Diary of an MW Student - part 44

8 Nov 2012 by Richard Hemming

The 2012 examiner's report has just been published. This year, the tasting exam recorded its highest number of passes for a single year ever, with 18 candidates finding success. However, there was also a record number of entries: 92.

Humbling stuff, but not gloat-worthy. I felt all the nerves and uncertainty that every student feels in that exam hall, and I was only too aware of the mistakes I had made once the wine crib was revealed. The marks for successful candidates are never disclosed, but I suspect that my pass was borderline.

At the time, I made a note of how I answered each wine. What follows now is an exhumation and autopsy of my papers. This is not to be morbidly self-indulgent but, I hope, to illustrate what makes a pass - and how wrong you can be.

PAPER ONE - WHITE WINES

1. Wines 1-4 are all from the same region of origin.
For each wine:
a) Identify the specific origin as closely as possible (4 x 10)
b) Identify the grape variety(ies) (4 x 6)
c) Comment on the winemaking (4 x 3)
d) Discuss the quality with reference to state of maturity (4 x 6)

The wines: Muscadet, Vouvray Sec, Menetou-Salon and Coteaux du Layon.

This was straightforward. The combination of a dry Sauvignon and a botrytised Chenin Blanc ruled out virtually anywhere other than the Loire. In isolation, the Muscadet could have been any number of modest European dry whites, but here it fell into place.

My answers: Muscadet, Vouvray Sec, Sancerre, Bonnezeaux.

2. Wines 5-7 are all made from the same single grape variety and come from different countries.
With reference to all three wines:
a) Identify the grape variety (15)
Then for each wine:
b) Identify the origin as closely as possible (3 x 10)

c) Discuss the quality with particular reference to winemaking techniques employed (3 x 10)

The wines: Alto Adige Pinot Grigio, Marlborough Pinot Gris, Alsace Pinot Gris.

These could have been Riesling, or perhaps Chenin Blanc, both of which I think I mentioned. Ultimately, the lack of acidity made Pinot Grigio the only remaining option. The Italian and Alsatian were then logical to place, whereas the Marlborough wine was more generically New World than overtly Kiwi. In the end, balance of probability made New Zealand the likeliest option.

My answers: Veneto Pinot Grigio, Marlborough Pinot Gris, Alsace Pinot Gris.

3. Wines 8-10 are all from the same region and are from the same vintage.
For each wine:

a) Identify the specific origin as closely as possible (3 x 10)
With reference to all three wines:
b) Compare the quality of the wines, within the context of the region of origin (30)
c) Identify the vintage (15)

The wines: Puligny-Montrachet 1er Cru, Meursault, Corton-Charlemagne 2008.

I veered off course here. That they were Burgundian was obvious - aside from the evidence in the glass, examiners are highly unlikely to ask you about the vintage of any other dry white wine region. However, I got the vintage firmly wrong, going for 2009. This was a straightforward misreading of acidity, which I thought was too low for 2008. So there's 15 marks lost. I also misfired on two regions, putting the Puligny in Pouilly-Fuissé and the Corton-Charlemagne as generic Bourgogne - therefore underestimating the quality of the latter quite chronically too. However, guessing the Meursault as a Puligny was close enough to have clawed back some marks.

My answers: Pouilly-Fuissé, Puligny-Montrachet 1er Cru, Bourgogne 2009.

4. Wines 11 and 12 are both made from the same predominant grape variety.
With reference to both wines:
a) Identify the predominant grape variety (18)
Then for each wine:
b) Identify the region of origin (2 x 8)
c) Comment on the quality, style and potential for further ageing (2 x 8)

The wines: Tahbilk Marsanne, Crozes-Hermitage Blanc.

This was the stinker. There were 'very few correct or logical answers' according to the examining board. The trouble is that Tahbilk Marsanne smells so compellingly like Hunter Semillon that it was virtually impossible to imagine it being anything else. I did mention Marsanne, actually, but only in passing as I ruled it out. This meant I drew a blank on the Crozes-Hermitage. I should have considered Bordeaux, I suppose, but in the end went for South-East Australian Chardonnay/Semillon. No offence (for it was his), Alain Graillot!

My answers: Hunter Semillon, South-East Australian Chardonnay/Semillon.

Verdict? Close enough. I held my nerve for the first two questions, where mistakes were perhaps less forgivable. The last two questions were not disastrous but I doubt they added up to the pass mark 65% by themselves. However, the average across the whole paper surely did.

PAPER TWO - RED WINES

1. Wines 1-6 are from 6 different countries. All are made from one or more of the red varieties permitted in Bordeaux. The same variety may feature more than once.
For each wine:
a) Identify the region of origin and grape variety(ies) (6 x 12)
b) Comment on the quality (within the context of the region of origin) and maturity (6 x 8)
c) Comment on the winemaking (6 x 5)

The wines: Chilean Carmenère, Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, Coonawarra Cabernet Sauvignon, Stellenbosch Cabernet Sauvignon, St-Émilion Grand Cru, Tuscan Merlot/Cabernet blend.

This was my weakest answer on my weakest paper. I put the South African wine in Pauillac and I called the St-Émilion a cheap Venetian Merlot. That is either an acerbic reflection on modern day Bordeaux or gross sloppiness on my part. I suspect the latter. Thankfully, I must have scraped a few points for variety, because my origins were far out, man. I probably got quality wrong for half of them. Winemaking was more easy to answer, not least because there is comparatively little variation for such styles - I remember feeling I was repeating myself a lot.

My answers: Chilean Carmenère, Mendoza Malbec, South Eastern Australian Cabernet Sauvignon, Pauillac, Merlot del Veneto, Napa Cabernet.

2. Wines 7-9 are from 3 different European countries, excluding France, Italy and Spain.
For each wine:
a) Identify the region of origin and grape variety(ies) (3 x 12)
b) Comment on the quality (within the context of the region of origin) and maturity (3 x 8)
c) Comment on the winemaking (3 x 5)

The wines: Burgenland Zweigelt, Douro blend, Pfalz Pinot Noir.

This is the kind of question that looks terrifying but is actually usefully limited in scope. Two were obviously cool climate, and one obviously warm. The third wine was clearly Pinot Noir, and therefore Germany was the safest bet. That leaves the first wine in Austria. The second wine could have been Greek, I suppose, but had the aromatic signature of Touriga Nacional - or so I thought. On Googling, the blend apparently only has 3% Touriga in it, and is mostly Tinta Barroca, so that either makes me bloodhound accurate or just plain wrong!

My answers: Burgenland Blaüfrankisch, Douro Touriga Nacional, Ahr Pinot Noir.

3. Wines 10-12 are from 3 different countries. All are made from the same predominant grape variety.
With reference to all three wines:
a) Identify the grape variety (15)
b) Comment on the quality (15)
c) Comment on the winemaking (15)
Then for each wine:
d) Identify the origin (3 x 10)

The wines: Santa Barbara Syrah, Cornas, South Australian Shiraz.

Thankfully, I identified Syrah. However, I put the Californian in Crozes-Hermitage and the Cornas in Maule, of all places. The last wine was more obvious, to me at least, and had all the hallmarks of big Aussie Shiraz.

My answers: Crozes-Hermitage, Maule Syrah, Barossa Shiraz.

Verdict? I suppose I was never tragically wrong, but there are an uncomfortable number of inaccuracies here. I think this goes to show how critical it is to retain logic when answering. Most of the time, even though I was wrong, I stayed within the bounds of reason. Even so, when I added up the maximum number of marks I thought I could get, it wasn't enough. This may have been a case of a fail paper being buoyed up by strong enough passes in papers one and three.

PAPER THREE - VARIOUS

1. Wines 1 and 2 are from the same region and same producer.
With reference to both wines:
a.) Identify the region of origin as closely as possible (10 marks)
?b.) Compare the most relevant winemaking techniques involved in the production of the wines (20 marks)
c.) Compare maturity and quality, stating which is the higher quality wine (20 marks)

The wines: Roederer 2004, Roederer NV.

These were clearly very good quality, and as such it's a big risk to plump for anything other than Champagne. The first wine seemed obviously more mature too, so this was a fairly forgiving question for me.

My answers: Champagne 2002, Champagne NV.

2. Wines 3-6 are each from a different country. Each is made predominantly from a different, single grape variety.

For each wine:
a.) Identify the region of origin and the grape variety (4 x 15 marks)
b.) To whom is this wine most likely to appeal, and why? (4 x 10marks)

The wines: Vouvray Pétillant, Sparkling Shiraz, Sparkling Sauvignon Blanc, Sparkling Zinfandel Rosé.

With four fizzes of such different styles, there are few real options. The Shiraz and Sauvignon were aromatically obvious, although I overstated the quality of the former. The Zinfandel was perhaps an obscure style, but was on my radar as a recent trend. The Vouvray had plenty of Chenin waxiness, but I think Cava would have been a good guess too.

My answers: Vouvray, Sparkling Shiraz, Sparkling Sauvignon Blanc, Zinfandel Rosé.

3. Wines 7 and 8 are from different countries. Each is made from the same, single grape variety.
With reference to both wines:
a) Identify the grape variety (10 marks)

b) Compare the quality and methods of production. Discuss the balance between acidity and sweetness in these wines (30 marks)
or each wine:

entify the origin as closely as possible (2 x 5 marks)

The wines: Mosel Eiswein Riesling, Tasmanian botrytis Riesling.

Riesling was probably a no-brainer here, although maybe Semillon was not unreasonable. The key to this question was not variety and origin so much as winemaking, on which I was 50% accurate.

My answers: Alsace Riesling Vendange Tardive, Mosel Riesling Beerenauslese.

4. Wines 9-12 are all made from the same, single grape variety.
For all four wines:
a) Identify the grape variety, with reference to each wine (12 marks)
For each wine:
b) Identify the most relevant production techniques evident in the wine (4 x 10 marks)
c) State the alcohol level (4 x 5 marks)
d) Comment on quality and style (4 x 7 marks)

The wines: Asti Spumante, Muscat de Rivesaltes, Californian Moscato, Passito di Pantelleria.

There was a feeling among the student body that Muscat would come up, and so it proved. With sufficient knowledge of the styles, this was something of a gimme - although I had never even heard of Passito di Pantelleria, so I mustn't be too smug! As with the four sparklings, the options were so few here that this was straightforward to answer.

My answers: Asti Spumante, Muscat de Beaumes de Venise, Californian Moscato, Rutherglen Classic Muscat.

Verdict? This was a kind paper compared to last year's. I strayed a little on the Riesling question, but was happy with my accuracy on the others. Because the wines were so particular, it was easier to be confident and precise with them. I imagine that made my pass mark high enough to bolster the shortcomings of my paper two.

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So there you go. Every MW remembers the wines they got wrong in their exam, and it is worth remembering that perfection is not required to pass - as my many errors clearly demonstrate! I hope this is a helpful insight into the tasting exam, both to fellow students and to others.

Meanwhile, my dissertation continues to unfold like a Greek Epic. Whether there is tragedy at its conclusion, I can't yet tell. But there is plenty of drama along the way - about which, more next time.