

Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

The Weekly Wine Commentary

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Numbering of Wine

This may come as a shock to our regular readers, but I've been putting numbers on wine for a long time. But not in the way you might have imagined.

And I've never explained it 'til now.

Since I have long decried the almost complete absurdity of any kind of numbering system for rating the quality of wines that aren't tasted scrupulously double blind, it might seem to be hypocritical of me to use any sort of numbering scheme to define wine quality. And in fact I do not.

Before getting into that, I'll remind long-time readers, and state for new subscribers, that I have many valid reasons for my aversion to the scoring of wine quality. I have stated my case here often; it need not be repeated.

But anyone who attempts to equate the quality a 30-year-old Barolo with a two-year-old Riesling with a barrel sample of an Hermitage, *using the same numbering scheme*, is making a leap that stretches credulity. Anyone with even a passing acquaintanceship to science would be struck dumb by such an idea.

So what is it that draws me to the numbering of wines, even those wines that I taste with sight of the label, and even while sitting at a table with the wine maker?

The huge difference here is that I do not use numbers in any way to define the *quality* of a wine. My use of numbers, which I use only internally, is simply an attempt at objectivity that I readily admit fails just often enough to keep me from using the idea in print.

I came up with this number scheme nearly 30 years ago. For me it is vital to remember what first charms me about a

wine, and helps me decide if I should recommend it.

My numbering is a personal guide to the structural elements of wines I taste. I'm explaining it here because it may be of help to those readers who take careful tasting notes when they are at walk-around wine festivals or at winery tasting rooms.

Since I publish tasting notes only of wines that are already bottled, I don't have to do any arcane prognostication of when a wine will be at a peak of enjoyment. That, essentially, comes down to a wild guess.

My analysis of wines goes deeper than almost any other reviewer and is more analytical than anyone else I know—which is why I figure I should explain how I reach these conclusions.

I use a five-point evaluation system in which every wine that's a candidate to get a tasting note is "scored" on a scale of each wine's specific elements.

In each category, 1=a weak or low level, 5=a strong level.

The elements I evaluate are: Varietal character (VC), aroma typicality (A), acid (TA), Tannin (T, red wines only), oak (O), residual sugar (r.s., white wines only), and other spoilage elements like volatile acidity (VA) or brettanomyces (B). I also rate alcohol (alc) on the same scale, 1 for a German Kabinett (7.5%), 5 for a powerful Zin (16%).

This shorthand saves space in my tasting book. (I have other short-cuts. For instance, "ff" stands for "forest floor," an element I often find in well-made Syrah and Shiraz.)

So a typical Barbera from Italy might

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A Quality Scale

Rating of a wine's specific elements (our lead article) isn't the only "scoring" I do.

The enjoyability of wines calls for a shorthand system to remind me days later about how to describe the wines.

I use a simple 5-point scale for that. And scores of 5 are reserved for great wines with true varietal character, balance and harmony. I also use 5- and 5- - to differentiate between great wines.

A 5+ is rare indeed. Even rarer is a 5 in a circle, a wine that I'll write about as long as a few bottles are left for our readers to buy—and almost regardless of price.

I often write about wines that score 4 or 4+. Though excellent, they're not at the top and usually carry the letters VHR (Very Highly Recommended.) A wine I score 4- is Highly Recommended if the price is low.

And I do not recommend wines scoring below 4-.

If you're keeping score, a 3 is an ordinary wine. A 2 gets the letters UOTC (the wine maker was unclear on the concept), and a 1 is flawed and the specific flaw is noted.

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Numbering

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have a tasting note that looks similar to this: TA4 (fairly high); T3 (moderate tannins); VC5 (a classic varietal aroma); alc2 (relatively low), and O1 (low).

This would describe a well-made Barbera with a typical aroma. A tart wine is indicated by its higher acid, low alcohol, and balanced tannins.

As for pH, I get that either from the person pouring the wine or from a tech sheet—or I guess and use a ? after the latter. The winery's web site often helps here. I tasted a Pinot Gris the other day that had a pH of 3.5, a bit high on its own, but the balance of the wine was perfect for what it was: a light quaffing wine if is served well chilled.

White wines that usually have sweetness (say Gewurztraminer) might be rated as VC5- (wonderful aroma), but a TA of 2, and rs5. This indicates that the wine is not only relatively sweet, but not terribly well balanced. (Its low acid is a clue.)

Franchise Laws

Two bills recently introduced in Missouri's legislature may not seem pertinent to wine lovers in other states, but they're a threat to wine consumers wherever they exist.

A small group of wine wholesalers wants Missouri to be a franchise state for wine distribution.

Those unfamiliar with franchise laws may not know how bad they are for consumers, usually leading to less competition and higher wine prices.

(Not incidentally, a bone dry wine could be rated as rs2 even if its sugar is zero, but it has low acid as well as high pH and high alcohol. I once used the word "soft" to refer to low-acid wines. But it's slightly more precise to use rs2 or rs3 to define how I saw the "effective acid," which includes the softening effect of high alcohol or a high pH.)

This numbering concept clearly is hard to decipher on first glance, but after I used it a while, it gave me a frame of reference for how each wine displayed itself.

For me, it's better than using a series of words that change over time and take on different meanings.

There are pitfalls, of course. Red wine tannins often are masked by high alcohol, so you have to factor in the alcohol to arrive at an appropriate tannin level. I suspect that any red wine with a T rating of 5 will age poorly. But a low T number (say 2) is *not* a sign that the wine won't age. Acid and pH are far more

important than tannin in this game.

The difficult thing here is to use the same scale for a long time to become comfortable with it. And it's best not to use a "3" too frequently. This doesn't help much when you look at older notes.

What I've found is that the scale is harder to apply to sparkling wines, sweet wines, and wines with aberrant numbers, such as a red wine with a high pH and a high acid, which rarely occurs.

I like my numbering system since it has meaning to me. But I haven't published it before this because no one has 30 years experience using it, as I do. And using it calls for a bit more technical knowledge and tasting experience than the average consumer has.

No, it's still not scientific, but at least it can explain a wine a bit more precisely than a raw score of 95 that can apply equally to a Chardonnay, an Aussie Shiraz, and a Port.

Franchise laws are protectionist in that they tie wine brands and suppliers to wholesalers with very restrictive "out" clauses.

Once a supplier agrees to be represented by a wholesale company, the supplier is captive and can quit the agreement only for "good cause," but that rarely means "failure to perform."

Those who agree to a contract with a wholesaler often get a promise that the wholesaler will meet certain sales

goals. Even if those goals are not met, the supplier still is all but out of luck in gaining freedom.

"In most cases, the terms in the contract are nullified by franchise laws," said one insider who opposes franchise laws. "Once a brand is under contract, there is no incentive [for the wholesaler] to sell" its wines.

So wholesalers could choose to sign up a brand specifically to block its sale in the state. "Clearly this is anti-consumer," said the insider. "It stifles competition. And how it [negatively] impacts consumers rarely comes up in the discussion."

There are about 14 states with various forms of franchise laws, most of which have "out" clauses that are hard to swallow. For example, in some cases, a supplier tied to a wholesaler that fails to perform must remain out of that market for years before reentering.

Wine of the Week

NV J Cuvée 20 Brut, Russian River Valley (\$28): Sprightly aroma of citrus, traces of red berry fruit(!), and a flavor profile as good as any bubbly around. It reminds me of a Blanc de Noirs with no color and the flavors are reigned in with hints of maturity (from a little reserve wine used in the cuvée). The best part is a perfect dosage, neither sweet, nor totally dry. This is wine maker Melissa Stackhouse's first bubbly with hands-on from harvest to bottle. Truly impressive and well-priced. (Consider: A number of California Sauvignon Blancs now sell for \$30!)

Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open within the last week.

Exceptional

2010 **Trombetta** Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, Gap's Crown Vineyard (\$58): Superb complex aroma of forest floor, dark cherry, and dried herbs. Weighty and rich, a style I rarely like. However, here wine maker Paul Hobbs allows the clones and vineyard to show through. See below article for further explanation.

2012 **Gary Farrell** Rosé of Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Selection (\$28): Very pale in color. Berry/citrus notes and a faint, complex earthy aroma leads to a bone-dry and quite minerally finish. Simply superb.

2012 **Fox Run** Rosé, Finger Lakes (\$20): Very pale. This 95% Lemberger pink has a superb red cherry aroma and a delicate, angular mid-palate. Bone dry. One of the best pinks you'll ever taste. Best to order from the winery in New York, www.foxrunvineyards.com

2010 **J** Pinot Meunier, Russian

River Valley (\$45): The aroma of plum and blueberry marks this as very much like Pinot Noir, except that it isn't! There is a hint of cocoa/chocolate and the flavors are all well balanced with good acid and terrific flavors. Perhaps the best red Pinot Meunier ever made.

2012 **Tablas Creek** Vermentino, Paso Robles (\$27): Slightly minerally/citrus-y with a note of dried peach. A 12.5%-alcohol wine that's dry and a delight with oysters and other such foods. An alternative to Sancerre, from an interesting Italian grape that usually makes a less-complex wine than this one! See next wine.

2011 **Domaine Vincent Delaporte** Sancerre, Chavignol (\$27): Here is the real thing, and a well-priced version at that. (Better Sancerres are usually pricey.) The aroma starts out slightly mute, with only vague green citrus, but with a lot of air the wine becomes a fine earthy,

herbal Sauvignon Blanc. Found as low as \$23 at some wine shops.

New Style: Less or No Oak

Unoaked or used-oak styles of Chardonnay have become popular. Now we're seeing a handful of Pinots made this way. They're hard to make since they must be made from great fruit to retain varietal integrity.

2010 **Foursight** Pinot Noir, Anderson Valley, Charles Vineyard, "Zero New Oak" (\$38): Medium-red color, bright youthful "Pinot-ish" aroma, and a lively acid in the entry. Nice flavors, for lighter-weight food.

2012 **Chamisal** Stainless Pinot Noir, Central Coast, "Unoaked" (\$24): This is what you get when quality Pinot is treated like a Beaujolais. Lovely up-front cherry fruit, not much depth, but lovely ripe flavors that would be great with steak tartare.

A Case for Dividing up Sonoma Coast

One of the least interesting vineyard appellations in California is Sonoma Coast—and not because the wines lack distinction.

This sprawling appellation (it spans 500,000 acres) ranges from Petaluma and San Pablo Bay in southern Sonoma County to the Mendocino County line and includes a wide range of sub-regions that are radically different from one another.

Some sites are a lot better than others for certain varieties. Some sites seem suited to one thing, yet don't do that thing very well. And some sites make wines of variable quality.

Much of Sonoma Coast is planted with Pinot Noir, and among the coolest are those in the Petaluma Wind Gap, a southerly region that brings in marine

air daily and cools vineyards to retain acidity and lengthen the time on vine.

One region that seems among the best for Pinot is the area just at the western edge of Sonoma Mountain that faces Petaluma. We reported on this months ago in an article on Cloud's Rest.

Another special site not far away is the Gap's Crown Vineyard, a 137-acre property located some 300 feet above the valley floor, and thus a bit cooler.

Gap's Crown, recently bought by investor Bill Price (owner of Kistler and Kosta Browne), is the source of fruit for nearly two dozen top-flight PN's, and a recent addition to some great wines is Trombetta, made by stellar wine maker Paul Hobbs.

I tasted this substantial (14.7%

alcohol) wine last week, and found it to be a great example of why the Sonoma Coast appellation must be divided into better-defined sub-regions.

Carrying some of the weight and depth of Sonoma Mountain, but with nuances of a cool climate, this wine is destined to be highly sought.

Bargain of the Week

2010 **337** Cabernet Sauvignon, Lodi (\$15): This Delicato project headed by Aussie James Ewart has many well-priced gems, none better than this perfectly balanced, fruit-driven, faintly herbal red with handsome flavors and an excellent balance. Often seen in the \$12 range. A bargain!

Agricultural commodities often are linked to one another in a cyclical formula best described by boom/bust or feast/famine.

In general, if an ag product is so heavily planted that its supply is greater than the demand, prices for that item will begin to drop.

Since commodities offer no special characteristics, prices rarely fluctuate from one grower to another. When supply rises, prices dip.

At some point, stronger firms survive, weaker ones make so little that they must withdraw from the market.

As growers exit the market, at some point the supply drops and the demand rises, forcing prices up. This encourages those not in the game to plant more of the commodity.

And the cycle starts all over again, supply-and-demand driving the issue.

One would think that wine doesn't fit this formula very well since some brands sell for a lot more than others. Most Napa Cabernets, for example, sell for more than

generic red wines from San Joaquin Valley.

So supply and demand doesn't factor into the wine game, right?

Wrong. And a basic factor here is the supply of all grapes compared with the average price of all grapes in a category, whether that category is Merlot or Central Valley red. And you can easily see how one overlaps the other.

Next week we'll explore this idea more fully. For this article, let's look at the supply/demand issue for one wine and how events that seem to be unconnected can affect the market both in terms of supply and price.

When, in 2008, the economy collapsed under the weight of the housing bubble, and the jobless rate rose to near-Depression levels, one wine that stopped selling as if it hit a brick wall was sparkling wine.

No one celebrated. Yet the supply of upper-tier sparkling that was ready for market had been made years before the economy tanked. As a result, prices for the existing stocks were under siege.

In the intervening years, as bubbly sales slowly rose, prices for the better sparklings rose slowly, but then the bountiful harvest of 2012 came and allowed sparkling producers to make a lot of very good wine. But should they?

Sales were not yet back to the pre-economic collapse era, and they now had the chance to get quality fruit at a lower price (because of a huge crop) than usual.

Since we know that "front-line" price points rarely if ever drop, the major sparkling wine houses in California had to make deals (they offered significant discounts, often called programming) to move cases.

Many of those discounts cut the suggested retail prices from \$25 to \$18, and that's a bargain for quality bubbly that has a lot of extra costs to produce.

Sparkling wine doesn't operate in the marketplace the way other table wines do since more than 20% of it is sold between Thanksgiving and Dec. 31. See Tasting Notes for a great idea. ©2013

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