

What's in a Score?

SHAYN BJORNHOLM, MS

"But did it get a 95?"

There may be no more contentious a question to a sommelier's ears in a restaurant these days. When a customer inquires about how many points a wine has received from the usual critics, it opens a Pandora's box of pride, concern, humility, admiration, and disgust. The sommelier's reaction is likely to be downright Shakespearean in depth and breadth of passion.

At one end of the spectrum, the simple mention of the "p" word can turn a sage, well-gathered professional into a momentarily overcome-with-rage, well-lathered professional, replete with lancing Laguioles and grand cru profanity. The ridiculous misappropriation of it all! It's patently absurd that the overblown statements of a couple of "authorities" could supplant your carefully considered, passionately listed, and confidently sold description of the bottle/pichet/half-carafe/glass of wine that any sommelier worth his or her corkscrew knows will best match your chef's creations. When was the last time a critic reviewed that wine in the company of your braised pork belly (or of any food this wondrous elixir should accompany, at least within the confines of a restaurant)? What are you paid for if not your hard-won knowledge, your complete understanding of the optimum marriage of wine and your restaurant's cuisine? When will American diners start to listen to their own

palates, or at least trust their sommeliers? One could polish glasses with the steam blowing out of this wine professional's ears.

On the flip side, another sommelier might welcome the query wholeheartedly—perhaps with a full recitation of the exact scores from more than one source. Not so long ago, many wine and restaurant professionals looked to these (mostly) experienced, erudite, and eloquent wine critics for honest guidance, trusting their scoring systems as reliable gauges upon which to base wine-buying decisions. It seems indisputable that the perspective of having tasted thousands of wines over many years would make someone an expert in discerning the quality of a particular wine. In an age when figuring out where the allegiance of ever-fickle guests' tastes (and pocketbooks) lies is an almost impossible chore, having a well-known magazine's or newsletter's top-scoring wines listed at your establishment seems a small price to pay. After all, who are you that guests should trust you to recommend a wine? Why shouldn't they listen to an extraordinarily gifted taster with 10 times the experience, perhaps one who specializes in a region that you could only wish to visit once in a lifetime, much less once a vintage? Indeed, why should you not use a system that obviously speaks to a mass audience, rather than relying on your own efforts to market the quality of your restaurant's offerings?

Photo by Richard Harris

“But did it get a 95?”





Geoff Kruth, MS, wine director of Farmhouse Inn and Restaurant, Forestville, Calif.

Considering how much has been written about the merits of the now-ubiquitous 100-point scale—which is really a 20-point scale, since anything below 80 is hardly worth mentioning—or the five-star scale or the three-wine-glass scale or the 20-grape-bunches-with-a-taste-vin-on-the-side scale, little more light can be shed here. Suffice to say that, except for specialized tasting panels, in which the “scores” are intentionally obscured, *Sommelier Journal* does not subscribe to the notion of wine ratings. Instead, the magazine prefers to publish knowledgeable descriptions that can assist its readers

in making educated decisions, based on flavors, depth, complexity, and relevance to the many facets of a sommelier’s job description (not least of which is food-pairing ability).

The Question

But have scores become completely irrelevant to the modern sommelier? In an informal poll of wine professionals from every corner of the United States (see box), I posed that question.

One truth is that more and more sommeliers are spending their time and efforts to train their palates by way of certification from various educational bodies (see *Sommelier Journal’s* Preview Issue 2007 for the article “Get Certified” by Tim Gaiser, MS). And as they scale the previously unattainable heights occupied by the wine critics, and their growing abilities gain the trust of their patrons, wine points are becoming more and more of a moot point. Today, a restaurant stakes its claim in the vast gastronomic territory by hiring, supporting, and marketing the abilities of its own wine servers—whether in the form of a sommelier dedicated solely to wine or a legion of waitstaff trained to provide full wine service. Indeed, the overwhelming consensus in my poll was that fewer than 10% of these sommeliers’ pa-

trons ever mention scores. “The majority of my guests realize that wine is subjective,” said Geoff Kruth, MS, wine director of the Farmhouse Inn and Restaurant in Forestville, Calif. “Every once in a while, I am surprised when a guest pops out their pocket-ratings computer and tells me how good or bad my wine list is.”

The Pros

Even as this country’s restaurant guests begin to trust the opinions of trained sommeliers, however, they still respect the established wine critics, most of whom use easily recognized and generally understood rating systems. “We live in a point-based society—it works!” noted John McCune, director of wine and spirits for the Yellowstone Club in Big Sky, Mont. “It drives the market for countless products. What discerning customer wants to buy/use/watch/eat/drink/drive *anything* that is not at the top of its category? In a world of instant information and often limited personal time, we rely on the expertise of others to guide us into making smart purchases about all the things we enjoy, especially wine.”

Ratings exist, pure and simple. It is a matter of restaurant philosophy how to recognize, uti-



John McCune, director of wine and spirits for the Yellowstone Club in Big Sky, Mont.

Photos by Andy Katz (left), Mike Martins (right)

lize, or, perhaps, ignore them. Some sommeliers choose to welcome them with open arms, maximizing the cachet and marketing reach of the major publications to which their guests subscribe. In 20 seconds with an Internet search engine, I found no fewer than 15 “100-Point Wine Dinners” advertised by world-class programs such as Canlis Restaurant in Seattle and the Wynn Las Vegas. In a similar search, I found bloggers of all stripes—from serious foodies to foie gras virgins—writing reverently of their experiences with “100-Point Perfect Wines” at tables around the world, from Champagne to Sydney to Hong Kong to New York, often without even mentioning the other aspects of their meals. Any sommelier who has worked the floor for more than a few weeks can recall a guest exclaiming at one time or another, “I can’t believe you have the Château So and So! That got 100 points!” And it isn’t just the “perfect” wine that gets attention; Canlis, for example, trumpets the first wine dinner ever given by a famous Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon producer by listing vintages that received 98-point scores. Actually, 95 points seems to be the standard cutoff in terms of promotion.

McCune thinks there is immense opportunity in “partnering with” the well-known critics. “Fill your wine list with wines rated extremely high (most, if not all of which, are great), and

you have a formula for success,” he advises. “You have made money pleasing those who are enjoying great wine at proud prices that, according to a small panel of experts, are ‘in’ products.”

The Cons

On the flip side, there are many restaurant wine directors who proudly profess not to care one iota about scores. Some believe points aren’t indicative of quality at all, but merely of the preferences of certain palates that don’t always appreciate what some wine regions have to offer. Others find that the big-scoring wines tend to be highly alcoholic and poorly suited to food. “Reducing a wine to a numerical score takes away the subtlety and joy that makes wine interesting in the first place,” says Kruth. “No one ever gave a rosé 100 points, but in the middle of June, that may be the most exciting wine on the list.”

A vast majority of my correspondents believe that their jobs are to find great wines and build relationships through their service at the table. “I would not list scores on my menu or give access to wine media in the restaurant, as I feel that it detracts from my job as a sommelier,” says Michael Meagher, assistant beverage director for the New France restaurant group in Boston. “I am there to speak about the qualities of the wine, the background, the varietals—if anything, I often go the opposite direction of wines with high scores, because those are the wines that are easier on the wallet and can provide the ‘ah-ha!’ moment that comes with drinking something amazing for less money.”

Such an establishment graciously deflects any mention of points in stating its own philosophy of food-and-wine pairing or in aligning a wine’s story or appellation with the restaurant’s theme, whether addressing its loyal clientele or the staff trained to sell wine at the table. Rather,



Julia Warren Schiavone, CWE, wine director of Quintance-Weaver Restaurants & Hotels in Greensboro, N.C.



Michael Meagher, assistant beverage director for the New France restaurant group in Boston.



Margaux Pierog, former sommelier of Hush Restaurant in Laguna Beach, Calif.

it spends considerable resources marketing its dedication to world-class service, believing that this will appeal more to discerning diners. For instance, an upcoming advertising campaign for the Bellagio in Las Vegas proclaims that the hotel has more Master Sommeliers under one roof than the entire city of New York (true), with nary a mention of the many high-scoring wines that its impressive wine program holds in its coffers.

The Compromise

Somewhere in between lies a major contingent of those who do their utmost to build outstanding wine lists driven by their cuisine, with an understanding that ratings aren't going away anytime soon, and that they ought not bite the hands that feed them by insulting those guests who prize their points. Julia Warren Schiavone, wine director of Quaintance-Weaver Restaurants & Hotels in Greensboro, N.C., prefers to ascribe her own value to the wines on her lists, but adds, "Scores seem to be very important to the enthusiasts and those with disposable income who enjoy trophy offerings. I need to know them to communicate with my guests who place value on that information."

Margaux Pierog, recently of Hush Restaurant in Laguna Beach, Calif., observes that a compromise approach might work best on both guests and employees: "Mentioning a score when educating the service staff is frequently done to get them excited about a wine, but it is only one part of the wine tutorial. I find that telling the staff a story about the wine and making it more personal has a far greater and longer-lasting impact."

Where does your restaurant stand? What will your guests expect, and how can you exceed those expectations? The true value of point systems is not measured on a scale from 0 to 100—it's determined by how an establishment decides to handle them. ☘

REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS FROM INFORMAL SURVEY

"What personal value do you put on point scores?"

"My opinion of them has changed from seeing them as a type of Bible telling a wine's quality to a driver of the market and what my customers will be looking for."

—Ole Thompson, CSW, wine director, GinSing LLC, Seattle

"What professional value do you put on point scores?"

"Professionally, I find point scores to be difficult to work with in the restaurant, since [high-scoring wines] are often higher in alcohol, more assertive in their flavor profiles, and demand the undivided attention of the consumer. It doesn't leave a lot of room for the food to do its thing."

—Michael Meagher

"Do you feel any pressure to list wines with high scores?"

"No. In most cases, I have already purchased the wines. It's more of an 'I wish I had bought more of that last year when I had the chance' thing."

—John McCune

"Does a low score deter you from listing a wine?"

"No, if the wine is great, it is a plus. The price isn't inflated, and I get to hand-sell something a guest is looking for."

—Julia Warren Schiavone, CWE

"Do high scorers move faster?"

"Yes, they do. Any favorable press does encourage people to order a wine."

—Geoff Kruth, MS

"Do you ever raise your price based on a score?"

"No, it doesn't cost me any more per bottle and if anything, it would justify my own palate and decision to include it on the list. I would view this as a challenge to try to seek out 'the next big thing.'"

—Meagher

"Do you train your staff to utilize scores?"

"I don't, although I do encourage our staff to be aware of the scores and to read the publications that give them."

—Thompson

"What do you think about providing an electronic wine tablet with links to media giving scores?"

"A wine tablet that facilitated guests in a helpful way that made them more comfortable, yes. If the score helped them buy wine vs. nothing it would be a win."

—Schiavone

Shayn Bjornholm has been recognized internationally as a wine professional, having won the Remi Krug Crup for passing the Master Sommelier examination on his first attempt (only the 10th person in the world to do so) and being named one of the six Most Trustworthy Sommeliers in America by *Gentlemen's Quarterly*. He is currently the wine education director for the Washington Wine Commission.