

Vinewise column  
NorthBayBiz  
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With the Harvest Fair not far off it will be interesting to see how many new releases have the words Sonoma County on their front labels. I realize that I have been hammering away at this for several months but I truly believe that wineries that refuse to use the appellation are short-sighted and in the long run will lose market share to the other appellations in the state that are doing a great deal of promotion and SELLING some very good wines. (Think Lodi and Paso Robles in state and Washington State). To quote Bill Turrentine (Turrentine Wine Brokerage) "The quality of wine from Burgundy, Bordeaux, Sonoma, or Napa no longer automatically trumps the quality of a wine from Sicily, Lodi, Australia, or Argentina." In this short term recovery of the industry where expensive wines are selling regardless of quality the market will continue to evolve with greater competition from all over the world. With decreased consumption in Europe more wines will be coming to the US and with more expensive wines coming from Australia we have to keep our guard up and not become complacent.

I keep using the word quality but am not exactly sure of the definition. I suppose we can listen to all of the experts and believe what we read but I have some real doubts about what many of them say. The biggest problem we have in the industry today is the reliance on one person to call of the shots. I am obviously referring to Robert Parker and we have even coined a new term to describe his effect. It is called "Parkerization" and refers to the many wine makers who produce wine that will get high scores (90+ on the 100 point scale). High scoring wines are Parker's personal preference of giant powerful wines that frequently lack finesse and are very high in alcohol. He also prefers European wines to American wines based on his current columns in some nationwide magazines. Four out of five columns are about foreign wines. I predict that as the wine market matures, if it ever will, we will demand lower alcohol wines that you can have more than a couple of glasses and still be coherent. Many

big wines mask the high alcohol hotness but the effect is still there. At one time in the mid 70's, when it was developed, it was great for the industry giving it some direction. Unfortunately, with the current surge in quality (?) it is becoming a force that discourages diversity of styles, and to the dismay of people who want wine to go with a meal rather than be the meal, encourages very high alcohol and tannin levels. Probably the worse thing it has done is to inflate prices of some of these monsters and thus making them available to a very select market, which is usually buying for ego satisfaction. Should I remind you that if you paid \$50 for a wine it will taste good even if it doesn't?

Have I had wines that have scored 98 and 99? Yes. Have I tasted wines that only scored 88? Yes and they were very good wines and generally more drinkable. Each person has his own taste and past wine experiences so what might be a great wine to one is poison to another. The subjective nature of wine quality in itself makes it impossible to impose an objective scale. Moral of the story- buy what you like, not what you are supposed to like!

Consumers are overly influenced by various ratings because they want some guidance and do not really trust their own palate. Retailers use shelf talkers with scores on them and it helps sell that particular wine, but does it sell more wine? Frequently a buyer will buy one high scoring wine for \$40 instead of two lower scoring \$20 wines and thus is selling less wine. I also suppose it could be conceivable that wines submitted are especially "concocted" for the tasting. With wines that are produced in larger numbers than a few hundred cases there might well be several different blends and bottlings. Will they all be identical? Obviously not but close maybe and that "close" might be 3-8 points lower on another day.

Several other writers and magazines such as the Wine Spectator, the Wine Advocate, the Wine Enthusiast, and even our own local Press Democrat rate wines. Everybody is getting into the act so which one is the most dependable? You will probably need to check your palate against their results and see what happens. If you really want to have some fun check out judging results against writers ratings. It is

not unlikely that many gold medals would only be in the mid 80's of several of the writers. Maybe we should cancel all judgments and just Parker and a few others put grades on our wines to "guide" the consumer. What a bunch of BS. How did I ever get going on this? My best advice is to drink what you like and the hell with all of the magazines ratings and judgments.

It is almost inconceivable but I found out that there really is a Santa Claus with common sense. After finding one in Paso Robles (see previous column) I found another one in the form of world famous wine storeowner Darryl Corti in Sacramento. On a sign over the Zinfandel section in his Sacramento store it states that "This is the last tasting that Corti Bros. Will do for over 14.5% Zinfandels. These wines will no longer be sold at Corti Bros. There will be no exceptions." Darryl is quoted as saying that he doesn't pay any attention to Robert Parker or the Wine Spectator. He (Parker) is the one who has caused all of this problem. Amen! Thank God that there are at least two of us who like wine to go with food, not mask it and kill your taste buds at the same time. And now we have technology available to reduce a wine's alcohol and not bother its flavors. Many wineries are currently doing it but the facility where it is done is more like Oakridge, Tennessee in terms of security because heaven forbid, another winery may find out or even worse the general public and that may harm their image. Bulls\_\_\_! Why would trying to make a wine better harm anyone's image? Oh, it might take away the "handcrafted" crap written up on the back label. Maybe all of these monster wines are just another sign of the lack of maturity of our industry, just like the fear of putting Sonoma County on the label. Well so much for this month. Keep help increasing that consumption level. Remember a bottle a day will keep the doctor away. (A bottle a day is accomplished by a sweet wine over you bran in the morning, 2 glasses at lunch and 2 at dinner- presto. Mission complete.)