

Tales from the Crypt: Auctioneer Bruce Kaiser Tells Us about the Trials and Tribulations of a Wine Judge

Interviewed by Orley Ashenfelter

I've often wondered how a wine like the Renaissance 1985 cabernet sauvignon could be sold to investors (like the Wine Exchange of California, which was finally shut down by the Federal Trade Commission) who ought to know better. The answer may be: "wine judges" and "wine competitors." The Renaissance 1985, which was barely drinkable (and unsaleable) according to former Bonham and Butterfield's auctioneer Bruce Kaiser, actually won a "gold medal" at a fair in California. How could this happen? To find out we interviewed Kaiser not long after he had been a wine judge at the San Francisco Fair.

Orley Ashenfelter: Bruce, we thought you only drank top flight wines. How did you come to be a judge in a white zinfandel tasting, of all things?

Kaiser: Someone in Tony Blue's Office [Anthony Dias Blue, wine writer for *Bon Appetit*] asked me if I would judge wines at the San Francisco Fair. I always wondered how a gold medal winner at the Orange County Fair could end up without any award in another competition. I decided to see how these things work for myself.

OA: Where do all the wines come from?

Kaiser: Basically, wineries submitted three bottles of any wine they wanted to enter into the competition. There is also an entry fee. An award is such a good marketing tool that there is no shortage of wines, especially since nobody reports on the losers. It's basically a win/no lose situation for the winery.

OA: Who were the other judges?

Kaiser: The organizers created the "tasting panels" of four to six judges for each wine varietal. The judges were journalists, sommeliers, and wholesale and retail wine merchants. Judges are not just "members of the trade" however.

OA: What type of wine did you taste?

Kaiser: I was a little worried about that. Bob Finigan [a well known California wine writer], who was also on my panel, was too. Drinking young cabernets is about as much fun

as slamming your hand in a drawer. Luckily, it was announced we would taste chardonnay on the first day. Finigan let out a great gasp of relief and said, “thank God we didn’t draw the cabernets!” Tasting 140 chardonnays is pretty tough, but it is infinitely easier on the taste buds than cabernets.

Of course, I wasn’t so lucky the second day – I drew white zinfandels and “miscellaneous California red wines.”

OA: How was the tasting organized?

Kaiser: We first donned white lab coats. Then volunteers presented us with blind samples of four to six wines. The first round was easy. If two panelists rejected the wine as obviously flawed, it was not sent to the second round. Over 100 wines were dropped.

Most of the rejected wines were either thin and watery or tasted like oak chips. Some were a lot worse. I especially remember a chardonnay from Virginia that was so badly oxidized it had the color of a copper penny and smelled like a bad glass of sherry.

OA: What happened to all the leftover wines? There must have been at least 200 bottles of chardonnay left after the first round from your panel alone.

Kaiser: Party hearty! The extra bottles, open or unopened, were divided up among the many volunteers who helped pour the wines. There must have been at least a thousand bottles of unopened wine, plus hundreds of unfinished open bottles.

OA: How was the second round organized?

Kaiser: Actually we referred to the second round as the “medal round.” We were presented with flights of wines that had not been rejected in the first round. Judges were asked to assign either “no medal,” or, for preferred wines, a gold, silver or bronze medal.

OA: Was there much disagreement about the wines?

Kaiser: Lots! Typically the panel leader led the group to a consensus. In one case a wine received two gold and two bronze votes. The leader announced, “I guess that means a silver.”

My favorite situation came during the white zinfandel “medal round” on the second day. I thought all the wines were too sweet, except one. I rated the wine as a bronze, as did one other judge. But two judges rated it silver. In the end, our group leader said “there should be at least one gold medal for every wine variety.” That’s how a not particular good semi-sweet pink wine received a “gold medal” at the San Francisco Fair!

OA: What happened on the third day of the competition?

Kaiser: Wines that had received unanimous gold medal votes from the judges on the panel in the second round were given a much coveted “double gold medal.” On the third,

and final, day of the competition these double gold wines competed for the highly sought after “best of show” award.

By this time many of the judges had departed, but I stayed for the lovely buffet lunch and to see the final fruition of my two days of effort.

Judges were served the wines in blind flights of mixed white and red varieties. Ideally, the judges were supposed to unanimously pick the best of the double gold’s as the best of show. Unfortunately, no wine received a majority in the first round of voting.

Ouch – another taste off!

Although there was great anticipation about the results of the second taste off among the 20 remaining judges, again there was no majority winner. More judges left, and I was ready to throw in the towel. Even though I was spitting the wines out, by this time my mouth was dry and puckered. In retrospect I don’t see how anything other than a big extract, high alcohol wine could have prevailed in such a massive competition.

OA: So, what wine finally won the overall competition?

Kaiser: The winner was a Franciscan zinfandel. When it was announced, wine writer Dan Berger [formerly of the *Wine Enthusiast*] looked up at me, smiled, and said (through an unbelievable mess of purple teeth), “Ummm, that’s good wine.”