

SNOW ON WINE

Wine Ratings: What's in the Number?



by Dr. Jeff Snow

We've all been there: dinner guests coming – spouse wants no embarrassments – and here you are at the wine store “Sum of All Wine” confronted by Ratings: WS 92, WA 89, WE 93 and little placards proclaiming, “**Dicky’s Favorite Merlot**” or “**Chris’s Best Choice for Burgers.**” It’s complicated with so many variables and choices. Like picking a hotel. *Booking.com; Trivago.com; Tripadvisor.com* or web pages of Westin, NH, Marriott, or Clarion, who all claim to give us the insight of professionals who, we hope, are knowledgeable but independent of commercial influence or bias and who also comment on varying taste and style in a way we can understand.

Reliance upon a wine critic to compare and rank wines is not new. Archeologists Heskett and Butler, in their book “**Divine Vintage**”¹ described Roman wine writer Martial’s blunt tasting notes: “*We drink the black poison of a Corsican Jar.*” While noting that “*Pliny and Columella are generally in agreement on the best wines in the (Roman) empire...*”. Direct language and critics who generally agree are good. Because tastes vary widely, knowing who makes the rating helps us understand it. A rating number allows us to rank wines for overall quality, but it doesn’t tell us if a wine is ready to drink now or if it is an acidic or tannic monster which won’t drink well for decades, nor any other considerations of aroma, taste or food compatibility. Only tasting notes can do that.

In 1978 attorney Robert Parker wanted to provide wine consumers with an **independent** and **consistent** review of wines. He created a new 50-100 point quality scale to provide greater levels of differentiation than the commonly used 20 point rating system. He founded a bi-monthly consumer’s guide titled, “**Robert Parker’s Wine Advocate**” (abbreviated variously as Parker, RP, TWA or WA). Not accepting advertisements and relying on subscription rates to pay for everything helps insure independence from the wine trade. Initially all tasting samples were purchased from wine stores so that Parker got the same wine you or I would and not some “special bottles” from the winery or distributor. Today 60% of tasting samples are purchased. Detailed tasting notes describe a wine’s appearance, aroma/bouquet, initial taste, mouthfeel, finish, and overall quality – summarized as the ranking NUMBER. Parker states that numerical scores can narrow choices but purchasers should only buy based on detailed reading of the notes. (see *addendum on point meaning*).

British wine writers Jancis Robinson (author of “**The Oxford Companion of Wine**”) and Michael Broadbent (author of “**The World Atlas of Wine**”) use the (older) 20-point scale and provide copious tasting notes. Membership in JancisRobinson.com with weekly wine newsletter and reviews costs 85 pounds (~\$111 U.S.) and she does not accept advertising.

Another popular rating system is used by **Gambero Rosso**. This Italian food and wine publishing group uses an experienced tasting panel to rate Italian wine. They award “Tre Bicchieri,” or 3 glasses, to “extraordinary wines”, “Due Bicchieri” to “very good wines”, and “Uno Bicchiero” to “good wines”. They provide detailed tasting notes and historical winery summaries.

Parker’s (WA) 50-100 system² caught on and **Wine Spectator** (WS), **Wine Enthusiast** (WE) and many others have now adopted it. But did they adopt Parker’s **independence** and **consistency**? Well, be your own judge. WS does publish wine trade advertising, and rates primarily winery donated wine, but claims to pay for about 2% of rated wines. To their credit the editors who rate their wines are identified, and tasting notes are clear. And WE? It is a group of related companies. **Wineenthusiast.com** takes you to the WE Catalogue, and when you click on “**buy wine**” you are redirected onto **wineexpress.com**. **WineMag.com** takes you to the WE Magazine, and selecting a wine to buy takes

you to **wine-searcher.com**. On the WineMag site go to the bottom and select “trade” then “submit for rating” or “advertising.” You will discover their “claims “... *to create immersive, memorable, custom content experiences that tell a brand's story...*”³.

Some other ratings services commonly include “**James Suckling**” (formerly a WS editor), “**Jeb Dunnuck**” (formerly a wine critic with Robert Parker’s WA), **Vivino.com**, **Cellartracker.com**, and **Decanter.com**.

Many less well-known sites, bloggers, and of course wine merchants, offer wine rating as well. I use them all from time to time but am careful to read accompanying tasting notes and consider their objectivity and independence.

Notes:

- 1) Heskett, Randal & Butler, Joel; Divine Vintage: 2012, Palgrave MacMillan, p. 109.
- 2) RobertParker.com, About Us, RPWA Rating System.
- 3) WineMag.com, Advertise, Enthusiast Idea Lab.

Addendum:²

Robert Parker created our original rating system with the first issue of **The Wine Advocate**, and it remains unchanged to this day. It employs a 100-point quality scale (in which wines are given a rating of 50 to 100 points). Since its inception, Robert Parker’s 100-point scale has become the wine industry’s standard.

The Wine Advocate takes a hard, very critical look at wine, since we would prefer to underestimate the wine's quality than to overestimate it. The numerical ratings are utilized only to enhance and complement the thorough tasting notes, which are our primary means of communicating our judgments.

The score ranges correlate to the following assessments:

96-100:

An **extraordinary** wine of profound and complex character displaying all the attributes expected of a classic wine of its variety. Wines of this caliber are worth a special effort to find, purchase and consume.

90 - 95:

An **outstanding** wine of exceptional complexity and character. In short, these are terrific wines.

80 - 89:

A **barely above average to very good** wine displaying various degrees of finesse and flavor as well as character with no noticeable flaws.

70 - 79:

An **average** wine with little distinction except that it is a soundly made. In essence, a straightforward, innocuous wine.

60 - 69:

A **below average** wine containing noticeable deficiencies, such as excessive acidity and/or tannin, an absence of flavor or possibly dirty aromas or flavors.

50 - 59:

A wine deemed to be unacceptable.
