

Tri-City Herald (Washington)

December 1, 2009 Tuesday

Lies, damn lies and statistics

BYLINE: Dan Berger

SECTION: WINE PRESS NORTHWEST; Pg. 8

LENGTH: 824 words

A report some months ago in the Journal of Wine Economics strongly implied that the results of wine competitions were more likely to be random than replicate-able evaluations of professional palates.

The fact that the report was based on research done by a statistician sounds as if the scientific method had been used in collecting data. Yet the accumulation of data was based around a methodology that I and other wine professionals believe is flawed. And it doesn't help that the statistician knows little about wine competitions.

Then a recent article in the Wall Street Journal further clouded the issue because it was written by the author of a book about how randomness rules our lives, and thus wine competition results.

Too bad it's not true.

It may well be true that results of some wine competitions are inexact and related to factors that shouldn't occur in major wine judgments. Such as bad category structuring, bad panel assignments and bad judges.

The original damaging report conclusion, that randomness plays a huge factor in the way medals are awarded at major wine competitions, was an utterly unfair shot at all wine competitions, akin to doing brain surgery with a cleaver.

True, the results of some wine competitions are better than others. Judges at various U.S. judgments have different skill levels and all taste under different rules, using different parameters and different groupings.

Some judgments mandate that panels taste only a small number of wines; others require huge groups to be judged by the same folks. (Two years ago, I had 85 Syrahs and 80 Petite Sirahs on the same day. How much care goes into judging the last wines of the last group?)

To verify how different wine competitions can produce different results, look at how wine is actually judged during the year:

* In January, a wine is judged at the Dallas Morning News judging. Say it gets a bronze medal. But perhaps that wine was recently bottled and in January it hadn't resolved and recovered from the bottling process.

* By May, at the Riverside International (which I coordinate), the same wine has had three months to "come around." The judges see its greatness and award it a gold.

* But by June at the Los Angeles County Fair, the same wine is judged and gets a silver. Perhaps it was served too cold, or too warm.

* In July, at the Indiana Wine Competition, say a panel of inexperienced judges judges it. There it gets no medal.

Moreover, some wine competitions use a "majority rules" format in which three mediocre or poor judges can overrule two experts. This often leads to a lot of bronze medals.

Where discussions are mandated, results tend to be better.

The original report implying randomness in wine competition results didn't mention Wines: Their Sensory Evaluation, a textbook by Maynard Amerine and Edward Roessler, in which wine tasting fallacies are listed.

Was the author of the study even aware of this? Did he ask the coordinator of the California State Fair wine competition (which was the only event analyzed) if he had taken any precautions against errors?

Then came the Wall Street Journal article. Both the study and the WSJ article made faulty assumptions that sound like science. But a sensory evaluation expert who looked at the report said it was faultily done.

In particular, I believe that when you use the CalState wine competition as your model, you're dealing with problems. What's lacking, in my mind, is the professionalism that is implied by the name of the event. It is one of the worst possible events from which to draw data.

But vital to this point is that the results of one competition cannot imply that the same results would occur with other, better-run competitions.

When it first was proposed that the CalState Fair authorize publication of this research, I read the material and so did the sensory evaluation expert. Both of us strongly advised against publication of the study since it was faulty. Yet it was finally published, and it as well as the WSJ article lent further credence to this myth.

I have written extensively on wine competitions and was a math major in college so I can explain why both articles were off base. But the most telling bit of evidence is this:

In 2007, the Huntington Petite Sirah was entered in 14 wine competitions. It received 10 gold medals, 2 silver medals and 2 bronze medals. And in 2008 and 2009, 2006 Ventana Vineyards Rubystone won 12 gold and 13 silver medals - a tally equal to what Ventana's 2005 Rubystone won!

Randomness? That exists where a mediocre wine wins one or two gold medals but is shut out when truly professional wine judges get a chance to evaluate it.

Randomness exists where there are poor systems, ill-trained wine judges, or both. Quality judges and quality systems produce quality results.

DAN BERGER is a nationally renowned wine writer who lives in Santa Rosa, Calif. He publishes a weekly commentary Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences (VintageExperiences.com).