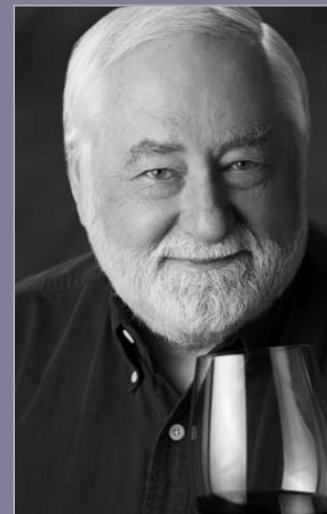


# Distilling the Fine Points of Wine



**W**INE DRINKING IN THE UNITED STATES continues to rise, placing us in first place worldwide for total consumption. I find myself increasingly asked to explain the various wine ratings schema in the marketplace. While parts of this article may be partly redundant for some readers, regardless of the score of the rating publication, I always suggest that the customer pay close attention to the wine's description, instead of its score.

This advice follows from the simple fact that most of us have distinct likes and dislikes when it comes to tastes and smells. As noted in *Quintessential Barrington* (September/October 2007), I do not like an abundance of the smell of mint in my wines, so I avoid those planted near large copses of eucalyptus trees. Others may not want to be overwhelmed by anise (licorice), kumquat, or whatever you don't like in abundance in your wine.

Ratings for wine have been around for a long time, but before the last quarter of the twentieth century, most reviews were essentially descriptions with particular favorites being identified. All of this changed beginning in the late 1970s when Robert Parker started the *Wine Advocate*. He developed the point system whereby wines are

rated discretely (point by point) on a scale from 60 to 100. In essence, wines garnering 60-69 points merit a "D"; 70-79 points, a "C"; 80-89 points a "B," and anything from 90-100 is worthy of an "A."

Within any of these ranges, higher scores would merit a plus (+) and lower scores a minus (-) suffixed to the letter grade. Much has been written about whether or not anyone can differentiate wines within one point of each other (e.g., an 87 vs. 88), but Mr. Parker and his staff continue to produce discrete ratings. Dividing up the world of wine, he and his associates each have a slice of this world to evaluate.

Another U.S. publication, *Wine Spectator*, has adopted the same scoring system as put forth by *Wine Advocate*. Likewise, the wine editors are responsible for specific wine regions so once you have identified the writer's palates, it's fairly straightforward to develop a relationship between the writer's preferences and yours.

The only exception to this occurs when *Wine Spectator* publishes its list of the "Top 100" wines of the world. For this annual ranking, all writers vote on all wines being considered so the personal likes and dislikes of the writers could have an influence due to averaging of scores. Moreover, the

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wine score for the "Top 100" rating all *Wine Spectator* reviews (tasted blind, as with all *Wine Spectator* reviews) is only one of four considerations as well as the price, the quantity (availability) and a secret "X" or *je ne sais quoi* factor.

Another U.S. wine publication is similar to *Wine Advocate* in that it accepts no advertising and uses the 100-point system. Owned by Stephen Tanzer, *International Wine Review* is similar in age to the aforementioned publications. Unlike those which are available in print as well as electronically, it is available only online as of 18 months ago. Maybe it's my age, but I have a strong preference for the printed version. I subscribed online to the *International Wine Review* for a year, although I

rarely accessed it.

*Wine Enthusiast* is another U.S. wine publication which is similar to *Wine Spectator* but in smaller format. It also produces a “Top 100 Wine List” and features in-depth reviews of wine regions worldwide, including helpful travel hints for the areas being profiled.

A final publication of note is *Decanter*, published in the United Kingdom. Historically, *Decanter* used a one-to-five star wine evaluation system. For many years, a numerical scale of 12-20 was used. Within the star system (e.g., five-star incorporates 20-18.5; four-stars includes 18.4-16.5; three-stars includes 16.49-14.5; two-stars includes 14.49-12.5; and one-star includes 12.49-10.5. Recently, the differentiation extends to one one-hundredth of a point (e.g., 17.89).

While all five publications are useful, I prefer advertising-free options, such as *Wine Advocate* and *International Wine Review*. The four U.S. publications seem to be uniform in evaluating wines worldwide, while I prefer *Decanter* for European wines (especially French) and I prefer the others for Italian and U.S. reviews.

As noted in the other *QB* article referencing ‘points,’ I feel it’s more important to read the adjectives and descriptions of wine notes than to buy based on points. While I take note of publications which differentiate by single points (much less by tenths or hundredths of a point), your palate is different from anyone else’s and therefore only by trying different wines can you decide on your favorites.

For those of you who buy fine wine to put away and drink after it ages to perfection, it is of paramount importance to keep it under proper cellar conditions. Recently, as in many past occasions, I had a 24-year-old wine (in this case, a 1987 Spottswood Cabernet Sauvignon) which was outstanding, even though professional tasters had recently been disappointed by almost all older (10+ years) vintages from this producer. Provenance, along with your palette, are the most important factors relative to a wine’s quality, regardless of the rating upon release. U



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