

Who's Driving The Wine Bus?

By Eric Anderson



In a recent Wine Spectator blog, critic James Laube wrote that “Winemakers have come to embrace the 100-point rating system as much as consumers have” (*James Laube’s Wine Flights*: Nov 11, 2013). On the face of it, this really isn’t ‘breaking news.’ The advertising and marketing of wine is directed toward communicating wine quality to consumers - most often by citing the scores given by critics or magazines. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that many vintners have found at least a financial interest in striving to reach some high numerical scores for their wines.

Mr. Laube goes on to say, “One big benefit of the [100-point scale](#) is that it has given winemakers a target. It’s one way for critics to show vintners where their strike zone lies.” And he continues later with, “Whether or not a vintner agrees with a rating matters less than knowing how the critic rates certain aspects of a wine, in effect, setting up the strike zone.” I don’t know about you, but this worries me.

When wine critics first appeared, their avowed role was to inform consumers about wine through reports of winery visits, tastings and recommendations. Critics have performed this function well, and wine quality in general has improved greatly over the years. Wine aficionados have become more informed. We have been able to explore and learn more about wine through their publications. That said, the wine critic’s role has always been to criticize, comment or analyze, not to select winemaking goals or redirect efforts. Mr. Laube’s blog, however, seems to indicate otherwise - that it is the critics, rather than the vintners, who are now driving the wine bus.

It isn’t the pundit or the yardstick that bothers me. I think wine criticism is fine, and I’ve also come to accept the reality (maybe even the benefits) of the 100-point scale. What concerns me is the thought of losing the artisanal qualities of a craftsman in some headlong rush to follow wine critics’ dictums. Art and criticism have long had an adversarial role, and that’s fine as well. But, I’d prefer to have critics and winemakers stay in their respective philosophical camps, rather than agree on some universal objective measurement for a goal that seems inherently subjective. Which is to say, I’d rather have them agree to disagree.