

Wine Spectator

April 30, 2012

Why We Taste Blind

There's a reason that statues of justice portray a woman wearing a blindfold. Impartiality is crucial to fairness; good judges base their decisions on facts, not favoritism.

At *Wine Spectator*, this simple truth stands as the foundation of our wine ratings. We believe that evaluating wines blind ensures that our tasters remain impartial and that our reviews are unbiased, with all wines presented on a level playing field.

You may be surprised to learn that not all wine writers share this approach. Some critics review wines non-blind, and even alongside the winemakers and at the wineries. They argue that honesty and independence can overcome the expectations that are inevitably triggered by knowing the identity of a wine, its reputation and its price. We respectfully disagree.



Avoiding Bias

Simply put, in a blind tasting the taster is deprived of information that may bias his or her judgment of the wine in the glass.

Now, you may think that a conscientious taster should be able to ignore the influence of extraneous factors. But research has shown that it's not so easy. We are all very prone to a cognitive error called "confirmation bias," which plays a large, but largely unacknowledged, role in everyday judgment.

The distorting effects of confirmation bias are easy to demonstrate when it comes to wine. A famous experiment that took place in 2001 is a case in point.

Frédéric Brochet, a professor at the University of Bordeaux School of Enology, gave 57 people tastes of two red wines. One was labeled as a simple *vin de table*, the other as a prestigious Grand Cru.

The tasters described the two samples in very different terms. The "Grand Cru" received more positive descriptors than the "*vin de table*"; 40 called it "good," as opposed to only six using that term for the "lesser" wine. Conversely, the "*vin de table*" was described as "weak" by 27 tasters, compared with only nine using that term for the "better" wine. In fact, it was all the same wine: a

red Bordeaux whose quality level fell between the extremes of the two false labels.

"It was observed that the label ... influenced, in a preponderate fashion, subjects' representations," Brochet concluded. "A tasting with or without labels does not produce the same representations. A real organoleptic appreciation of a wine should be carried out in the absence of all imaginary reference."

These kinds of experiments have been carried out many times, in many settings, but always with the same results: "Imaginary references"—especially producer names and price tags—significantly influence sensory evaluations. The only way for a scrupulous critic to guarantee unbiased judgments is to review wines in blind tastings.

Wine Spectator's Tasting Methodology

At *Wine Spectator*, all new-release wines are evaluated in blind tastings. However, there are varying degrees of blind. The most extreme is "double-blind," which generally means that the taster has no information whatsoever about the wine in his or her glass.

In our experience, double-blind tasting is inadequate for proper evaluation, because it eliminates context. A fine wine will deliver delicious and complex flavors, but it can also convey information about its growing season, grape variety and origin—in short, its *terroir*.

(continued)

A PUBLICATION OF M. SHANKEN COMMUNICATIONS, INC.

PUBLISHERS OF WINE SPECTATOR • CIGAR AFICIONADO • WHISKEY ADVOCATE • FOOD ARTS • MARKET WATCH • IMPACT • SHANKEN NEWS DAILY

387 PARK AVENUE SOUTH, NEW YORK, NY 10016 • 212-684-4224 • FAX: 212-684-1540 • WINESPECTATOR.COM

This is why *Wine Spectator* employs a “single-blind” methodology. Our tasters know general aspects of the wine that provide context, which include vintage, appellation and grape variety where appropriate, but never the name of the producer or the wine’s price. The goal is to arrive at the appropriate balance: enough information to contextualize the wine, but not so much information that “imaginary references” begin to distort judgment.

We have developed this methodology through more than three decades of experiment and experience. Our modern database, in place since 1984, currently contains nearly 250,000 reviews from our blind tastings of new releases, and every month we add hundreds more.

If you’d like complete details about how we taste, visit the About Our Tastings (www.winespectator.com/aboutourtastings) section of WineSpectator.com for more information, including our Statement of Ethics (www.winespectator.com/ethics). Also watch our informative video that takes you inside our Tasting Department (www.winespectator.com/tastingvideo).

Building Trust

Our commitment to fairness, expertise and independence goes far beyond the tasting room. It is the very foundation of our approach to wine journalism.

Wine Spectator’s tasting staff includes 10 tasters, each of whom is responsible for specific wine regions (their initials are appended to their reviews). Together, they count more than 175 years of experience with *Wine Spectator*. Each taster undergoes an extensive apprenticeship program, which usually lasts several years, before they are qualified and approved to review wines on their own.

Our staff of eight tasting coordinators receives the wines, checks them into our database and sets up the blind tastings. All of our official tastings take place either in our offices or at locations we set up and oversee in the vineyard regions. We never cede control of the tasting environment to wineries or trade organizations.

Of course, simply tasting wines isn’t enough to truly understand them. Our tasters visit their regions on a regular basis, spending many weeks each year at the wineries and in the vineyards. In order to prevent any possible conflicts of interest, *Wine Spectator* pays all expenses for these trips, including transportation and lodging. These field trips help our tasters build the context that is essential to their effective evaluation of the wines in subsequent blind tastings.

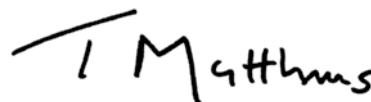
Blind tasting is difficult, imprecise and humbling. Evaluating a wine is not like weighing an object on a scale. The tasting note that accompanies each of our reviews describes the individual wine and attempts to put it in context. The score our tasters assign, based on our 100-point scale, is a summary of their judgment about the wine’s quality.

Wine Spectator makes every effort to ensure that our tasters have the skill and experience to make good judgments on the wines they review. Then we make certain that those reviews take place under tasting conditions that eliminate bias and ensure fairness.

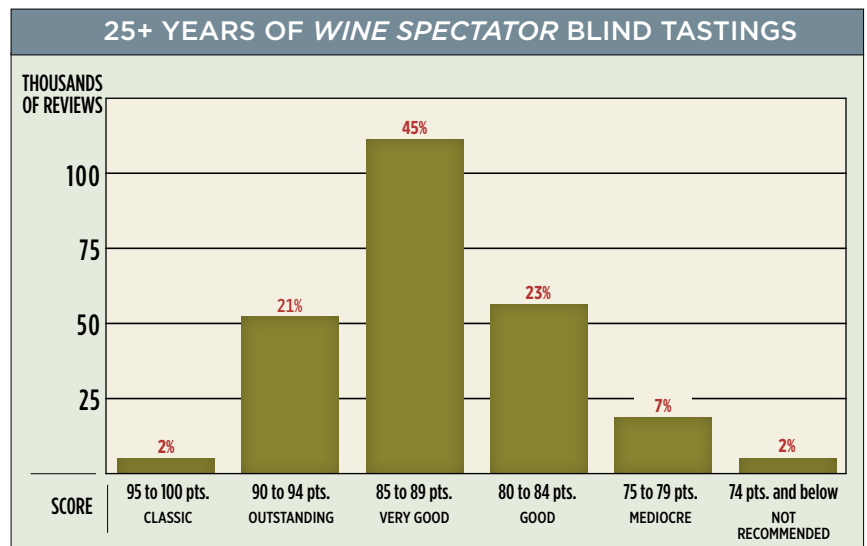
We believe that this combination of expertise and methodology results in wine reviews that are not only independent but also, and most importantly, reliable. Above all, we hope the information and judgment we share with our readers can help you deepen your understanding and appreciation of wine, and develop an authentic taste of your own.



Marvin R. Shanken
Editor and Publisher



Thomas Matthews
Executive Editor



The *Wine Spectator* database currently contains nearly 250,000 reviews from our blind tastings. This chart breaks them out into their respective score categories on our 100-point scale.