

International Wine Challenge v Decanter World Wine Awards

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At 11.52 on a grey morning in south west London last month my fellow wine writer John Longstrege Leamonth, a Robbe specialist, stood up in an all-white photographer's studio, surrounded by his peers hunched over wine glasses and, with thickened teeth, raised two clenched fists to declare triumphantly. "The Robbe [game] has given a gold medal at least! Where's that Bligter Stevenson?"

This was a reference to his counterpart the champagne specialist Tom Stevenson who was in another room judging champagnes, fervently profligate with his panel's gold medals, for the third annual Decanter Wine Awards.

Individual panels of judges may vary in how permissive they are with their points, but for the organisers there is considerable money to be made from the dynamic world of international wine competitions. One sign of this is the healthy seven-figure sum paid last year by William Reed Publishing for some less-than-blossoming drinks magazines with what is billed as 'the world's biggest and most influential wine competition', the International Wine Challenge (IWC), attached.

The UK, vitically relatively neutral and an increasingly important wine market, is now home to three significant international wine competitions. The International Wine & Spirit Competition (IWSC) is now 37 years old and in this bumper year its judges have been assessing 5,000 wines at its base, including analytical lab, on an old Surrey airfield. Entries have to submit four bottles of each wine and pay at least £120 an entry.

But the International Wine Challenge which was started up in 1984 and attracted about 9,100 wine entries this year at £75 a wine, seems even more – and now judges spirits too! – just like the IWSC. This was a slightly better belly than last year – perhaps not so much because of the new team organising it but because there is now serious competition between the competitors.

It was presumably with this healthy income stream in mind that Decanter magazine, a more established consumer wine magazine than the one that originally began the IWC, finally took the plunge with the Decanter Wine Awards in 2004. According to its publisher Sarah Kemp, "people like wine recommendations but I took Decanter a while because I wasn't very keen on the results of some other competitions." The Tom Warner-owned publication has now overcome its scruples, or at least devised a satisfactory format, and this year managed to generate 6,300 entries (wine only), a considerable increase on its 2004 tally of 4,000. Decanter's standard entry fee is £80.

I thought it would be interesting to see how the big two wine competitions were organised so I accepted their invitation to do a day's judging at each recently.

My first day was that Decanter and I was extremely impressed by the array of international judges. On the way there from Parsons Green tube station I bumped into Puh Ting, Singapore's best-known wine writer, who claimed he had come specially "because they pay" – although at £110 a day for regular judges and no travel expenses the glory must have been a factor too – glory and the social aspect. Kemp has successfully created a salon in her photography studio and I thoroughly enjoyed catching up with so many luminaries from all over the wine world gathered in one place over the cosmoses in the morning, a delectable lunch and, catching their beer courtesies at the nearby White Horse after the day's judging. Decanter also distinguishes itself by holding a party for the judges during the week's repast with Laurent Perrier champagne. It seems more fun than the Challenge and more personal, thanks to its chairman Steven Spurrier, a respected Decanter contributor who can be called upon at any time to adjudicate between competing panel members.

The judges at the IWC may be less cosmopolitan but, last year anyway, included more than 40 Masters of Wine. This year the new team at the Challenge has done away with the previous VIP culture of Super-jones, dispensed with the previous 'buy' system whereby really smart wines bypassed the first week's stage, introduced a more American scoring system based on 100 points (as opposed to 20 at Decanter) and has been monitoring wine faults particularly carefully. On my day at the Challenge last week Master of Wine Sam Herring reported a fault rate of almost eight per cent, of which half were cork-related.

Another big difference between the competitions is how they are organised. At Decanter everything is judged regionally by a panel chaired by an expert in that region. (Judge Linguistic-Rossillon wines under the chairmanship of my colleague Andrew Jefford. We four judges, all with a certain expertise in the area, sat at round tables in a large, airy room with no shortage of natural light – a boon when judging wine.

The IWC takes place in a decidedly business exhibition hall at the Barbican – where things grey carpets replace Decanter's shiny white-painted floor and, Australian style, judges are expected to stand. Glasses are IWC-enslaved Schott rather than Decanter's copious quantities of Riedel, although both competitions rely heavily on opaque plastic bags to disguise the identity of the bottles. (IWC means much of the fact that judges never see the bottles themselves, and indeed in this era of different bottle shapes and screwcaps a neutral cork, it is surprising how many clues even a plastic swathed bottle could emit a discernible scent.)

At the Challenge I judged during the second of the two-week judging sessions and saw chair of a panel of three MW judges, therefore saving £150 for my day's work. I particularly admired the fact that each panel was allocated a pair of tables so that while we were judging one might the very efficient serving staff could be setting up the next. There was no apparent theme to what we three judged and indeed I was rather gobsmacked the way, the conditions in The AgriCentre, we hid on each new task. "Oh good, Tuncan Sarigozmen – she should be here!"

At both competitions the familiar voices of fellow judges at other tables can be seriously distracting. "Where the heck is Trazzer?" asked the chair of a panel assessing Austrian wines at the IWC while at Decanter I heard from one table reference to "that great German period 1870 to 1900. I mean when you've tasted 1921 Döbberger..."

Another enormous difference between the two competitions is that at Decanter judges are given an idea of the price of each wine whereas IWC judges are told strictly to ignore any considerations of price. The IWC has traditionally attracted far more entries from the mass market whereas Decanter has firmly set its cap at rather more classic and individual wines. Spurrier saying slightly wittily, "God knows where the IWC gets all their wines from, but our feeling is that if we reach 7,500 in three years, that will be about as far as we want to go".

Over the years the IWC has done a superb job of marketing itself and its media winners so that many a supermarket and off-licence has been adorned with its little round seals on bottles. But brand owners such as Greg Anderson of The Barlow Chardonnay have wondered whether they have taken their eye off the ball recently. "Both competitions have merits but the IWC used to do a lot more work. Perhaps because there are so many medals they seem to have lost the connection with the retailers who used to do promotions around the results. Or perhaps they've simply let out to the power of the big brands. It's a shame because it's a great way of getting people excited about wine in general."

All the competitions can be criticised for being too generous with their bronze medals and commendations but I know from personal experience that it truly is an achievement for any wine to satisfy an entire panel of judges that it deserves a gold. I still haven't a clue what I tasted and look forward to reading the results in full soon in the year.

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