What our scores mean

10 Dec 2009 by Jancis Robinson

Although I studied Maths as well as Philosophy at Oxford, I'm not too keen on the combination of numbers with wine appreciation. Drinking and assessing wine is a subjective rather than an objective process in my view. We all have different partialities and sensitivies, which is what makes it so difficult to encapsulate a wine's qualities in a single score.

However, I do realise how useful scores are for those reading and buying (and selling) in a hurry - especially in an *en primeur* market on fire. So, while scores can never be as expressive as a tasting note (and I ackowledge that my tasting notes are far from prolix), I am happy to see scores as a necessary evil.

Below is a rough guide to what our numbers mean.

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

We occasionally give a '+' or even '++' to suggest that we think (but are not 100% sure) that the wine will improve, and if a score comes with a minus attached, it means that it has a drawback, usually described in the tasting note. But I'm sure these are annoying and we will try to keep them to a minimum.

As background, and for amusement, you might also like to see the comparative scoresheet compiled by Steve De Long of www.delongwine.com reviewing many different scoring systems.

Our scores are for how the wine tasted when we tasted it, combined with any perceived potential. So a one-year-old first growth bordeaux is likely to be given a pretty high score, even though it may be not much fun to drink at that point (and not even bottled in fact). If we taste a wine that is obviously on the way *down* from its peak of maturity, the score denotes how it tasted when we tasted it and not how wonderful we imagine it might have been at its best.

Fortunately, I am confident that my fulltime assistant Julia Harding MW has a palate that is remarkably similar to mine. Richard has rather less tasting experience but his Master of Wine studies are rapidly remedying this. And I know that the rest of the team share our love of balance, eloquence, finesse and, where appropriate, ageability above sheer mass.

You might also like to see some relevant 2005 correspondence on the subject in What my scores mean in the precursor of our forum, which was called Your turn. In it I try to grapple with the fact that I do not believe there is a single objective yardstick of quality by which a Beaujolais, for example, can be measured alongside a Napa Valley Cabernet.