

# Wine Uncorked

**What's in a number? Wine is too complex for a simple rating system**

We recently bought an iPod and loaded it with our favorite music. We were intrigued to discover that the software enables us to rate our songs using a star system, from no stars up to five stars -- just as wine critics rate wines, with stars or point scores

Now we wouldn't presume for a moment that the songs we rate highest are necessarily the best songs; they're just our favorites. But when a wine gets a high rating, just about everyone assumes that the score represents the wine's quality--that a 92-point wine is inherently higher in quality than an 85-point wine, for example.

Wine ratings are extremely influential in the market because everyone wants to drink the highest-quality wine that he or she can afford. Although we completely understand that no one wants to drink a poor wine, we think that the obsession with quality in wine circles has gotten out of hand--especially when one considers that no real definition exists for wine quality.

Think about it: If you ask different types of wine professionals what constitutes quality in wine, you'll get different answers. A winemaker from Europe might say that a high-quality wine must be the product of a specific terroir and that it must express that terroir in the glass. A New World winemaker might say that fruitiness is a requisite characteristic in high-quality wines. Wherever technically trained winemakers hail from, they probably will agree that quality involves the absence of flaws, but they might not agree on what is or isn't a flaw. Other wine professionals might say that balance is the essence of quality in a wine, or intensity of fruit character, or concentration.

None of those criteria holds water. We've all tasted wines that are wonderfully fruity or that perfectly express their terroir or that have no flaws whatsoever -- and yet somehow are not truly high quality wines. Just as wine itself is so much more than just water, alcohol, acid, tannin and a few hundred chemical compounds, wine quality is more than its individual attributes.

The reason that everyone can't agree on what constitutes quality in wine is not only that wine quality is complex but also that it is relative. Lab tests can measure certain components of wine, but only a human being can experience the taste of a wine and evaluate it--relative to his own experience and opinions, of course. Furthermore, the same person's perception of a wine will vary according to the situation, the bottle and even the glass that's used.

The concept of quality also varies over time and cultures. Historically, age-worthiness was a prime element of wine quality; the great wines were those that could develop and improve for decades. In today's hurry-up world, however, even wines built for aging must be enjoyable young. Another example: When Europe dominated the wine world, a wine's structure--its particular combination of alcohol, acid, tannin and, if any, sugar--was its key feature; the influence of California and Australia, however, has made a wine's aromas and flavors at least as important as its structure, if not more so. Many of the wines that today are considered great have a distinctly utilitarian flair: They taste delicious and are easy to enjoy. In times past popular appeal and greatness defined two completely different types of wine.

When you consider the different levels of wine that exist--a good bar wine, for example, a branded wine that's appropriate for a family-oriented chain restaurant or a wine for a three-star restaurant--the fact that quality is relative becomes obvious. Quality is relative to style as well; the best dry rose in the world is simply not as great as the world's greatest Cabernet-based

wine.

So how important is quality, then? We believe that quality is a consideration in choosing a wine only within the context of style, price and personal taste. We sometimes have washed down the drain wines that other critics rated highly, because they were not to our taste. Likewise, about five nights a week we opt not to drink the wines that we believe are the best wines in our cellar, because they aren't appropriate either to our mood, the weather, the occasion or the food. And we promise that you'll never hear one of us saying to the other, "Let's drink 95 points with our pasta tonight, dear."