

Observations on Judging & Tasting Wines for 40+ Years

by G.M. "Pooch" Pucilowski

These Observations have been written for folks who want to be wine judges or are new to wine judging. It's a short guide on how to adjust your attitude to get along and a guide to what to look for. I encourage anyone who is interested in learning to judge wines to avail themselves in the Mentoring Program that we offer.

I offer these observations to encourage you to be conscious of your actions while you are judging wines. These comments are only one man's opinion — and you are free to take them or leave them. The point is, at the end of a day of judging, you may have made 3 or more new friends on your panel.

Generally speaking, since most all of you have taken a Qualification Exam or the one offered at UC Davis given by John Buechsenstein, you obviously are qualified to judge wines — but does that mean you have the ability to judge? (This was a program that we, the California State Fair, required in order to be a judge many years ago. The State Fair has since dropped this program. It was offered by John B at UCD. You might check to see if he is still offering it.) A qualification exam was not meant to determine if you were a good judge or not. (God knows if that is even possible?). It was designed to test your ability to be consistent. (And please, if I may be so bold, after 8-10 years of testing judges, live and in person, the answer is — you are NOT that consistent. And I'm not just talking about YOU, but ALL OF US who judge wines). (See more comments below about this subject.).

I have found over the years, that some of you may have never judged a wine competition before — this isn't a bad thing, everyone has to start somewhere. But some people find the job of judging wines overwhelming. I have had many people judge for me the first time and I never see them again. So this Mentoring Program was developed to "test" your ability to #1) stick in there all day and get a feel of what it's all about, and #2) see if you can work and play well with others.

What happens? (The following was how we "did it" at the State Fair for 25 years, it is not the only way to do a competition, but this one worked. It is no longer done this way.) During the judging process, you will be given many "flights" of wines throughout the day. Each flight may consist of one wine or 12 wines, but usually not more than 15 wines. Once a varietal hits 16 entries, usually we will make it into two flights of 8 wines each. You will be given a certain amount of time, depending on how fast the rest of the judges are, to taste each wine and give it a score. This is done in silence and you should NOT attempt to talk to any other judge, answer your phone or go to the bathroom during this time. You should taste your wines, make your notes and score each wine. It is very important you make this decision and mark it on your score sheet. Only when every judge on your panel is finished, can the silence be broken. Now, all the judges will form a circle and the learning begins. Each of you in turn, will go around and give your score to the clerk. Sometimes, with certain wines, you will all be in agreement, most of the time, you will not. Discussion usually takes place, but if everyone is in agreement, maybe not. You are more than welcomed, even encouraged, to change your score — up or down or leave it the same. Each judge's score sheet must have two scores — whether you changed it or not. Your ability to discuss and persuade other judges will be match by their ability to do the same.

(It's important to note that judging The Bottle Shock Open Home Winemaking Competition will require much more note taking than just writing down your score. Also, your notes will be passed along to the home winemaker. The wine evaluation sheet that you are given for each wine are NOT used at the commercial level.)

Finding Golds

The one job you have when judging wines — more important than any other — is to FIND the Gold winning wines. I didn't say to just give out golds — but to search out the ones that are there. They are there, but they are hidden among the “also-rans.” And the one thing that surprises me more than anything else, is that one man's gold is another man's no award! Here is a fallacy about wine competitions that most consumers probably believe — When a wine, for example, gets a silver medal, it is easy to assume it's because ALL the judges gave the wine a silver medal across the board. Consumers don't consider the fact that maybe one judge gave it a gold, one a silver, one a bronze and the last judge gave it “no medal.” It is not as clean as you would think. No wine competition wants to be a “medal factory” yet truth be told, that is where the money is — Wineries enter competitions to get medals to sell more wine. So we are walking a fine line between finding the best wines and just giving out medals. Here are a couple observations when searching for those Golds:

1) You have to be brave enough to say, “this is a Gold.” There are a couple reasons why this may be harder than you think. One reason it is so hard is because you have 3 other judges (maybe very prestigious judges, who may be a legend in their own minds) who might look at you like an alien from another world. “You gave THAT a Gold?” Yes my friend, your ego gets in the way. You may be intimidated to stand up and say “I like this wine,” for fear of being “wrong.” This is the biggest challenge AND BIGGEST MISTAKE for most wine judges. The best lesson I can share with you is — you can never be wrong about a wine you like! If you like the wine, you like the wine, with or without faults. (You can learn to recognize faults. You can learn you like the taste of a certain fault. You can learn that other people recognize this fault and have been trained to not like it in wine.) But no one can take away the fact that you like this wine, as it is.

2) ALSO, it is way easier to find faults in wine than positive attributions! It's human nature!! The slightest off-smell, too much “browning,” or higher acidity/tannins than expected can condemn a wine to “undrinkable.” Whereas under different circumstances in your own backyard, you might just sit back and suck this baby down with nary a thought. But when you put on your Official Judge Hat, you become a different animal. I share this with you to keep you human. Relax. It's only wine.

Believe it or not, even after 26 years of running the California State Fair Competition, I still gave the same “lecture” to all my judges, every year — “The hardest thing for any judge to do is give a wine a Gold.” If you can give a Gold because you like the wine and know why you like the wine — then give the damn thing a Gold! It is so much easier for judges to spend the day giving Bronzes and Silvers. (This is how you can spot a poor judge). If you never throw a wine out or never give a Gold, you will ALWAYS BE RIGHT and in agreement with the other judges! You can't miss. You will never be wrong. Only giving Bronzes or Silvers allows you to change your score up or down in conjunction with the other judges. But the question is, do I really want judges that are afraid to give Golds? In case you missed it — NO, I don't want judges who are afraid to give Golds. I am looking for judges that give Golds, know why they gave a gold and are proud of it. (even in the face of three other, possibly more senior judges who all threw the wine out. This is a slight exaggeration, but only slight. You need to be that strong, but not be arrogant about it. After all you might learn something about your own tasting abilities.)

Bronze Minus

By the way, while I'm talking medals. You are allowed to give pluses and minuses to Bronze, Silver or Gold. In fact I encourage it because we use Bronze plus or Silver minus to give the wine a final numeric score, somewhere between 80 and 100. HOWEVER, there is one score that is NEVER allowed, call it my pet peeve, but don't give a wine a Bronze minus. Bronze medals are already frowned upon by wineries, please don't insult them by giving a Bronze minus — just throw the wine out. Don't fudge! Be strong! THERE is one exception to this rule. Home Winemaking Competitions. Home winemakers are looking for ANY recognition of their wine. In this case, we would give a Bronze minus wine an Honorable Mention — this is what we do at The Bottle Shock Open.

Silver Plus (The proper use and care of)

When you give a Silver Plus, you are saying to the rest of the panel: “I like this wine. I think I want to give it a Gold, but I’m not absolutely sure. If ANY OTHER judge gives this wine a gold, then I’ll move my score up to a Gold” automatically. No questions asked. So when that other judge does give a Gold, don’t hesitate to move your wine up to a Gold. It amazes me that when I judge other competitions, I still have to convince this judge to move up. It’s like I’m asking them to move from a no medal to a Gold. If you are still having problems, just move a fraction — give it a Gold minus! Otherwise, don’t use Silver plus.

Style

Style — this is a hard one. I know you don’t like every style of Sauvignon Blanc or Chardonnay that is on the market today — but there are consumers out there who do like them. It’s okay to fight for your favorite style of Chardonnay, but please realize, other judges (and therefore other consumers) like different styles. Don’t get stuck believing that the style of wine you like is the only correct style of that wine. If the wine is made well and doesn’t have any defects, but it’s just not your style, please go along with the other judges. **Change your score.** It’s okay to go from No Medal to Silver or even Gold. I will not think less of you and actually will be quite proud of you.

Changing Your Score

The way our competition works is you will be given a certain amount of time (hopefully in silence) to go through all the wines in your flight. You will judge and score each wine on your own — This first score will be recorded by the clerk. Then, as a panel, you’ll share your scores with each other and you are allowed to re-score your wine, up or down, in agreement with the other judges on your panel. I am not looking for judges that change their score every time another judge says to do it. On the other hand, it is far worse a crime to NEVER change your score. Being stubborn and “right” about your decision and not “playing well with others” is a sure way for me to never invite you back. No one is perfect, no one is always right and no one is infallible. (At least I’ve not met that judge yet) Please be human. Please make mistakes. Please be humble. The other judges will appreciate it. Swallow your pride and change your score. (It’s more important to the winery that you can change your score and don’t worry about your pride).

Slowness

Being slow is not a crime — unless it starts to wear on the other judges. There will always be panels who are very fast at tasting wines and some panels are slow. But when we get both types on the same panel, it becomes a problem. No one has ever complained to me that a certain judge was too fast, but I do get complaints of being too slow. Also, throughout the day, we track where all panels are in relation to the rest of the panels. If we spot a panel that is running behind, you can be sure I will be visiting your panel asking you to pick up the pace. In almost all cases, it is usually one judge who is slower than the rest. There is a rhythm and a pace to every competition, just be aware of it. And, oh yes, do keep up.

If you find you are the slowest judge on your panel, you might have to change your tasting style. You might have to learn to taste wine differently. You might need to find a way to taste wines quicker and be confident with your end results. If you have to smell all the wines first while taking notes and then you go back and smell and taste each wine — that might be taking you a longer time to do than the other judges. Maybe you shouldn’t take notes while you smell all the wines, or maybe you don’t smell all the wines first? Learn to pace yourself. You don’t need to be the fastest, but try not to be the last judge to finish every time. And it’s still okay to be the last to finish, just make sure you are not 3 or more minutes behind every time.

Discussing Every Wine?

It is not necessary to discuss every wine. If every judge on your panel gave a wine a Bronze, that may be all that wine will get. Further discussion will not move this wine to Gold status. You don’t need to spend your time

discussing each and every wine. One advantage of judging wines with other experts is the knowledge you gain. If there is something unusual, strange or just down right beautiful about a certain wine — then please bring it up to the other judges for their comments and discussion. This is how many of us learn. Just don't do this for every wine, every time. I've been on panels where one judge wants to discuss his comments on every single wine. Many of us don't really care to hear what you think about every single wine. Please be conscious that there are a fair amount of wines that need to be tasted each day and talking about every wine only slows the whole panel down.

And of course, there is one exception — Home Winemaking Competitions. This type of competition under my direction, is a learning process. You learn a lot by discussing the wines. I need you to discuss each wine and understand what you are tasting, just be conscious of the time. Even though I limit the amount of wines you judge to under 40, it still may take all day to taste and comment. Use this time to write about the wines, as you are talking about them, with the other judges.

Your Opinion Matters, Not

Please, I do not need or want “know-it-alls.” (I already have too many. The wine industry has too many. Please don't add to the clutter.) There is no doubt **in your mind** that you are **absolutely correct** in your observation and assessment of a particular wine. However we judge in panels of 3, 4 or 5 judges. We need to “**attempt**” a group concession (it's not always achieved but we attempt to reach for it anyway). Consider any day that you judge as a learning experience and don't be so damn “right” about every wine you taste. Yes, your opinion is important, but it's not the be all, end all.

Your Comments — at the Wrong Time

When judges are tasting the wines in front of them in silence, it is extremely important that you keep your comments (and mumblings) to yourself. It is disturbing and distracting (and some may say rude) when one judge mumbles to another, “geez, wait till you try that next piece of crap,” or “wow, that's great,” or something similar. Please, keep your observations to yourself until it is discussion time. When you do make a mumbling, the other judges have to break their concentration, ask which wine you are talking about as they are looking at your wine glasses to see which wine you just tasted. This can actually change the score of the judges after they may have already scored the wine. Even comments like “this whole flight was a disaster” or “I was surprised how good this flight was” should be avoided. This is a shaded attempt to get the other judges to change their scores in order to agree with you. No matter how good or bad the wine may taste, please wait till it is time to discuss them as a group. Keep your comments to yourself until the proper time to discuss.

Note Taking

Much like my comments on discussing every wine (above). You may not need to be so elaborate about every wine. You do want to take enough notes so that you can discuss what you liked or didn't like about each wine — if the occasion presents itself. If there is a discussion, you will want to participate. You may need enough notes to defend why you feel this wine is a Gold. Other judges will re-consider if you can support your observation. If you are a wine writer and are here to apply your trade to every wine, then maybe this isn't the right place to do it. If you can take notes and keep up with the group — no problem. But if the panel is waiting for you to finish your note taking, then you'll need to stop taking such elaborate notes.

ON THE OTHER HAND, if you are judging wines for the Home Winemaking Competition, please, take all the notes you want! Discuss each and every wine. Be really anal. Be my guest. The biggest difference between the Home and Commercial competitions is the note taking (and at the Home competition we don't judge as many wines in a day). So there is more time; we taste at a slower pace. We do not create notes for the commercial wineries (so your notes are your own). However, for the Home Wine we give extensive notes on every single wine. It is much more difficult to judge wines for the Home winemakers. The Home winemakers really appreciate the judge's comments, suggestions, annotations and observations.

Computer Note Taking

Much like any note taking, as long as you are finished with judging your wines around the same time as the other judges on your panel, there is no restriction on bringing your computer and entering information.

First Wine in a Flight

There is an assumption that is inherent with the first wine of every flight. What goes on in a judge's mind is "this can't possibly be the best wine in the flight" or "this has to be the worst wine I've ever tasted." Neither of which is (probably) true. It is tough. This is what I can tell you: We, at the State Fair, do not look at the wines and line them up in the back room from best to worst or vice versa. Here is what we do: Let's say there are 250 Chardonnays in total. The computer uses a random sort routine that gives us a listing of all 250 Chards. We pick the first 12 and assign it to a flight. Then the computer program re-sorts the remaining 238 wines and the next 12 are assigned to another flight. No human, at this point, has any idea what brand is being assigned to what panel — they are only 4-digit numbers. And, truth be told, we don't care which winery is first or last. So please be assured, the wines you get on most panels are just sorted, randomly. Regarding the first wine syndrome, one trick I use is to taste the 12 wines in order, then return to the first and second wines and treat them like they are the #13 and #14 wines in the flight. Other judges will taste the wines in reverse order, right to left. You should know however, there are some panels that the wines are sorted in sweetness order, but, if they were, that information will be found on your tasting sheet.

How Does it Taste Today?

It is best when tasting wines to consider what the wine tastes like today. Do not take into consideration what you may think the wine will taste like in another year or longer. Also, don't consider the fact that if you had a medium-rare rib eye steak, how much better this wine would taste. Judge the wine as it sits in front of you now.

How Much Information Do You Need?

There is a lot of controversy on how much information a wine judge needs in order to make a sound, unbiased decision about the taste of a wine. Do you need the vintage? Do you need the price range? Do you need to know the grapes used in a blend? Or the Appellation? Here is what the California State Fair will give you: the varietal or the blend of grapes (if it is on the wine label); the vintage date if we have to divide a large flight of wines by vintage date; and the residual sugar if the wines have a range of variance. We will not give you the price range. I believe this affects your ability to make an unbiased decision. When you know prices, you know too much and your decision could be based on the price of the wine and not just the quality. We will not give you the appellation. This also gives the judges a prejudice that is not needed in the evaluation of a wine.

When I first starting running the State Fair Competition, the wines were judged based on the appellation of the wine. I also made sure that there were no judges from that appellation on the panel. You would assume upon first glance that this was a fair way to judge wines? So when I had a panel of judges tasting Cabernet Sauvignons from Napa Valley, you might assume the judges would be inclined to give too many Gold Medals. Just the opposite occurred — "This is a Napa Cab??" "This isn't good enough." "I can't believe this is from Napa??" This Cab is not worthy of being from Napa." Out of about 30 – 40 wines judged, there were no Gold Medals! Obviously, this was a problem. I hear the same type of comments on wines (when the prices are given at other competitions): "\$50 bucks? I wouldn't give you \$5 for these Pinots...." No — prices and appellations will not be given to judges.

When 4 Silvers might be a Gold

Depending on your panel and how many Gold medals you have given, there might be a time when you are all in agreement about a wine. If everyone has given a certain wine a Silver medal, it's a good bet that everyone liked the wine. I suggest you all re-try it and see if it can be moved to a Gold, especially if your panel has been a little stingy

up to this point. I have found wines that seem to appeal to everyone actually do quite well later in the competition, if it can be moved up to a Gold on your panel.

When Might 4 Bronzes be a No Award?

For the same reasons as given above. If no one is that excited about a particular wine, consideration should be given to just deleting this wine. Believe me, most wineries don't get that excited about Bronze medals. On the other hand, for the Home winemaking competition, home winemakers really appreciate any medal they can brag about. We in fact have added another category between Bronze and No Medal — Honorable Mention. I guess you can say this is my version of a Bronze minus — but never to be used in a commercial competition!

Flaws or Faults? To Re-pour or not?

A flaw is considered a minor characteristic in a wine that would still allow a wine to receive a medal. Consider that these flaws, in low concentrations, could add to the complexity and taste of the wine. Some of these aromas/tastes would include oxidation, brettanomyces (also known as dekkera or just brett), diacetyl (butteriness), sulfur dioxide and volatile acidity (vinegar). As humans, what is considered a low threshold will vary from judge to judge and can easily move a wine from a flaw to a fault. This is why we have panels of 3, 4 or 5 judges to help make that determination.

Faults on the other hand, are usually so prevalent in the wine that they overwhelm other components. They generally make the wine undrinkable to most consumers. This would include everything listed above (in higher concentrations) plus ethyl acetate (nail polish remover), acetaldehyde (sherry nose), mercaptans (burnt rubber or over-cooked cabbage) and lactic acid bacteria (sauerkraut) when added with sorbic acid (geranium smell). Cork taint ("corked" or 2,4,6-trichloroanisole or just TCA) on the other hand, when identified, is always regarded as a fault and always requires a re-pour since it happens randomly. Please also be aware that TCA in very minute concentrations may not have a musty, noticeable smell, but instead it suppresses the normal aroma of the wine. This of course, is much more difficult to determine, but I do want you to be aware of it. All other faults are generally not helped by re-pouring the wine.

For Home Winemaking Competitions, faults are a GREAT FIND! Please make sure that the Technical Advisory Judges and myself know about them. I will have the wine re-poured and shared with all judges. These are great teaching aids. Please make sure we know about them.

Winemakers Judging Their Own Wines

Many winemakers who also judge, assume that they are not allowed to judge the varieties of the wines they make. I'm here to tell them and you, that if they are that good, then I want them judging wines for me — anytime, any where! Over the years I've had numerous winemakers ask me why I took their wine out of the competition or I've seen certain winemaker judges giving wines higher scores (than they have done prior) assuming the wine was theirs. In every case, the winemaker had either thrown their own wine out or scored someone else's wine higher than their own. I am not sure it is possible to recognize your own wine (unless there is some unique feature in the taste). But for the most part, if it is a well made wine, I welcome winemaker judges to judge their own wines. AND if they are able to identify their own wine, I guess they should be allowed to give it a Gold — it's only one wine and one vote.

However, there are circumstances where we list the blend of the grapes on the paperwork or the varietal is fairly obscure and they are the only winemaker making this wine. In such cases, it is imperative for the winemaker judge to tell the other panel members (after the other judges have scored the wine) that they feel this wine may be his/hers. In this case, the winemaker should not attempt to influence the other judges and should only give the wine whatever the other judges have agreed to score it.

Leave Your Ego at Home (you already know how good you are)

Please, don't come here with an attitude that you are the "fastest gun in the West" or you are better than most at judging wines. You may or may not have read the studies and articles that have been written about the California State Fair Wine Competition. But for a period of 8 to 10 years, we brought in Dr. Robert Hodgson, a former judge at the California State Fair and Professor from Humboldt State University where he had taught statistics for many years. He developed a program, to test our judges for their ability to be consistent. We didn't care if the judge was generous and gave high medals or if the judge gave very low scores. We just wanted judges who would be consistent when judging wines.

So, Hodgson developed a program to analyze judge consistency by measuring the ability of a judge to uniformly rate identical samples of a given wine. Each panel of judges on each day would judge about 100 wines, divided into flights of 6 to 14 wines, depending on the varietal. We would pick, always randomly, 4 wines for each panel of judges. We would call each of these wines the "mother" wine. Only this wine would be eligible to earn medals.** When this wine was being poured in the back room by the volunteers, we also poured 2 additional glasses in the same flight from the same "mother" bottle for each judge. These were called "ghosts." The order of presentation to the judges was random.

We tried to make sure there were at least 8 wines in the flight. So in this case, 3 of the 8 wines were poured from the same bottle. (In other words, there would be 6 independent wines and two ghosts.) But most of the time there were 12 wines in the flight (10 independent wines and two ghosts). During the course of the experimental program, each year every judge was presented with four triplicate sets of wines. In the early years, a few of the flights were larger than 12, but we ended up deciding to limit the flights (with "mothers" and "ghosts") to about 12 wines. And we did not test judges on the first flight of the day.

**This did cause some unexpected "problems" but they were resolved because we stood fast that only the "mother" was eligible for the award. 1) Sometimes a given wine was denied the possibility of being a "best of" because a ghost received a double gold, while the mother only earned a Silver! 2) Once a Chardonnay in a flight ("mother" wine) received a Double Gold by the judges, while those same judges gave the two "ghost" wines an average score of Silver minus and Bronze plus.

Here is what we discovered: None of us are very good at judging wines consistently. At no time, in the 8-10 years we were testing, had a judge consistently out shown, out judged, or consistently scored in the upper 15% of judges. One year judges would score in that high 15% and the next year they drop back into the middle 70% with everyone else. One thing was consistent — judges who scored in the bottom 15%, always tended to score in the bottom 15%, every year.

Remember, all we were testing for was consistency — would the judge be able to notice and score the same wines close to the same score for each of the 3 glasses? Judges were aware that they were being tested, but how it was done remained a secret. So judges, for all practical purposes, did not know when and how they were being tested. They certainly were not aware that there were 3 samples of the same wine in a certain flight.

Ideally, if we were a machine, all 3 wines should receive the same score, but rarely was this the case. In all the years we experimented, no judge gave an identical grade to all four triplicates. We, alas, are only human. The best judges may have done a B, S, B, 1 point of variance. But many times the wine receive a Gold, Bronze, No Award or any other combinations you can imagine. As earlier mentioned, no judge scored in the top 15% every year. Our data would suggest that there are no Super Judges. No one was so good that they scored in the top 15% year after year.

The humbling point that you should take home is sobering — you may not be as good as you believe you are. As humans, it seems we are just not capable of tasting a wine and recognize it later in order to give it the same score as

the first time — even if it is in the same flight. Believe me, we want you to be great, we want you to be infallible, we want you to be consistent, but alas, you are only human.

NOTE: For those interested, the results of the California State Fair study are presented in the Journal of Wine Economics, vol. 3, number 2, with free access to the entire article available gratis from the author. Hodgson also looked at how individual wines scored when entered in several different competitions. (This work is presented in the Journal of Wine Economics, 2009, vol. 1). He found that there is very low correlation between what a wine earns in one competition compared to another. Perhaps the reason is because individual judges are, in general, rather inconsistent.

I hope you find these comments useful. Let me know if I can answer any further questions for you.

Thanks,

Pooch

G.M. "Pooch" Pucilowski

Lodi, CA 95242

Cl: (916) 812-2020

Fx: (209) 369-9104

gmpooch@me.com

www.UniversityofWine.com

www.CaliforniaWineStainRemover.com

www.ConsumerWineAwards.com

<http://bottleshockopen.com>

Society of Wine Educators, Certified Wine Educator

Brotherhood of the Knights of the Vine, Supreme Knight

Golden Bear Award for 26 years as Chief Judge, California State Fair Wine Competition

Recipient of the 2016 Wine Lifetime Achievement Award for California's Wine Industry