

Judge wine by more than its score



Wine critique is as old as the drink itself. From the time of the first sip, there has always been someone uttering either, “Mmm, that’s really good,” or “What is this garbage you’re making me drink?”

Many people feel a good way to convey how they feel about a particular wine is to give it a score. And no one person is more responsible for the modern scoring of wine than Robert Parker, founder of The Wine Advocate, a publication launched in 1978. Sure, wine had been scored and rated before, but this American made it accessible to the masses by using a 100-point scale – something we can all relate to. A lawyer by trade, Parker claimed he rated all bottles he bought personally; hence he was not influenced by “familiarization” trips or free wine.

By using percentage-style scoring, he made it clearly understood where a wine ranked – one man, one vision, one palate.

Parker’s scale really started at 80; it was rare to see a score under that. At the time, an 88 or 89 from him was a solid score and, as his popularity grew, anything above 90 was a sure-fire hit and would guarantee sales. It truly was a revolutionary way to rate wine, and it took the wine world by storm.

As with anything popular, the scale was soon co-opted by other reviewers and publications. The problem with this co-opted scale is that we are no longer dealing with one man, one vision, one palate. We have a bunch of people – with different palates – tasting wine using a system made popular by one person whose scores meant



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something.

And then comes an even bigger problem. Although different voices in the mix can be beneficial, with more and more reviewers watering down the pool the only way to be heard is by being louder, and the only way to do that is by giving higher scores.

So, a wine that once received an 87 might now get a 94, not because it’s better, but because 87 no longer cuts it. A score of 87 won’t end up in a winery’s marketing efforts, but a 94 certainly does – complete with accreditation and instant notoriety for the reviewer.

Consumers end up getting caught in the middle. They might find themselves lured into buying wines they perceive to be “great,” only to find themselves saying, “I like it, but I don’t get 94.”

The real issue is this: 94 is just six points shy of perfection. If reviewers feel the need to push their scores higher and higher to get ink in this tough media landscape, what will they do when they really taste greatness? Are we due for a new system that pushes the scoring above 100?

Rating wines on a chart or graph makes sense in competitions, where you need to score wines and come up with a winner head to head. But what about the consumer?

Do you sip on a Yellow Tail and say, “I’d give that an 86,” or a bottle of Dr. L. Riesling and say, “That’s an 89 for me.” No, you describe it as smooth, soft or fruity. You may say things like, “I really like this,” but I doubt numbers ever come into the discussion, unless you are discussing the price: “You paid \$12 for that? Really? No way it’s that cheap.” Or if your host tries to impress you by saying “Parker gave it a 92,” your response is one of two things: “Oh, really?” or “I wouldn’t give it a 92.”

Just think about wine and its role in your life: happy occasions, sad occasions, festive occasions – whatever the occasion, where does wine fit in? Do you rate your occasions on a scale of 1 to 100 or do you use words such as awesome, amazing, fun, incredible, best, worst?

Wine is always about you. You make the choice to buy the bottle; you decide when to pull the cork; you make a decision about how long to keep it open; you decide on what occasion to pour it. You also decide whether you like it or not.

I can help guide you by pointing out a good bottle. You can agree with me about descriptors such as red fruit, cranberry, chocolate, peaches, apples – and thus derive your own review. But I’m not about to defend a 92 or 86 points.

Wine is ultimately about you and your perception.

WINES TO TRY

These were my favourite Niagara wines released in 2017. Two will require a visit to the winery.

Crescent Estate Winery 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve (\$34.95 - Winery only)

A powerful Cabernet that’s big, meaty and oak-driven but with so much spice, cassis, blackberry, mocha and more waiting in the background for its moment in the sun. The finish has big tannins, black pepper and great acidity for balance. The linger of cassis, blackberry and baker’s cocoa on the tongue will keep you coming back for more. Hold at least two to five years.

Icellars 2015 Arinna (\$39 - Winery only)

A red blend of 54 per cent Cabernet Sauvignon, 28 per cent Merlot and 18 per cent Cabernet Franc. This wine is quite simply gorgeous, from the aromas of cassis, mocha and cherry to the smoky-white pepper and grippy tannin structure at the back end. Even the dark fruit mid-palate shows finesse. Only 225 cases produced. Drink: 2019 to 2029.

Vineland 2016 Cabernet Franc (\$14.95 - #594127)

This perennial favourite has arrived and the 2016 is quite simply a steal. If you’re not buying this by the case, then at minimum a half case is a must. This is pure Ontario Cabernet Franc with none of the drawbacks. It has cherry-rasp fruit with tobacco interlaced throughout and is so balanced, so tasty, I defy you not to open a second bottle on the same night you open the first. Still the best value in Ontario Franc.

Henry of Pelham 2012 Cuvée Catharine Carte Blanche, Blanc de Blanc (\$44.95 - #315200)

Probably one of the best bubbles to come out of the cellar doors at Henry of Pelham. It spends five years on lees; made from 100 per cent all-estate Chardonnay, which has developed a very leesy, smoky, toasty, biscuity essence that surrounds every aspect of this wine. It also maintains great mousse (bubble) with a creaminess in the mouth and flavours of apple purée, pear and lemon on the long luxurious finish.

Trius 2015 Red (\$24.95 - #303800)

Red is back with a vengeance, and why not? It was a better year for Bordeaux reds, which also bodes well for a killer 2016. A blend of 43 per cent Cabernet Franc, 42 per cent Cabernet Sauvignon and 15 per cent Merlot – and showing a rich mouth feel, smoky mid-palate and spicy finish. You’ll also find vanilla, black cherry, white pepper and cocoa interlaced with well-balanced acidity. 

