

Godfather or Big Brother?

© 2012 *Burton Anderson*

In the nineties, raters came to dominate the wine media, beginning in America with Robert Parker, whose 100-point system was copied by *The Wine Spectator* and others. Their sphere of influence spread to Europe and beyond, changing patterns of buying, selling, and even producing wine from California to the historic vineyards of France, Italy, Spain, and Germany. Newsletters, blogs, and websites provided instant access to all the info needed to buy a ranked bottle at the nearest shop (where you'd be certain to find the pundits' scores already posted).

The market for wine books by literary-minded authors plummeted. But since print publications are in crisis everywhere, the raters can't be held entirely to blame. Even disgruntled literary types like me will admit that the best of them are skilled tasters and judges of quality, though there are plenty of copycats, sycophants, and second-raters (pun intended) in their ranks.

What aggravates me is the often arrogant way many of them use, and abuse, their palates. The standard rater ritual entails tasting through a series of wines in a limited time: sniffing, sipping, analyzing the wine in the mouth without swallowing, then spitting it out. Points, or other criteria, are assigned to each with descriptive notes. Such reports provide insights into a wine's quality at a moment of its life. But all too often critics have the gall—and, worse, readers the gullibility—to regard such judgments as definitive.

The virtuosos often taste in solitary confines remote from the atmosphere in which wine is normally consumed: with food, in company in convivial surroundings, as a drink to be savored and admired, not as a specimen being put to the test. It depresses me to witness wines being judged clinically, scrutinized and analyzed by impersonators of wine-tasting robots.

Obsessed with omniscient numbers, people sometimes seem to forget that wine's main role is to provide enjoyment—where, in times past, it was a basic nutrient used prevalently for medicinal and religious purposes. Yet, even in the old days, wine was exalted by those who knew it as the paragon of pleasures of the table and the noblest expression of man's mastery over things that grow.

Most of us veteran writers have done extensive analytical tasting, enough to know that evaluating wine requires concentration, experience with grape varieties and places of origin, and the knowledge that the subject of our scrutiny is in a phase of evolution. I've always taken into account the enduring factors that determine a wine's quality over time, the natural and human elements that govern development of individual character.

Here I'm talking about wines that bespeak their origins. And, yes, I'm an advocate of the tenets of terroir, the credo of cru, as conceived by the French and embraced by winemakers everywhere who work with grapes from designated vineyards. To us terroiristes, it's essential that procedures in vineyards and cellars respect the nature of the soil, the ecosystem, the variables of each vintage, the bona fide ways of producing and aging wines. Such wines carry an indelible pedigree, whether they come from a grand cru chateau or a devoted vigneron's half hectare.

The pedigreed class excludes a majority of the world's wines, as processed and priced for popular markets. I don't mean to be condescending; the overall quality of everyday wines has never been better. More pointedly excluded from the category are designer or proprietary wines, blends of unstated origin ostensibly tailored to the tastes of influential critics and the cults that follow them. Closely related are artsy-fartsy wines devised by companies that put more stock in packaging—posh bottles, labels, corks, capsules, crates, etc.—than the integrity of the product.

Beyond cliques and fads, mainstream wine drinkers often base purchases on points rather than personal tastes. Some lack experience and the confidence or means to buy and compare. Those who can afford them, tend to covet wines that rate 90 or more, regarding anything from 89 down as second class. Conscientious merchants steer customers toward worthy alternatives, ignoring the scores. But many retailers seem only too happy to let the critics do their work for them.

In Italy, winemakers keep an eye on the main domestic guides—Gambero Rosso, L'Espresso, Veronelli—but by now the world brotherhood of raters has fixed standards so stereotyped that they hardly need to bother. The universal trend has been toward wines that are richer in flavor, bouquet, color, body, and alcohol, thanks to advances in cellar techniques, as well as the bags of tricks used to ameliorate mediocre vintages.

The points of Parker, and a choice few others, not only determine the commercial success of certain wines, but dictate styles that winemakers strive to emulate. This phenomenon is so widespread that critics condition global production trends—most conspicuously at premium levels where points can make or break a wine. In doing so, they boost the egos and earnings of producers whose top-ranked bottles often sell at wildly inflated prices.

To hear the raters tell it, their numbers and notes provide a key consumer service as guides to what to buy, and what to avoid, through fearless criticism of wines that don't meet standards and lofty praise for those that do. What could be loftier than a Parker score of 100? What could be lowlier for a wine of established reputation than an 80? But is Parker to blame if his judgments are taken as gospel by customers and as godsend by commercial interests that profit from propagandizing his points? Isn't he, after all, just doing his job?

Of course he is, having become rich and famous in the process of advocating what a Parker biographer called “the new world order” of wine. Good for Bob. Bad for those of us who pursue the once honorable calling of putting wine into words.

If, in the beginning, I'd imagined that one day the most important figure in wine would be a taster, a rater, I might have chosen to explore more venerable subjects of interest to me, such as archeology or architecture. The biographer called Parker “the Emperor of Wine,” concluding that he has a “unique semi-divine tasting ability.” Wow. As the boss of bosses of production, commerce, and consumption, Godfather might be more to the point. Or, in a not so different sense, Big Brother.