

WINE SHOWS. 3-7-10 BINGO!
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An open letter to the ASVO Wine Show Committee Chairman Nick Bulleid.

Dear Nick,

I don't envy your job to sort out the Australian Wine Show system. The frustration alone of having to deal with the various Wine Show Committees must be worthy of receiving a medal, of the bravery kind.

Yet your committee has persevered and has particularly made headway in the training and accreditation of judges, and so we can look forward to better consistency and discrimination between fashion and quality in the future. And thank goodness those useless XL5/ISO glasses are on the way out! The temperature of the wines presented could be an area worth looking into?

These are practicalities, but I really wanted to raise with you matters of a more fundamental nature, concerning the conceptual framework behind the Shows.

Three issues come to mind;

1) Discovering the purpose of Wine Shows.

For us winemakers it seems like an end of year examination, while the judges probably think that they are at a perverse Olympic Games, dispensing medals to others after they themselves have done a marathon.

To 'show' is to display to others what was otherwise private or hidden. I ask myself whether our Shows are about;

- setting standards / guiding towards the future?
- helping us to make better wine?
- help wine drinkers make better purchases?
- an interface between winemakers and the public?
- promoting themselves and 'winners'?

If the Shows are to be relevant to the public then they should take into account how the public actually drink or even have novice panels. Right?

Currently judging is done by men(usually) in white coats, in total silence, tasting and spitting some 200 wines lined up in small glasses that perhaps have been sitting (losing aroma?) for an hour or two.

On the other hand the wine drinking public (half of them women?) enjoy wine in larger glasses at a BBQ, restaurant or wine bar or at the dinner table, talking with their family or friends, and usually with food.

A tale of two contexts? One is hedonistic, the pleasure of the occasion, and the other is meant to be quasi-scientific but is an abstraction of reality.

You may argue that this is irrelevant as the Industry knows what good wines are, and the public should take heed irregardless.

This is in the tradition of "Father knows best" and not listening to the public has been the downfall of many a winery.

So, if Shows are of doubtful value to the public surely they are of value to the winemakers? Perhaps. But are there better ways of raising the standards of winemaking?

The growing use of "Workshops" appears to be fulfilling this need through submitting wines to blind tastings amongst peers, followed by discussion and evaluation.

Any Show that doesn't have a brace of wine writers or a publicist involved is on the way to oblivion.

2) The concept of Benchmarking.

At the recent Gippsland Wine Show James Halliday baffled us by suggesting we benchmark our pinot noirs against those of Mornington and the Yarra Valley. What does that mean, apart from not liking the wines?

For years Australian pinots have been regaled as either 'Burgundian' (i.e.good) or not (i.e.bad), so its a relief that comparisons have finally moved to within Australia.

The word 'benchmarking' is being widely used in the Industry in the sense of comparative costing of the production of wine from wineries of similar sizes or putting statistical data on wines alongside viticultural practices.

When it comes to benchmarking/comparing one wine against another, where one is set as a standard, then the matter is complex.

Very complex in the case of pinot noir as it is a flavour based variety with infinite variations and highly subjective. Some like a feral character (brett notwithstanding!), others don't.

There is some value in comparisons, as long as it is apples with apples, but this needs to be balanced with an appreciation of the wine's individuality or character; its 'terroir' as the French would say.

I know this has become a cliché with every small winery but there is a kernel of truth in these words.

The danger of benchmarking in isolation is that it encourages imitations and sameness. This is precisely the criticism frequently made overseas about Australian wine.

How can we create diverse wines that are memorable in their own way?

3) The Scoring System.

I share with the late Professor Peynaud a scepticism about numerical systems; they are inherently unsatisfactory and do not resolve the issue of the relative weighting of the senses involved.

As you would know AWRI research has shown no correlation between the Show 20 point system and the 'liking' scores of consumers. (Technical Review No. 154)

Nevertheless number systems, usually to 20 or 100, are widely used around the world. Reputedly there are people who only drink wine that Robert Parker has scored 90 or above. Wine is widely regarded as 'confusing', so the reliance on a simple number is naive but understandable. An IQ is a similar such number and also used and abused..

In Australia our system has evolved to the present 3-7-10, where

3 is for 'colour and condition', 7 is for 'aroma' and 10 is for 'taste/palate'. The last is the awkward one.

Bryce Rankine recommended it be divided into "3 for flavour intensity and persistence, 2 for balance, 3 for fault free and 2 for general quality"

(p93. Tasting and Enjoying Wine).

In the light of a better understanding of the tasting process (see my article in WIJ Nov/Dec 2004) where two sense organs (mouth and olfactory) are competing for our attention it would be more appropriate and avoids confusion, to consider them separately.

If we allocate points to the three sense organs concerned with the experience of wine then we would have something like the following;

3-- (eyes)-- appearance, clarity, hue.

7-- (mouthfeel)-- balance, texture,structure.

10-- (nose, olfactory)-- aroma in the glass, flavour in the mouth.

The weighting is biased towards aroma/flavour as there is general agreement that its variations and length is the best guide to quality, or if you like, the existential enjoyment of the glass of wine I am tasting!

In the past we in Australia have been influenced more by mouthfeel than flavour because we had them joined in language and scoring system. For example, our prestigious reds. Structure is really important in another way, in that it holds the wine together during aging. Flavour enables us to access memory, complexity and pleasure through a specialised part of the brain- NOW.

I hope you will accept these comments in the spirit in which they have been written; as a contribution to an on-going debate.

The Wine Industry and market is continually changing and presenting new challenges which I enjoy, along with the opportunity to sharpen my judgment and skills alongside peers.

God knows there is a lot to learn.

Thanks for your attention,

Ken Eckersley
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