



# Buried Roots

By Braydon Scully

## What Do Wine Scores Really Mean?

You see them everywhere. At the LCBO, in magazines, wrapped around the necks of bottles, or on hanging tags at wineries you visit. Wine scores are almost ubiquitous, but what do they really mean and can you just go by the number? We all know high numbers are better, your teachers, parents and everyone else has always told you to get better grades and improve your scores.

The answer to this one is complicated. I have used and referenced other reviewers scores in past articles for this column, so I am perhaps as guilty as anyone of feeding the beast that the wine rating game has become. But first some history.

Ratings and scores for wine reviewers really took off and came to public prominence when influential wine reviewer Robert Parker Jr. started using the 100 point scale for his publication *The Wine Advocate* in 1978. The scale, which actually only goes from 50 to 100 points, was meant as a tool for consumers to help them determine the quality of a wine based on flavour, colour, aroma, appearance and overall quality level. This 100 point scale is widely used today in similar or slightly altered forms by many publications and reviewers around the world.

Alternative systems are also used and you may see some of these referenced in magazines or wine stores. *Gambero Rosso* magazine in Italy uses a "Tre Bicchieri" system" awarding between one to three glasses (bicchierri) to wines it reviews. Three Glasses means extraordinary, Two Glasses means very good and One Glass means good. Anything not "good" receives no rating.

Another system used primarily by UK based writers such as Jancis Robinson MW (Master of Wine) who utilizes a 20 point rating system. This system actually only uses scores ranging from 12 to 20. On her website she defines the ratings as follows:

- 20 – Truly exceptional**
- 19 – A humdinger**
- 18 – A cut above superior**
- 17 – Superior**
- 16 – Distinguished**
- 15 – Average, a perfectly nice drink with no faults but not much excitement**
- 14 – Deadly dull**
- 13 – Borderline faulty or unbalanced**
- 12 – Faulty or unbalanced**

She also notes that they "are not very comfortable with scoring wines because it is so difficult to encapsulate a wine's qualities in a single score."

The most serious issue with these systems in general is two-fold. One, is that the rating in and of itself does not really let you know whether you will actually like a wine and, two, that marketing pressures and competition among some reviewers have led to what I will define as rating inflation.

Let's tackle that second point first. It seems to me - and I have admittedly done no statistical study to back this thought up - that scores for wines seem to be increasing all the time. It seems very common now to see ratings and scores in the high to very high 90s routinely. Scores which seemed to only be quoted once or twice a year for a reviewer now seem perhaps to get used a lot more. One way to increase the use of your name and perhaps direct traffic back to your website or publication is to get your score quoted on bottles, labels, stickers and in advertising of all kinds. One sure way to do this is to rate a wine really high. There is nothing a winery's marketing department or a stores sales manager likes more than to quote a high score and see more product move out the door. So we see a 98 point score and as consumers we assume that this must be a near perfect or absolutely exceptional wine. Digging a little deeper reveals that the particular reviewer quoted adds a "value" component into the rating that increases the score because the wine is less expensive. So the wine which sells for \$16.95 at the LCBO gets this rating based a lot on price whereas on a purely subjective basis it is an 86 point wine from most other reviewers.

At the end of the day ratings are truly something that can only aid in your selection of a wine to buy. If you are looking at ratings as a buying input you must get to know a particular reviewer and how they rate wine and most importantly how your palate lines up with theirs. Above all it is most important to read the full tasting note that most reviewers provide. These details, on flavour, aroma, colour, intensity and so on, truly provide the key details that you need to know about a wine. Whether a wine rates 88 points or 96 points, it really only matters if the style of the wine, the production of it and how it tastes to you, lines up with your expectations.

So where does that leave all of us?

For this column, I have chosen not to provide numerical ratings of my own. There are more than enough ratings out there for you to reference from other reviewers. Where I think it appropriate or relevant I may reference scores for some wines in future columns. Generally, if I mention a wine it is because I like it, I think it is reasonable "value" (value being highly subjective), and that I think you might just enjoy it as well. My goal here is only to encourage readers to perhaps try something new, to get out and see what the County and other regions of the world have to offer and to in general enjoy wine and food and great company when they can.

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