

# Jim Hiller's Wine Club

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### The Rating Game

An experiment was conducted at the University of Bordeaux some years ago in which 57 “wine experts” were asked to give their impressions of two glasses of wine: a white and a red. What the experts were not told was that the glasses contained the same white wine but one had been tinted red with an odorless, tasteless dye. Not a single expert noticed.

In another experiment, a mediocre Bordeaux was served from two different bottles. One bottle was a fancy grand-cru. The other bottle was an ordinary vin du table. Despite the fact that they were actually being served the exact same wine, the so-called experts in this experiment gave the differently labeled bottles nearly opposite ratings. Forty experts said the wine with the fancy label was worth drinking, while only 12 said the wine from the cheap wine bottle was.

We might conclude from these and similar examples that all “experts” are full of hooey, or more generously, we might agree on the enormous influence of unconscious bias. When we take a sip of wine, we don't taste the wine first, and the cheapness or redness second. We taste everything all at once, in a single gulp of thiswineisred, or thiswineisexpensive. Those preconceptions will very powerfully influence our actual sensory perceptions.

Even if such biases are stripped away and we try to measure sensory discrimination directly, the essential subjectivity and unreliability of our sensory perception gives substantial reason to be skeptical of our own or

so-called expert judgment. One of the simplest tests of taste discrimination is to sample blind three wines, two of which are identical. The objective is to choose the odd sample. Rarely do “experts” identify the odd wine more than 60 to 70% of the time, twice as good as random chance, but not much to crow about.

Perhaps, then, we shouldn't put so much stock in expert's wine ratings. But we know that wine aisles will always be plastered with signs extolling this 93 point Chianti and that 89 point Cabernet and we know that so long as the biggest category of wine consumers describe themselves as “overwhelmed,” wine ratings are here to stay. What do these wine ratings mean, how can they help us to shop wisely, and who are those guys doing the ratings anyway? Let's take a look.

There are dozens of wine-focused magazines, writers, columnists, and bloggers voicing their opinions and getting quoted in advertisements and on shelf-talkers, but the Big Three in the world of wine are Robert Parker of *The Wine Advocate*, and the editors of *The Wine Spectator*, and *The Wine Enthusiast*. Other notable and generally reliable sources of wine ratings are Steven Tanzer's *International Wine Cellar*, *Connoisseurs Guide*, *The Wine News*, and *Wine & Spirits*. With some minor variations, they all use a numerical rating system in which 100 points represents a perfectly realized wine and the scores correlate closely to grades you got in college. 96 to 100 points is an A+, a profound and extraordinary wine of exceptional character. 90 to 95 points corresponds to an A, an outstanding wine of

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superior quality and style. 85 to 90 is your B+ to A- range of very good wines, often of exceptional value. 80 to 85 points gets you a B for solid wines with no noticeable flaws, 70 to 79 is drinkable but of no real distinction, and so on.

Parker is more explicit than many in explaining how he comes up with a final number. In his scoring system, each wine starts with a base of 50 points. The wine's general color and appearance merit up to 5 points. The aroma and bouquet merit up to 15 points, flavor and finish merit up to 20 points and, finally, the overall quality level or potential for further evolution and improvement-aging merits up to 10 points.

Those last 10 points are important to understand for those of us searching for good value wines for more or less immediate consumption. If you realize that aging potential is worth maybe 4 to 6 points and you know that tannic structure is a big element of ageworthiness, you may do yourself a disservice to buy the 94 point red wine that is going to be too muscular and tight to enjoy tonight as opposed to a cheaper 89 pointer that may be drinking better right now. It is often the case that the wines ranked in the high 80s and low 90s are the best buys.

Personally, I find the ratings of the major wine writers to be very helpful. After you follow them for a while, you get a pretty clear idea of whose tastes seem to match your own preferences. Robert Parker, for example, is frequently panned for his outsized influence and his clear preference for highly extracted, high alcohol, intensely flavored reds. I rather like new world style fruit bombs, so his prejudices in that direction don't faze me, they're simply another factor to ponder. Ultimately we all have to make up our own minds by paying attention to

the wines we like and taking notice of the advice we value.

In this edition of the Wine Club, we selected only wines that rated 87 points or more by at least one of the Big Three, i.e., *The Wine Advocate*, *The Wine Spectator*, and/or *The Wine Enthusiast* (abbreviated *WA*, *WS*, and *WE* below). We might have quibbled a bit one way or the other over some of the scores, but by and large we thought all the selections worthy of the accolades they received. In our tasting notes, we simply quoted the review(s) and their source(s). You'll find in those that received multiple reviews some interesting confirmations of the subjectivity hypothesis propounded earlier. Enjoy the wines and see how you think they rate.

## Tasting Notes

### Taster's Table Whites

#### 2007 Feudo Arancio Chardonnay Sicilia

"Here's a well-priced Chardonnay from Sicily that boasts very distinct herbal notes of dried oregano and wild sage backed by exotic fruit and grapefruit. It has a creamy, round feel in the mouth that would pair well with Caprese salad or smoked swordfish. 87 points. "A Best Buy" *WE*, 11/1/08. Ranked #93 on *WE* Top 100 of 2008.

"Typical Chardonnay aromas of apple pie and cream follow through to a full-bodied palate, with plenty of ripe fruit and a lemon, vanilla and apple aftertaste. Very good and stylish." 88 points *WS*, 8/31/08.

#### 2006 A to Z Wineworks Oregon Riesling

"Tart and racy, this sets up the palate for spicy fare with bracing acids and scents of citrus skins. It is the first-ever Riesling for A to Z, a nod perhaps to the growing demand for

these wines, especially on the West Coast. Flavors mix citrus, white flowers, strawberries and spice, with a finishing lick of minerality." 88 points. "A Best Buy" *WE* 4/1/08. "Light and appealing for its gentle apple, pear and floral flavors, finishing off-dry." 85 points. *WS*, 12/31/07.

#### 2007 Grayson Cellars California Chardonnay

"The 9,000-case cuvee of 2007 Chardonnay exhibits elegant pear and lemon blossom characteristics, medium body, good acidity, a hint of wood, and an attractive finish. Drink it over the next several years." 88 points *WA*, Issue # 178, 8/08.

#### 2007 Geyser Peak California Sauvignon Blanc

"Pungent grass, gooseberry, lime and guava notes are intense and bright, with a mouthwatering acidity and a long, lingering finish." 88 points *WS*, 7/31/08.

#### 2007 Mirassou California Pinot Grigio

"A lovely wine to have at picnics, on the beach, backyard barbecues, even at the table with everything from fried calamari and goat cheese to roast pork and fresh fruit. Completely dry and racy in acids, it shows intense, nervy flavors of citrus fruits and zest, with spicy notes of medjool dates." 90 points. "A Best Buy" *WE*, 11/15/08.

"Spicy baked apple aromatics and intense Meyer lemon flavors are focused and direct, with a juicy acidity, a medium body and a refreshing finish." 86 points *WS*, 2/28/09.

#### 2007 Yalumba Organic South Australia Viognier

"Smooth and silky, this is generous with its pear, lemon curd, and floral aromas and flavors, coursing through the finish." 91 points *WS* 11/30/08.

## Taster's Table Reds

### 2007 Neil Ellis The Left Bank Red Blend, Western Cape

"Smoky spice and dried herbs on the nose are followed by flavors of rustic spice and red fruit on the palate.

Vibrant fruit and muscular tannins are integrated by a clean minerality. The wine has native character but will please many palates with its dimension." 90 points. "A Best Buy" *WE*, 12/15/2008.

"Forward, with a prominent herbal edge to the cherry fruit. Tangy, herb-laced finish. Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and Merlot. Drink now. Tasted twice, with consistent notes." 83 points *WS*, 12/31/08.

### 2005 Symington Family Estates Douro Vale do Bomfim Reserva

"Concentrated and well-structured, this oozes with luscious flavors of raspberry, blueberry, dark cherry and spice. There's cherry pie on the finish, with cocoa powder and hints of hazelnut. Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz, Touriga Nacional and Tinta Barroca. 89 points *WS*, 6/15/07.

"It is grapey and utterly primary, seeming almost like a barrel sample. There is a certain richness to it that makes it a good value in its price range, although it has a certain simplicity to it as well. I liked the 2004 version more for its charm, balance and structure, but this has merits of its own, including its velvety texture, creamy edges and tasty fruit. Its ripe tannins become apparent after an hour or so and give the wine some verve, which it needed. Although the oak is a bit prominent now, a few months of cellaring should help a lot.." 87 points. *WA* Issue #178, 8/08.

### 2007 Grayson Cellars Paso Robles Cabernet Sauvignon

"The most recent releases include the 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon (89%

Cabernet Sauvignon and 11% Merlot). It offers plump, sweet chocolaty, berry fruit, an uncomplicated personality, good body, and a silky texture." 86 points. *WA*, Issue # 178 8/08.

### 2006 Roogle McLaren Vale Shiraz

"The 2006 Roogle Shiraz was aged for 12 months in seasoned French and American oak. It is purple-colored and offers up a big whiff of cedar, blueberry, blackberry, and chocolate aromas. Full-bodied, ripe and sweet, it has enough structure to improve for 2-3 years in the bottle but who is going to defer their gratification?." 90 points. *WA*, Issue # 178 8/08.

### 2006 Domaine du Pegau Pegovino VDP d'Oc

"The 2006 Pegovino / Plume Bleue Vin de Pays d'Oc (a blend of Grenache, Syrah, and a few other varietals) is sold under either the name Pegovino or Plume Bleue, depending on where the bottles end up. It is a classic Provencal wine offering roasted herb, new saddle leather, black cherry, currant, and loamy soil characteristics. A tasty, earthy effort with loads of personality, it should provide plenty of pleasure over the next 2-3 years." 87 points. *WA*, Issue # 178, 8/08.

### 2006 Panarroz Jumilla

"An amazing bargain from Spain, this blend of mourvèdre, grenache, and syrah bursts with plum, blackberry, and licorice-infused fruit. There is a bit of pepper as well, and the wine is silky, soft, and opulent. Serve it at a barbecue... Years ago I wrote in *The Wine Advocate* that Dan Kravitz was perhaps the top U.S. importer of wines priced under \$10 a bottle. Even though the dollar bought a lot more then, Kravitz still has a knack for finding good wines at great prices." 90 points from Robert Parker in *Business Week* Magazine.

## Collector's Club Whites

### 2007 Attems Friuli-Venezia-Giulia Pinot Grigio

"A full-bodied style with lots of character, from peach tart to lemon seed to mineral. Crisp and lively. Drink now." 90 points. "A Smart Buy." *WS*. Ranked # 70 on *WS* Top 100 wines of 2008.

### 2008 Kim Crawford Sauvignon Blanc

"Concentrated and very intense, weaving together a harmonious medley of crushed stone, grapefruit and nut flavors. Savory herbs, grass and lime notes highlight the bright, vibrant finish!" 91 points. *WS*, 4/30/08. Ranked #40 on the *WS* Top 100 wines of 2008.

### 2006 Chateau Ste. Michelle Cold Creek Vineyard Columbia Valley Chardonnay

"The Cold Creek Chardonnay is built upon 30-year-old vines, fully ripened at this warm site. Sensuous, soft and broadly laced with flavors of toasted nuts, brioche and apple pie, this luxurious Chardonnay still maintains a pleasing, focused structure that carries along flavors of lemon and apple, cut against the dominant oak. Cold Creek wines are among Washington's most ageworthy." 90 points. *WE*, 12/1/08.

"Soft and spicy, with a layer of toast and cocoa underlining the pear and citrus flavors, lingering on the gentle finish." 90 points. *WS*, 2/28/09.

"The 2006 Chardonnay Cold Creek Vineyard is sourced from a 32 year old vineyard, one of the first planted by the winery and ancient by Washington standards, with yields of less than 2 tons per acre. The wine was aged in 54% new oak and 50% was fermented with indigenous yeasts. Light gold in color, it reveals aromas of butterscotch, vanilla, apple, poached pear, and a hint of tropical fruits. Smooth-textured and

nically balanced, the wine's finish is long and pure." 90 points *WA*, Issue #177, 6/08.

**2006 La Val Orballo Rias Baixas Albarino**

"This Albarino is estate bottled, a relative rarity in Rias Baixas. The wine is fermented with indigenous yeasts and remains in contact with the fines lees until bottling. The 2006 Albarino is light gold-colored with a fragrant perfume of mineral, flowers, and lemon meringue. Medium-bodied, it has a succulent creamy texture, ripe, slightly tropical flavors, and a lengthy finish." 90 points *WA*, Issue #175 9/08.

**2006 Castello d'Alba Vinhos Douro Superior Reserva Branco**

"The 2006 RESERVA BRANCO is a blend of Codega do Larinho, Rabigato and Viosinho. It is pungent, a touch grassy, and rather solid in the mid-palate. Fermented in oak, it is nonetheless rather clean and pure. The wine is nicely balanced, with crisp notes intermingling with ripe, tropical fruit flavor." 88 point *WA* Issue #178, 8/08.

**2006 White Oak Russian River Valley Chardonnay**

"The '06 shows a return to ripeness. It's lush in pineapple and mango fruit, and the rich overlay of oak adds complexing notes of smoke, vanilla and wood spice." 90 points *WE*, 6/1/08.

**Collector's Club Reds**

**2006 Bodega Catena Zapata Mendoza Malbec**

"The opaque purple-colored 2006 Malbec was aged for 12 months in 70% French oak, 20% new, and 30% new American oak. The aromatic array displays toasty black cherry, black raspberry, and violet notes leading to a smooth-textured, layered, rich wine bordering on opulence. It

manages to achieve this while retaining an elegant, light-on-its-feet personality. On the palate, spice notes and a hint of chocolate emerge.

The Catena Zapata portfolio is stunning from entry-level to top-of-the-line. As an aside, during my visit to Catena-Zapata in April, 2008, I tasted many barrel samples of 2006s and 2007s. The components, particularly of the 2006s are astounding; the best is yet to come." 91 points *WA*, Issue #180, 12/08.

"Enticing, with lots of mocha, fruitcake, raspberry and boysenberry flavors stretched over a lengthy, fleshy finish. A delicious, fruit-driven version." 91 points *WS*, 11/15/08.

**2005 Marchesi de' Frescobaldi Chianti Rufina Castello di Nipozzano Riserva**

"Offers plummy fruit, with hints of flowers, citrus and light chocolate. Medium-bodied, with a balanced and tasty palate, fine tannins and a clean finish. Structured." 90 points. *WS*, 10/31/08. Ranked #76 on *WS* Top 100 Wines of 2008.

**2006 Chateau de Lancyre Pic Saint-Loup "Vieilles Vignes"**

"A nose of concentrated black fruits tinged with smoke and marine air, leads to a concentrated, clean, bitter fruit skin-tinged and smoky Lapsang black tea-laced palate, and a long, black-fruited, smoky, saline finish. This formidably-concentrated, lean, tight, yet seamlessly ripe red should be worth following for 5-7 years. (The winery proudly promotes the age-worthiness of this cuvee by selling older vintages at the cellar door.) [Chateau Lancyre] has really outdone themselves this year!" 91 points *WA*, Issue #178, 8/08.

**2006 La Meridiana Barbera d'Asti Le Gagie**

"Ripe and decadent fruit on the nose. Full-bodied, with firm tannins and a medium, fruity finish. A little

disjointed, but an interesting wine. Drink now." 87 points *WS* Web only.

**2006 Casa Lapostolle Colchagua Valley Cabernet Sauvignon Cuvée Alexandre Apalta Vineyard**

"Really juicy and ripe, with fleshy layers of sweet raspberry and boysenberry fruit riding along red licorice, fruitcake and a nicely embedded vanilla streak. Long, polished finish. Very tasty. Drink now through 2010." 90 points *WS* 8/31/08.

"Put this on the scale and watch it tip. It's a monster of a Cab that's quite tannic and therefore narrow on the palate. But if given time in a good cellar it may soften into something much more evolved than it is now. Early openers should expect black fruit in spades, with nail-like tannins. Best to have a steak on the grill if you are drinking this any time soon." 89 points and "A Cellar Selection" *WE*, 9/1/08.

**2006 Cono Sur 20 Barrels Cabernet Sauvignon**

"The 2006 Cabernet Sauvignon 20 Barrels is more deeply colored and more expressive aromatically. It offers up notes of earth, tobacco, plum, cassis and blackberry. On the palate it shows an elegant personality, several years of aging potential, and a lengthy finish. This outstanding value will be at its best from 2009 to 2018." 90 points *WA*, Issue #179, 10/08. "Shows a medium-weight mix of raspberry, black cherry, sweet vanilla, spice and red licorice notes. There's a juicy edge on the finish as the fruit lingers. Drink now. 6,500 cases made." 87 points *WS*, 7/31/08.

**How Do I Buy More?**

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