



Doing it on purpose

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I have been reading about the great debate on the wine show system with interest, especially the 'Much Ado About Nothing' article in the September *WBM*. This debate is about as useful as rocking-horse poo. It is akin to, when faced with global warming, debating whether our cars should run on 91 Octane fuel instead of 94 while the world builds a new coal-fired power station each week. It gives people a warm, fuzzy feeling, like driving a Prius, but makes no difference in the real world.

The real issue is: what should be the purpose of wine shows? Once that has been sorted out, then the wine geeks can ponder whether it is better to have a 20 point system, a 100 point system or maybe even a 500 point system – who cares, providing the assessment is done on a level playing field.

The regional wine shows are much closer to getting it right than the capital city wine shows and my comments are aimed at the latter. There is however one wine show that is close to perfect: Warren Mason's Sydney International Wine Competition, where the finalist wines are assessed with food – which is the way ninety-five percent of all wine drinkers enjoy their wine.

Wine shows were originally set up to improve the breed in the days when there were faults a plenty in wine. Is this basis still valid today? The answer is a resounding *No*. There are about 2,700 wineries in Australia today (there were 1,320 in 2001) in a fiercely competitive market and so I would suggest that anybody who makes faulty or inferior wine will be nudged out of business by good old market

forces. Drinkers will buy their wine, realise it's crap and never buy it again. This is the basic principle on which wine sales in Australia work. Unlike China, we do not have a 'Sanitary Certificate' from the government to say our wine is safe to consume. Thus, if the reason for having wine shows has changed due to more than 100 years of technological and communication improvements, isn't it time we updated the purpose of our shows?

In the 1970s Wolf Blass began to change the real role of wine shows by using them to market his wines, which were specifically made to appeal to consumers rather than aiming for 'technical excellence – to improve the breed'. Yet here we are nearly 50 years later and we still haven't grasped Wolfie's lesson.

Consider that in last year's Royal Adelaide Wine Show there were 506 Shirazes entered in the four classes (by vintage) ranging from commercial wines up to some of the best known names in the Shiraz stratosphere. This is like comparing apples with tomatoes, oranges and a few pomegranates thrown in, rather than comparing apples with apples.

Surely this would have more relevance to consumers if these classes were split on the basis of style and/or price point rather than just vintage. You could have the 'cool climate' Shiraz in a separate class to the 'warm climate' Shiraz or the 'retail at under \$10' in a separate class for those that 'retail at under \$20' etc. Each class would then be judged accordingly, in context, rather than



having, for example, Jacob's Creek Shiraz sitting next to Hill of Grace in the same class. A system like this would still take into account the wine's technical quality, *but* within the clearly defined context of commercial reality. The results would have much more meaning for consumers while still fostering winemaking excellence within realistic (commercial) parameters.

In addition, why do wine shows still have classes for brandy and fortifieds? What purpose do they serve? Sure, they make the good folk at Angove's, Morris and one or two other wineries feel good, but do they have any relevance in the real world? These classes were very relevant until around the 1970s, but not today. The Royal Adelaide Wine Show in 2011 had 21 classes for fortified wines, which attracted only 87 entries in total, compared with 60 Pinot Noir entries, which had to all be entered into one class, irrespective of price or growing climate or any other criteria.

So, here is a radical thought – instead of perpetuating the past, how about wine shows focus on the future and remove classes which are no longer relevant, and instead create classes for upcoming wine styles or new alternative varieties?

Classes for Moscato, Tempranillo or Sangiovese would have bucket-loads' more meaning to consumers than a class for Vintage Port or Brandy.

Yes, some wine shows have started down this track, but they still need to review their *modus operandi*. Let us have a discussion as to what should be the purpose of wine shows in the 21st Century and then start to change the anachronistic capital city wine shows so as to reflect this new-found purpose. Perhaps what is really needed is two different types of wine shows. We could have one that is there to promote technical excellence, for example winemakers' wine shows – where the accolades are only recognised within the industry (no gold medals on bottles – just certificates to wallpaper the winery with). Then we could have another system of 'Commercial' wine shows, where the wines are assessed for commercial criteria such as drinkability, food compatibility within defined parameters such as price, the results of which are communicated to wine consumers via medals on bottles.

I do not profess to have the answers to this conundrum, all I am saying is the current system has gone past its use-by date and needs to be overhauled or replaced.