

Special “Wine Competitions” Edition

Each year, I judge in about a dozen different wine competitions throughout the United States, but mostly in California. I also get many questions from consumers about wine competitions: What are they? How are they run? Who are the judges? What do the results mean?

This special edition of the Wine Press will answer those questions, and probably raise more. In most cases, I’ll be referring to the competitions in which I serve as a judge, but may also note what we do in our own “New York Wine & Food Classic”, which has attempted to adopt the “best practices” of other competitions.

What is a wine competition? It is a “blind” tasting by wine experts of large numbers of wines to determine their relative quality on that day.

What’s a “blind” tasting? No, we don’t wear blindfolds, or even Lone Ranger masks. A blind tasting simply means we have no idea what specific wines we are tasting. We usually know the varietal (or type of wine) and the vintage (year the grapes were harvested), and a few (but not most) competitions include the price category as well. But we never know the brand, rarely the country or region of origin; and we never see a bottle, even in a brown paper bag (because the capsule could give away the winery’s identity).

Instead, all of the wine samples are poured in a separate room by the “back room staff” into identical glasses that are coded by number or letter, then brought to the judges’ tables—usually about 10 glasses at a time. By the way, the back room staff is just as important as the judges; without either group, there would be no competition.

Which wines are judged? The ones that are entered. This may sound obvious, but it really depends on the scope of the competition, and especially on which wineries choose to enter. The competitions where I judge are mostly international in scope, inviting wines from around the world. There are a few regional competitions (e.g., Great Lakes or Atlantic Seaboard), and many state competitions (e.g., California, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, and our own New York Wine & Food Classic) which are limited to wines produced in that state. There are also a few competitions which are limited to one type of wine, like the Canberra Riesling Challenge in Australia or Chardonnays du Monde in France.

Within the parameters of each competition, it is really the wineries themselves which determine the wines that are tasted. Some wineries submit many wines in many competitions; others just a few wines in a few competitions; and still others none at all. The decision may depend on the winery’s size, marketing strategy, or opinion about the value of wine competitions in its overall business plan or philosophy. One highly successful California winery publicly admitted spending \$20,000 annually in entry fees, and said it got that back in spades in terms of tasting room sales and trade support. A successful New York winery has chosen not to enter any competitions at all. Obviously, if you don’t enter, you can’t win, but that may simply not matter to some.

Who are the judges? They are a diverse group of “wine experts” from many different professional areas—wine makers, wine educators, wine writers, sommeliers, wine retailers, and more—who all have two things in common: a passion for wine, and daily exposure to it. In most competitions, the judges also represent many states and countries, which provides broader perspectives and protects against “viticultural racism”. Some judges have specific academic credentials like Master of Wine or Master Sommelier, but most do not. They are simply immersed in the world of wine, with regular tastings of many wines as an integral part of their professional life. Ideally, the panels have judges from different aspects of wine’s professional life because they bring different perspectives to the table, which is how we learn from one another. For example, a wine maker might evaluate a wine on the basis of technical aspects, a restaurateur on how well it would pair with food, and a wine educator on how typical it is of its varietal type.

How are the wines judged? Most competitions have two basic phases: the medal round, and the “sweepstakes”. For the initial, medal round, the judges are split into panels of 3, 4 or 5 people. Some competitions prefer the odd numbers because it’s easier to get a decision by a simple majority. Others (including ours) prefer panels of 4 because when there is a split, it must be resolved by discussion and consensus.

Each wine is judged on its own merits—color, clarity, aroma, bouquet, taste, aftertaste, and overall quality—rather than as part of a ranking. In other words, 10 wines will not be ranked 1 to 10, but rather recommended for specific medals. In a particular flight, there might be 1 Gold, 3 Silver, and 2 Bronze medals, for example, and 4 receiving no award; but there are no predetermined numbers or percentages of medals. Normally, sparkling wines and white wines are tasted first, followed by Rosé and red, and finally dessert wines. When there are different levels of sweetness, with Riesling for example, the wines are tasted from dry to sweet, because tasting the sweeter wines first would make the dry wines taste bitter. Palate cleansers include lots of water (still or sparkling), unsalted crackers or French bread, mild cheese, rare roast beef (for red wines), and Gruber olives from southern California—a soft, fruity olive like none you’ve ever tasted that is the best overall palate cleanser of all (as well as being addictive).

The back room staff brings out “flights” of about 10 wines of the same type (like Chardonnay) in coded glasses which each judge separately tastes in silence, making notes (if desired) and deciding on the appropriate medal for each wine on its own merits—Gold, Silver, Bronze, or No Award. Some competitions, like ours, also have a “Double Gold” category, which requires unanimity among panelists that the wine deserves a Gold medal, whereas a Gold medal just requires a majority. Simplistically, you might consider Double Gold as “exceptional”, Gold as “excellent”, Silver as “very good”, and Bronze as “good”.

When all judges have finished tasting, they compare notes to decide on a final, group medal for each wine. When there is agreement on their individual scores (80-90% of the time in most cases), no discussion is needed and the medal is assigned. When there is significant disagreement, the judges discuss and often retaste the wine to arrive at a consensus. (NOTE: In most competitions, judges will taste 100-120 wines per day, and

sometimes more, beginning at 9 am. With appropriate palate cleansers and an efficient backroom staff, this is eminently manageable, but long discussions hold up the process.)

(But don't you get drunk?! No, not even tipsy. When you're judging wines, you didn't swallow the samples, you spit them into a container. By the end of the day, you want a beer. During my 20 years of judging, I have only encountered a handful of judges who don't spit, and they don't last long. They fall asleep at the table, start slurring their words and are dismissed, but in any case are never invited back.)

In addition to the medals given to each wine, the panels normally determine which Gold medal wines advance to the "sweepstakes" round to determine the Best of Class (like Chancellor, Chardonnay, or Catawba), Best of Category (Red, White, Rosé, etc.), and at some competitions Best of Show (that is, the single best wine of any type) like our "Governor's Cup" trophy. The "sweepstakes" round is the grand finale of the competition, with all judges (not just a panel) tasting all the wines that have been advanced.

How does the "sweepstakes" round work? This is definitely the most fun for the judges, because all of the wines to be tasted are the best wines of the competition. Dan Berger, a prominent California wine journalist who chairs the Riverside and Long Beach Grand Cru competitions, introduced "acclamation voting" as the fairest way to determine the best wines in large categories (like white, or red) when there are often 20 or more different types of wine. Each judge may vote as many times as he or she likes, since the wines are of different types (e.g., Chardonnay, Riesling, Seyval, Catawba), with the knowledge that the more one votes, the less each vote means. This system has been adopted by many competitions, including ours.

Many competitions end with a Best of Category (e.g., Red, White, Rosé), but ours also selects a "Best of Show" among them as well, which is known as the "Governor's Cup" trophy.

What do the results mean? Basically, a wine competition is one moment in time. The results reflect the collective opinions of expert judges about a specific group of wines on a particular day. But there is a lot of consistency among different competitions held in different places at different times, so wine competitions really do provide good guidance for purchasing wines. On our website (www.newyorkwines.org), the "New York Gold" section lists all Gold medal wines which you may sort by competition or type of wine—and you'll see lots of the same winners in different competitions.

Wine competitions are a unique blend of objective and subjective. The objectivity involves several people in a blind tasting process which eliminates personal bias for a region or winery. The subjectivity involves the personal taste sensitivities and preferences of different people. If everyone tasted the same, and preferred the same nuances in wine, there would be no need for more than one person.

Over the years I have judged in about 200 wine competitions and tasted about 50,000 wines. Yes, it's fun, but it's also hard work if you're conscientious about being fair to every wine, which requires a day's worth of concentration. You can also get "palate fatigue", just like an athlete can get muscle fatigue, so you need to learn when

you can no longer be fair, which means it's time to stop. And after tasting lots of red wines, you end up with purple teeth!

It has also become harder over the years, for the wonderful reason that wines from everywhere have become so much better. There used to be much more variation in quality, but research into grape growing and winemaking, plus the commitment to quality by producers worldwide, has raised the bar, making it harder to discern a Gold from a Silver, or a Silver from a Bronze. This is good for consumers, and it's good for producers because consumers are more likely to see wine as a positive experience.

Another major trend has been the increasing acceptance and respect for non-traditional grape varieties and wines, even in California where they're not produced. Years ago, entering a Concord, Catawba or Seyval in most competitions guaranteed no medals for those wines because the judges were either unfamiliar with the taste characteristics or outright biased. Thanks to the efforts of many people, and to the ever-increasing quality in the bottle, those wines now often win major medals.

I've judged in over 200 competitions, and every time I learn something new—about wine, wine making, taste perceptions, and more. Judging has also been a very valuable experience for me in my role of promoting New York wines. I have come to know my own tastes, how others may differ and why, and especially to have a better understanding of the competition we face and the trends in the big world of wine that we live in.

Cheers!