

## West Norwood's critic-at-large

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Robert Parker of Maryland (you may have heard of him) is without a shadow of a doubt the most influential wine critic there has ever been. His taste in wine and mine vary in some respects. This hardly surprising difference in opinion manifested itself most obviously in early 2006 in our reactions to a particularly distinctive young red Bordeaux, Ch. Fines 2003 which I rated 12 out of 20 and he rated 95-100 out of 100.

More than two and half years later this little storm in a wine glass, most unfortunately, refuses to die down. Parker + Robinson or The American + The British Palate is just too attractive a theme for the media. I am constantly being asked to provide juicy anti-Parker quotes, and to a small band of Parkerist I represent the Antiphras.

This is absurd. We have always enjoyed each other's company, have shared meals in each other's houses, and I retain the respect for Parker's skills and dedication that I have had since I first wrote about him 20 years ago. But a week last Wednesday morning (see [Parker's Critic-at-large in wine critic John H. Egan's](#)) my admiration for him soared to new heights when it was announced that, as part of a much heralded revamp of enobesparker.com, he was taking on Neal Martin, a British wine writer from West Norwood. Later that day I found myself at a wine tasting in London with several of my fellow managers who correspondents and asked if they knew about the surprising appointment, the first of a non-American to "beat" Parker, and from the world's best of his and had been at that "who?" they all said.

Martin does, admittedly, fail to stand out in a crowd. He may have a particularly impressive face, but fortunately for us all he has the most distinctively expressive way with a keyboard, as evinced by his website wine-journal.com soon to be subsumed into Parker's site.

Born in Leigh-on-Sea in 1971 and possessed of a "2:1 Honors, Management Science degree, that has since proven to be completely useless" from Warwick University, he encouraged his wine epiphany, as it so often the case, by accident. Having taught English in Japan he ended up at 25 being offered a job by Japan Airlines which included the procurement of vast quantities of wine, so had to mug up on the subject. A glass of Ch. Montrose 1992 was enough to ignite a passion for both wine and writing being none. "People always said jokingly, 'you'll be the next Robert Parker because I always look nervous,' he told me last week.

By 2003, already a revision of several useful tips to Bordeaux with his colleagues from Tokyo, Martin had amassed an impressive store of notes on wine. "I always thought it would be great to provide a different opinion on wines from all the published writers, so I thought 'I'll use the internet'. I didn't know anything about it at all at that stage." As he points out in his valedictory blog, he has managed to run his site on precisely £11.48 a month including V&T ("you many webmasters to question the services on their technical support site").

His tasting notes and producer profiles are useful and effective (I stated making that my notes were having an influence on selling wine) but it is surely his writing style and flairful of West Norwood persons that has lured so many to wine-journal.com and, so unexpectedly, Bob Parker to his door. Take this introduction to his book review of the annual guide Wine Report 2006:

"I must admit that when I purchased a copy of the first Wine Report last year, my main was not so much the calibre of authors each writing about their pet wine region, but the fact that there, in the 'Best New Wines' top ten was wine-journal.com, in line a holder at number two. I was trumped by Bob Nerson's excellent [www.bobnerson.com](#) but as he is a man, I forgive him. Once in possession of the compact little tome, I spent endless hours looking myself up in the index. I had served in print. I had achieved a moment of recognition."

That moral (sic) is about to become a gargantuan global beast, so much so that Neal is now working out his notice at J&L and will be supporting his wife Tomoko, a fine tester who once worked for Beryl Bros, and growing, much-cherished family, on his albeit salary, which will allow him to travel freely and also (surely increasingly?) contribute to Parker in print. The Wine Advocate newsletter whose scores are so powerful.

Martin has been eager to reassure his readers that he will retain his own distinctive voice. "Even last night during Easterdays, Bob telephoned me and reconfirmed that he welcomes and positively encourages an alternative view and not an echo of his own voice (what would be the point of that?) but he has still received a few emails accusing him of 'going over to the dark side' - a sign of a worrying transatlantic polarisation of views.

"It's a bit of a bony story," he told me, still a bit dazed (he always looks a bit dazed) by his elevation to Bordeaux. "He approached me in July, by email via his internet business associate. I thought it was a hoax at first." See "When Neal met Bob" on wine-journal.com for details how the signing was effected "and what CD I proffered as a gift in return from his famous oak casks when I flew over to meet him" (Martin's quirky musical choices feature almost as much as wine on wine-journal.com.)

For Martin all this represents a triumph of cyberspace over print. "At this time it's been kind of weird. If you were to say you work, for instance, for the Duffinmore Evening Argus, people would be interested, but if it's a dot com they switch off."

Not any more, Neal.

