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Wine judging scrutinized after study finds inconsistent results

BYLINE: Mike Dunne Special to The Bee

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Judges had no idea that one of the wines in each of the three flights given them was identical. During the first two flights, they rejected the wine as undeserving of any kind of award. During the third flight, however, they unanimously agreed that it warranted a gold medal.

Great for the wine, not so great for the reputation of the judges. I may have been one of them. If so, how can I explain this inconsistency without sounding dismissive or defensive?

And if I were one of the oscillating judges, will I ever be asked to judge again?

This quiet test took place at the California State Fair commercial wine competition in 2003. It was part of a trial run for a proposed study to measure the reliability of wine judges.

Since then, the study was refined and then conducted over four years. It drew little fanfare until researcher Robert Hodgson announced his initial findings in a paper published earlier this year in the Journal of Wine Economics.

In short, judges who have been evaluating wines in the State Fair's commercial wine competition in recent years haven't been very reliable in identifying consistently duplicate pours. Only 10 percent of the judges gave the same wine an identical score or close to identical score, Hodgson found. What's more, it seems judges weren't always consistent.

This doesn't look good for the credibility of the State Fair wine competition. If judges can't identify the same wine if it is in three of the 30 or so glasses in front of them, how much confidence should consumers put in the awards?

Of two minds on judging I approach this subject with conflicted sentiments. For one, as a member of the State Fair's wine advisory committee, as well as an occasional judge at the State Fair, I was aware of Hodgson's research. I welcomed his study even while recognizing that ultimately I might be found to be not as keen a student of wine as I'd like to think. (Only Hodgson and the chief judge of the State Fair competition, G.M. "Pooch" Pucilowski, know how individual judges performed during the study; eventually, judges found to be the most inconsistent likely won't be invited back.)

Secondly, while I believe wine competitions perform a helpful if nonessential service in pointing consumers to commendable wines, I have qualms about the process. As I've sniffed, sipped and spat my way through 100 or 200 wines in a day, I've found myself wondering at what point do I hit the wall in this marathon: 50 wines, 95 or 125, somewhere in between, or beyond? When does my palate become too fatigued?

There are other questions judges mull as they try to be fair to the flight arranged invitingly in front of them. Did that olive I just ate really do its job in reviving my palate or does its lingering flavor cause me to rate the next wine as worthy of only a bronze medal rather than the gold my neighbor judge gave it? What if the room is too hot, cold, too dimly lit or too bright?

Despite these concerns, we judges shoulder on. Frankly, it's fun. All we know of the wines is their varietal or style, and perhaps vintage and price niche; such blind evaluations effectively diminish or eliminate preconceived notions. As a wine writer, competitions provide me with material.

And competitions are educational. Panels often consist of this kind of mix: A wine collector, a wine writer, a winemaker and a wine dealer such as grocer, importer or sommelier. Each generally has long experience on the wine scene, each has his or her own take on what constitutes an exceptional wine, and each often brings to the table fresh insight.

Each competition has the air of a family reunion. Many of the same judges are repeatedly invited, while at the same time others show up for the first time. We mingle, we swap news, we learn from each other.

While competitions benefit by the "institutional memory" of seasoned judges, this homogeneity in the composition of many panels is another reason to question the results: Do they too much reflect the tastes of older white guys? Some competition directors are responding to concerns that panels aren't as representative of the country's demographic profile as they might be by recruiting more women, more younger judges and more members of ethnic minorities.

Judging isn't particularly remunerative. If an honorarium is paid, it will cover meals not provided by the sponsoring organization, and such incidentals as newspapers or Internet access at the hotel, or both. In some instances it also is intended to cover transportation and lodging costs. Judges won't say it publicly, but many would give up three days or so to judge even if they weren't paid, even if the competition were on a weekend, as most are.

A gold medal wine Ultimately, what do these competitions mean? Well, gold medals sell wine, vintners almost invariably tell you. They must have some impact, given that the number of entries at several competitions is rising.

Years ago, I heard the director of one enduring competition say that such comparative roundups are good because they "help improve the breed" by highlighting superior wines. I'm skeptical. I'm more convinced that the wines to win high honors tend to be wines that have the most profound impact on palates stained, wrinkled and just plain exhausted by round after round of withering acids, raspy tannins and subversive alcohol.

What tastes really good after all that, other than a frosty mug of Sierra Nevada Pale Ale?

A wine fairly blooming with oak, fruit, sugar and alcohol, not necessarily in any kind of balance. I'd rather not have a hand -- or a taste bud -- in encouraging that style of wine.

For consumers, a gold medal means that on one given day a group of wine enthusiasts whose palates may or may not be much different than their own found a wine of unusual merit. The next month the same wine may not even medal in another competition. That could be because the wine changed in the meantime -- or a number of other reasons.

Questioning the system This inconsistency is what prompted Hodgson in part to undertake the State Fair study. A professor emeritus in the department of oceanography at Humboldt State University in Arcata, he's also the owner and winemaker of Fieldbrook Winery just north of Eureka.

He got to pondering why some of his wines would do well in one competition but finish out of the running in another. He also began to question his own acuity as an occasional wine judge. Thus, he structured the study to try to understand both the variabilities of the wine circuit and the variability of wine judges. So far, only the State Fair competition has signed on to his research.

Hodgson is now pretty much convinced that judges just can't accurately judge 120 or so wines a day, a total fairly common on the competition circuit.

Pucilowski has taken notice. At this year's State Fair wine competition in June, he hopes to reduce the total number of wines that judges evaluate each day to between 75 and 85, thereby lightening their workload while raising confidence in the results.

"I don't believe it's the judges as much as the system used to judge the wines," he says in interpreting the early returns from the study, which he and Hodgson expect to continue.

A gold or silver medal or other high honor from a competition does mean something: that three to five people customarily with long experience and enthusiasm in wine matters have reached a consensus on the quality and expressiveness of an entry.

But that's no substitute for the best way for consumers to find which wines most please their palates. That way is simply to taste wines while visiting winery tasting rooms, attending charitable pourings or staging an exploratory flight at home.

That's what I see myself continuing to do, regardless of whether I'm retained or eliminated as a judge.

WINE CONTESTS AHEAD The calendar is filled with dates for regional, domestic and international wine competitions; most of them are iconic annual events. Right about now, the wine competition circuit is heating up for perennial judges like Mike Dunne.

* Today: Pacific Coast Oyster Wine Competition. Wines paired with oysters are judged this week in Los Angeles, Seattle and San Francisco. * Thursday: Fiddletown Wine Competition in Amador County, a smaller event that is a big deal for regional wineries. * April 30: Calaveras County Fair Professional Wine Competition. * May 1-3: Riverside International Wine Competition in Riverside. * June 10-12: California State Fair Commercial Wine Competition, Sacramento. * July 18-19: The Long Beach Grand Cru Competition.

Note: results for wine competitions usually aren't made public for days, or even weeks, after judging.

Mike Dunne, The Bee's former wine columnist, remains active as a judge on the competition circuit and continues to contribute to The Bee's wine Web site, sacwineregion.com.