

## *Wine Competitions, Judgings, Medals and Scores*

### *What Do They All Mean?*

*What's the big deal and should consumers pay attention?*

This is a frank and honest discussion of the State of Wine Competitions in America. How “fair” or shall we say, “honest,” are wine competitions? How blind are the judges? What do judges really need to know about the wines in order to judge them? Can you really trust the results of 60 judges who taste 4,500 wines in 4 days? Are these tastings subjective or objective? Who do competitions really serve — consumers, judges, wineries or all the above?

Have you read the wine study about a certain California Wine Competition that found their judges were not very consistent? It stated that perhaps only 10% - 15% could accurately pick the same wine in the same flight? Meet Pooch, who authorized and hired the professor to conduct this evaluation of the California State Fair. Why does Pooch seem to be so ho-hum about all the press? Why does he feel this is positive information and looks forward to further studies? Come in, sit down and enjoy the real history of wine competitions!

#### I. Inside look at the California State Fair Commercial Competition.

- A. Is there one right way to judge wines?
- B. How blind is blind? How do we keep the wines blind for the judges?
- C. How honest are judges?
- D. What are judges looking for when evaluating wine?
- E. What's the difference between a Silver & a Gold — and who the heck wants a Bronze?
- F. What type of wineries enter and don't enter wine competitions — and why?

#### II. How is the California State Fair Wine Competition conducted?

- A. The Process — Keeping the wines blind
  - 1) Each wines is given a random 4 digit number when checked in.
  - 2) These number are placed on 4 wine glasses for each of the 4 wine judges.
  - 3) judges have scoring sheets that have numbers that match the glasses.
  - 4) Each flight can consists of 1 to 15 wines, usually about 10 to 12 wines.
  - 5) Judges averaged about 75 wines per day.
  - 6) Generally the red wines were tasted first in the morning, light to heavy
  - 7) White wines were judged in the afternoon, generally after lunch.

## 2019 SWE Conference - Mayflower Hotel - Washington, DC

- B. How the Judges judged.
    - 1) History: CA State Fair started judging wines in 1854
    - 2) judges must pass a qualification exam to be on our list.
    - 3) we tested judges during the competition for consistency
  - C. Judges taste wine in silence and mark their scoring sheet.
  - D. Judges talk with each other and reveal their scores to other judges.
    - 1) Discussion begins what they like or don't like about the wine
    - 2) judges are free to re-mark their scores up or down or leave the same
  - E. Integrity of scores and results
    - 1) judges sign clerk score sheet and verify that that the scores are theirs
    - 2) Data crew checks that judge score and clerk sheet are the same
    - 3) Scores are entered into the computer
    - 4) Data crew re-checks clerk sheet against computer print out
- III. How judges taste wines and award medals (in old days, prior to 2005)
- A. First day, retain/eliminate all wines, 160 to 200 wines per panel.
    - 1) Most competitions retained about 40% to 50% and the judges would re-taste the retained wines to give them medals on the second day. (Since retain meant the wine was a medal winner.)
    - 2) Silver Bullets are a big deal with retain/eliminate rounds.
    - 3) In addition, at the State Fair, if wine is retain, then style category is given (example: Reds - Light, medium or heavy tannins. Chardonnay - barrel influenced or fruity style)
  - B. Second day, retains come back to same judges within their style categories
    - 1) ALL of the wines at the same time, instead of in flights of 10 or 12. (about 40% are retained)
    - 2) At this time, we started judging wines using the Peterson Method (1995) created by Dick Peterson. This is similar to what winemakers do when tasting many barrels of the same wine.
    - 3) Judges determine Gold, Silver, Bronze or No medal
    - 4) Double gold is given when all 4 judges give wine a gold
  - C. End of 2nd day, judges are combined into groups of 8 and taste to find Best Varietal in the State (Best Zinfandel, Best Chardonnay, etc.)
  - D. 3rd day, all Golds and Dbl Golds are sorted into 1 of 11 regions
    - 1) Judges are grouped into 4 panels of 12 judges each,
    - 2) they literally compare apples to oranges
    - 3) judges determine the best wine for it's type, the wine is awarded Best Wine of the Region.
  - E. Judges now become a panel of one group
    - 1) All 11 Best of Region wines (maybe more if there are ties) are brought back

2019 SWE Conference - Mayflower Hotel - Washington, DC

- 2) Judges vote for their top 4 wines, then vote for one wine. Nowadays, judges vote for as many wines as they like.
- 3) This wine becomes Best of Show Wine (out of the 3,000 entered)

IV. Controversy? We've got our share!

- A. The blind testing of the State Fair Judges, a Wine Economics Study.
- B. How did we set up the blind tasting for the judges?
- C. Out of 335 Chards entered, how can a \$2 bottle of Chardonnay be the Best Chardonnay in California State?
- D. How are wine judges chosen? What are the secrets for picking the best?
- E. How much information is too much in a "blind" tasting? Should judges know the varietal, price, vintage, appellation, alcohol, sugar levels, etc.?

V. How to do a wine competition — differently!

- A. Lodi International Wine Awards.
  - 1) Judges are divided by their taste sensitivity: tolerant, sensitive, hyper-sensitive. Six judges to a panel.
  - 2) "Have YOU had your buds done?"
- B. Morphed into the Consumer Wine Awards. How did that happen?
  - 1) Wouldn't it be great to have a back room full of consumers to taste the same wines that the professional judges are tasting in the main room?
  - 2) Why wouldn't the wine that came out number 1 for the judges be the same wine that was voted on number 1 by the consumers — be the greatest wine in the world?
  - 4) Tim Hanni book: Why You Like the Wines You Like: Changing the way the world thinks about wine.
  - 3) Example of a wine competition that tasted Pinot Noirs, divided by men and women judges.

VI. VARIOUS observations:

- A. How to judge wine judges. How to look at a judge and tell if he/she is a good, great or a poor judge.
- B. What if some judges are high scorers and others a low scorers? What if they are on the same panel? Consistency saves the day!
- C. But there was one bright spot of relative consistency: Judges tended to be more reliable when giving the thumbs-down to wines they thought didn't deserve a medal. "They tend to know what they don't like, both individually and as a group," Dr. Hodgson said.
- D. Be careful if you think you can do better. This is a fools errand. You are not as good as you think you are.

## 2019 SWE Conference - Mayflower Hotel - Washington, DC

- E. Could you do better? 120 wines in a day. And judges did not know they were being judged, let alone the method we had devised.

### Discussion items

#### VII. Why would a winery enter ANY wine competition

##### A. What type of wineries would enter?

- 1) new wineries that have no presence in the market.
- 2) new wineries that are looking for a splash.
- 3) older wineries whose sales have stalled or are decreasing.
- 4) wineries that are looking for a boost to their sales programs.
- 5) wineries who have won before.
- 6) wineries who want to build an advertising campaign
- 7) large wineries who have nothing to lose by entering.
- 8) wineries who make darn good wines and want everyone to know!

##### B. What type of wineries would not enter?

- 1) wineries that are at the top in their respective varietals category.
- 2) wineries that sell all their wines every year
- 3) cult wineries that sell their wines at astronomical prices
- 4) wineries whose owners don't believe in wine competitions

##### C. What is the benefit to winning?

- 1) the California State Fair will give them publicity
- 2) they will get medals to display in their tasting room
- 3) they get bragging rights — “my wine is better than your wine”
- 4) this gives consumers a reason to try their wine.
- 5) hopefully, this all means only one thing — they will sell more wines

##### D. What makes the California State Fair competition “work” for wineries?

- 1) 3,000 wines are entered
- 2) only wines made from California grapes can enter.
- 3) their wines are compared with other like wines.
- 4) State Fair has the Grape & Gourmet Tasting that has a trade tasting
  - a) they will meet restaurants and retail stores who may buy their wines
  - b) they will meet consumers who don't know them
- 5) State Fair has a Wine Magazine that lists all the winning wines.

#### VIII. Steps in receiving and coordinating wine for the California State Fair Wine Competition

- A. Send out letter to 2,500 wineries in California
- B. Call 2,500 wineries to remind them to send in their wines.
- C. Gather a crew of 12 or so to receive the wines.
- D. As wines are registered they are given a random 4-digit judging code
  - 1) this is the key to a blind tasting

2019 SWE Conference - Mayflower Hotel - Washington, DC

2) wines are only known by this number

E. Wines are entered into the computer. Two databases are kept.

1) by judge code number (random 4 digit number)

2) by winery name

3) volunteers and judges have no access to the database by winery name.

F. 8-10,000 wine glasses have to continually be rotated.

G. Wine glasses and pouring in the back room

1) four wine glasses get same judge code number.

2) wines are opened and poured into correct glasses, then bottles are placed back into case

3) wine glasses are placed on carts and brought to front of warehouse by pourers

4) wine stewards take glasses via cart to judge's room and place wine in front of each judge

5) judges have scoring sheets that have judge code numbers that match the glasses

IX. Volunteers - 6 groups

A. 160 volunteers, almost 3 volunteers for every wine judge

B. Cellar crew (most not allowed in warehouse building)

C. Database crew (most not allowed in warehouse building)

D. Clerks (not allowed in warehouse building)

E. Support staff (not allowed in warehouse building)

F. Wine runners (only group allowed in both buildings)

1) can only be in front area of pouring area

2) cannot converse with judges

G. Pourers (not allowed in judge's building)

X. Is there one right way to judge wines?

A. Most competitions taste one glass at a time, 10-12 wines in a flight

1) Judges award each wine a Gold, Silver, Bronze, or No Medal on their own.

2) Then a discussion of each wine is made by each judge. Scores are allowed to change

B. In old days, retain/eliminate was used to cull the selection

1) Judges could taste more wines faster, since it was a simple up or down

2) The next day was devoted to "which" award the wine would receive

3) 40% of wines were eliminated

C. State Fair used the Peterson Method

1) Dick Peterson stated this was how winemakers taste their barrel wines

2) Retained Wines were brought to the table at one time

3) Judges would smell each glass and place the wine in 3 groups

4) Since the best wines had the best aroma, these were tasted first

## 2019 SWE Conference - Mayflower Hotel - Washington, DC

- D. Wines can be ranked
- E. Lodi International used the Peterson method, then ranked the wines
- F. Consumer Wine Awards
  - 1) The consumers were placed on panels of wine that they liked
  - 2) rank/rating system of 7 from “Don’t like” to “Love it”
- G. Wines can be given points
  - 1) 100 point scale (Parker, Wine Spectator)
  - 2) Davis 20 point scale
- H. Simplistic system: I like it; I don’t like it.

### XI. What information about the wine do judges need to know in order to remain objective?

- A. Things that are needed.
  - 1) Varietal, including blends,
- B. Things that might be helpful.
  - 1) alcohol, vintage date, residual sugar, oak or no oak,
- C. Things that I believe taints the judges perception.
  - 1) price, bottle size, appellation, proprietary blend names, winery name, country of origin, cork or screw cap,

### XII. HANDOUTS

- A. **Please Stop Telling People That Corks ‘Breathe’** - by Richard Grant Peterson, PhD
- B. **Taste Observations** - by G.M. Pucilowski
- C. Pinot Noir Shootout. Men & Women rankings