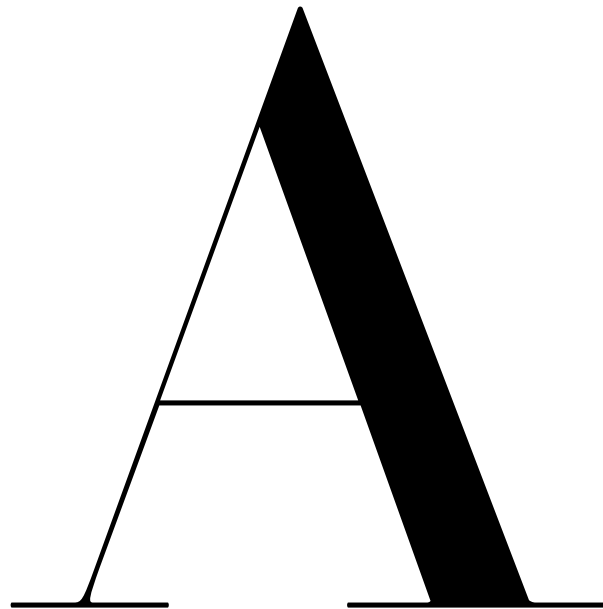




EVERY ONE A CRITIC

THE FUTURE OF WINE WRITING

by Mike Steinberger



round spring each year, scores of wine writers descend on Bordeaux for the en primeurs tastings, and every spring, many end up asking themselves the same rueful question: Do I really need to be here? It is a question born of a hard truth: When it comes to rendering a verdict on each new Bordeaux vintage, the only opinion that truly matters in the eyes of producers, merchants, retailers, and consumers is Robert Parker's. His barrel scores hugely influence the opening prices and are treated as the vinous equivalent of papal bulls by wine lovers around the world. When it comes to Bordeaux, Parker doesn't just move the market; he makes the market. If no other critics tasted en primeur, it's unclear that anyone save for château staff would either notice or care. Imagine, if you will, a giant seesaw with a single occupant at one end and several hundred people clinging to the other end—a seesaw in which all the weight is distributed to the former end. This is how disproportionate Parker's influence is.

It is a word picture that speaks to a broader point about wine criticism: Many people are called, but few are rewarded, with either money or authority. While Parker's power clearly reaches its apogee in Bordeaux, he has had a crowding-out effect in a number of other wine regions, notably California and the Rhône Valley. This is partly because the market has given him astonishing sway—it is axiomatic now that he is the most influential critic the world has ever seen, in any field—but it also underscores the fact that the market for wine criticism has always been a puny one. Even with a region as vast and important as Bordeaux, a single voice has largely satiated the demand for wine-buying advice—advice people are willing to pay for, at any rate.



The Parker era has now entered its twilight. He turned 60 last year; his publication, *The Wine Advocate*, has gone from a one-man shop to a small factory; and it is reasonable to assume that he will continue cutting back his workload in the decade ahead. There is no void yet, but one is opening up. How is this void likely to be filled, and what does the future hold for wine criticism? Parker has begun to cede the spotlight at a challenging moment for his profession. Prices for the world's most sought-after wines have become stratospheric, more quality wines are emerging from more places than ever before, and the Internet is revolutionizing the way that wine information is disseminated. It is no exaggeration to say that seismic changes are afoot for the field of wine criticism. Regrettably, the one thing that probably will not change is the bottom line: The market for fee-based wine advice is apt to remain a tiny one, and few people are going to be able to make any real money selling their opinions about Mosel Rieslings and Sonoma Pinot Noirs.

Certainly, no critic will ever again wield the kind of influence that Parker has exercised. He was the product of circumstances that will almost surely never be repeated. This is not to suggest that the former attorney from Maryland lucked into his success; his talent, work ethic, integrity, and self-promotional skills (a phrase used here not in a pejorative sense but in a wholly earnest and admiring one) made him what he is. There is no denying, however, that Parker arrived on the wine scene at what was a uniquely propitious moment. The 1982 Bordeaux vintage, which cemented his reputation, coincided with the start of a 20-year bull market in the United States—one that created legions of new wine enthusiasts eager for just the kind of accessible guidance that Parker was offering. Woody Allen once famously quipped, “80 percent of success is just showing up.” In Parker’s case, the 80 percent came from skill and hard work, but showing up counted for something.

There were other factors in his favor. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, wine prices were still fairly manageable, and educating a palate on the finest Bordeaux and Burgundies did not require a trust fund, a rich spouse, or an investment banker’s salary; it was something viable for a person living on a normal income and willing to be a little extravagant. A few other things bear recalling: The universe of review-worthy wines was quite compact at that time; print journalism was the only avenue into wine reviewing; and there were many fewer voices competing to be heard (in part because print was the only way in; in part because wine writing was not yet something to which many people aspired). Professional wine criticism was a small pond—a puddle, really—and it found, in Parker, a very big fish.

In addition to the power he has wielded in the marketplace, Parker has also greatly influenced how wine criticism is done. His tasting notes, in tone and content, were little short of revolutionary. Thirty years ago, wine reviews tended to be succinct, rather guarded in their judgments, and heavy on anthropomorphic metaphors. Parker coined a completely different style: exuberant, bristling with certitude, and rich in pastoral imagery. His approach has now become the industry

standard, and it will almost certainly remain so after he retires. Another, more controversial Parker innovation is also likely to outlast him: the 100-point scale. The fundamental illogic of the 100-point scale has been discussed ad nauseam, to no avail. Merchants and consumers, particularly in America, are hooked on it, and that is not going to change. In separate interviews for this article, both Steve Tanzer and Allen Meadows admitted to misgivings about the 100-point system but said that they had no choice but to use it if they hoped to keep and augment their respective audiences. Along with his prose style, numerical ratings will surely prove to be Parker’s most enduring contribution to wine criticism.

And what of the moral code that he brought to his work—his determination to avoid conflicts of interest and to always “call ‘em as he sees them”? His Naderite approach to wine criticism has plainly laid down a marker in the minds of consumers—they rightly expect wine critics to serve them, rather than serving the trade—and will remain an example to which other wine writers aspire (and should). But because he achieved financial viability rather quickly, he was able to establish and maintain a degree of independence that most writers could not—at least not if they hoped to do their jobs and scratch out decent livings (although it also must be conceded that some of his contemporaries were perhaps not as anxious to keep their distance from the trade as he was). For the majority of wine writers, sponsored trips, media lunches, solicited samples, and the like are not a choice, they are a necessity. Call it the Parker Paradox: He set a standard to which few others could reasonably be expected to adhere. (For the record, I attend media events but do not, as a matter of personal policy, accept press trips.)

To appreciate how *sui generis* Parker’s experience has been, one need only consider the long and distinguished career of the British wine writer John Livingstone-Learmonth. He was possibly the first Anglo writer to make the Rhône Valley his area of expertise. He arrived in southern France in the early 1970s, and in 1975 he coauthored a book about the wines of the Rhône. Faber & Faber delayed publication for three years, which gave Livingstone-Learmonth an early taste of the difficulties of wine writing. The book ended up doing fairly well, as did a sequel, but he has never been able to make a full-time go of wine writing. Since the 1980s, he has worked as a communications consultant to international corporations, researching and writing about wine in his spare time. In 2005, he published *The Wines of The Northern Rhône*, a 700-page opus that has been universally hailed as an indispensable work. For this he has pocketed less than \$5,000 to date—a figure that includes his advance.

Priced or squeezed out

And now, three decades after both Parker and Livingstone-Learmonth got their starts in wine writing, the landscape has changed dramatically. For one thing, becoming a wine expert is now an infinitely more expensive proposition—prohibitively expensive for people with normal incomes. A deep knowledge and experience of first-growth Bordeaux

and grand cru Burgundy is an obvious prerequisite to becoming a critic with an opinion worth hearing, but prices for current releases of these wines have soared beyond the reach of most wine writers, and as for older vintages—well, better not even ask. On erobertparker.com last year, Neal Martin raised this issue and posed the obvious question: “Does this imply that the next generation of wine critics can only come from an ever increasingly smaller pool of those born into affluence? Will wine writing or criticism suffer as a result?”

Nor is the problem limited to purchasing power. Thirty years ago, few critics were traipsing through the vineyards of Burgundy and Bordeaux. Nowadays, there are scores of wine professionals knocking on cellar doors, and many of these wines have become costly. François Mauss, president of the Grand Jury Européen, asks another question: At a time when top Burgundies from good vintages are fetching more than \$1,000 a bottle, how much need do the domaines have for journalists, and how much wine can they afford to pour for them? Bordeaux will always be more accommodating because its wines are made in larger quantities, but aspiring wine critics hoping to experience yardsticks like La Tâche and Musigny are likely to have a much tougher time getting those opportunities than their journalistic forebears did. All this suggests that younger wine writers are going to have difficulty acquiring the experience they need to be credible, and the pool of journalists able to offer themselves as knowledgeable guides to Bordeaux and Burgundy (especially the latter) is certain to remain a particularly small one.

Regionally speaking

One way around this problem, of course, is to focus on other regions, and there is much to choose from these days. A quality revolution has swept the planet, and delicious wines are being produced in regions that were dismissed as hopeless backwaters in the not-very-distant past. The universe of review-worthy wines has exploded, and it is simply not possible now for one critic to span the entire globe—not in the comprehensive manner readers expect and demand. Parker’s decision to outsource *The Wine Advocate’s* coverage of Italy, Burgundy, Champagne, Spain, Germany, Australia, and other important regions was clearly motivated by his desire to slow down, but it was also an acknowledgment that the wine world had outgrown his reach. Relative to his competition, Parker was slow to accommodate himself to the new reality: *Wine Spectator* has long divvied up regional responsibilities among its editors, and Tanzer has used outside contributors for years. One thing that Parker was surely not conceding, but that many enophiles had come to believe, was that the one-palate-fits-all approach did not work. Every critic, no matter how gifted, has strengths and weaknesses, and some regions suit their tastes better than others.

But is there real money to be made covering South Africa or New Zealand? The emergence of Allen Meadows and his quarterly online publication Burghound.com was partly a product of this backlash against the so-called universal palate, and it seemed to confirm that regional specialization was indeed the wave of the future. Meadows launched [Burghound](http://Burghound.com)

in 2000. Four years earlier, Parker had handed over Burgundy coverage to Pierre Rovani. But Rovani struggled to establish his authority, in no small part because Parker’s relationship with some Burgundy producers had grown strained and because many Burgundy aficionados, disenchanted with Parker’s views (particularly concerning the 1993 vintage), had given up on *The Wine Advocate*. Clive Coates MW and Steve Tanzer were still providing well-regarded Burgundy reviews, but *The Wine Advocate’s* diminished influence created an opening for Meadows, who already enjoyed strong name recognition in Burgundy circles, owing to his longstanding interest in the wines and his participation in online wine-discussion groups.

Meadows, a former banker who resides in southern California, has succeeded brilliantly as a dedicated critic. While he won’t discuss dollars and cents, he says that [Burghound](http://Burghound.com) is profitable. It is unquestionably influential: Meadows’s scores are widely cited by retailers and auction

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houses, and it is generally agreed that his ecstatic reviews of the 2005 Burgundies sparked the global buying frenzy for this vintage. (It has been suggested that the ’05 Burgundies have done for his reputation what the ’82 Bordeaux did for Parker’s.) To date, though, Meadows is the only independent regional specialist prospering enough to do the job full time, which has come as a surprise to him—he, too, thought that he was at the vanguard of a trend—and has led him to reflect on why [Burghound](http://Burghound.com) has thrived. While he believes comprehensiveness, consistency, and accuracy have been critical ingredients, he also concedes that, not unlike Parker, he has benefited from some unique circumstances. *The Wine Advocate* unwittingly created an opportunity for him, and it did so in a region where the wines command enough interest and money to support a full-time critic. Burgundies are costly and, as Meadows puts it, “the price of a mistake is very high.” People want some assurance before splurging on a Roumier Musigny or a Rousseau Chambertin and are willing to pay [Burghound’s](http://Burghound.com) \$125 annual subscription

fee to get it. With most other regions, the stakes are comparatively small, says Meadows, and the market for fee-based coverage appears to be correspondingly thin. Even with the advantages he enjoys, Meadows admits that without the financial base his prior career provided him, things might not have turned out so well. "It would have been very difficult," he says.

World Wine Web

Another thing that helped smoothed his passage was the Internet; Meadows made a name for himself via the Web, and his newsletter has been distributed electronically from its inception. The Internet has given rise to two other newly arrived critics—Neal Martin and Antonio Galloni, both of whom now contribute to *The Wine Advocate*—and has also been a springboard for some other up-and-coming wine writers, notably Jamie Goode, a frequent contributor to *The World of Fine Wine* and author of the well-received book *The Science of Wine*. More established figures, notably Parker,

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Tanzer, and Jancis Robinson MW, have established strong online franchises as well, and *Wine Spectator* has likewise carved out a formidable Internet presence. Parker has said he believes that wine criticism will in future revolve around the Net, and he and his competitors are doing their best to make this a self-fulfilling prophecy.

There is also no doubt, however, that the Internet has the potential to usurp these established voices. While the field of wine criticism has always had relatively low barriers to entry, the Web has stripped away even these minor roadblocks. Now, every wine amateur with a computer and Internet access can share his or her self-declared expertise with the world. In wine, as in everything else, we are witnessing the empowerment of the *vox populi*. Tanzer, while happy to have his own online foothold, takes a rather dim view of the Internet's democratic possibilities. As he sees it, the Web has given rise to a great deal of "noise," making it harder for truly qualified voices to emerge. "I had the great advantage of being

able to establish my name back in the 1980s, in a print-only environment," he says. "Now, there's a lot more static that you have to cut through."

That is certainly true, but is it really the cacophony of uninformed opinions that most threatens professional critics? Despite the greatly increased volume, voices worth hearing are still managing to cut through the noise—Martin and Goode are two prime examples. The Internet has also given a platform to amateurs who are very knowledgeable indeed, and who previously had no way of sharing their insights with a broad audience. This would seem to be the greater danger for traditional providers of wine criticism. Just look at the daily chatter on erobertparker.com; some of the participants have nearly as much access to top wineries as the pros and have vastly more money to spend on the very finest wines. Take just one area, Champagne: There are now several people on the Parker board who drink more Krug, Dom Pérignon, Cristal, and Salon than all the major critics combined. They post tasting notes diligently and are being recognized by fellow board members as experts in this realm, and rightly so. This is high-quality advice being offered gratis, and generally speaking, if people can get information they want free of charge, they are going to take it.

Nothing illustrates this challenge to the established order more clearly than the emergence of CellarTracker. In 2003, Eric LeVine, a Microsoft group manager who had grown tired of using spreadsheets to keep tabs on his wine collection, designed a Web-based cellar-management program. He showed it to two enophile friends, who immediately began using it to track their inventories, and soon thereafter LeVine decided to make it available to the wider wine world. It has proven wildly popular. As of February this year, CellarTracker had 46,000 registered users, of whom up to 25,000 were actively managing their cellars, and its virtual cellar contained a combined total of 7.75 million bottles. In addition to its organizing functions, CellarTracker allows people to post tasting notes, and early on LeVine made an interesting discovery: People really like to read other people's tasting notes. Indeed, he noticed that the majority of viewers were not registered users at all but were "guests" visiting the site to peruse the wine critiques.

The tasting-note function has since become a phenomenon unto itself—and one that ought to be giving mainstream critics pause for thought. CellarTracker is currently logging more than 1,200 tasting notes per day—a rate that, in the span of less than two weeks, yields more reviews than *Wine Spectator* publishes in a year. Thanks to what LeVine calls its "army of tasters," CellarTracker now has notes for well over 400,000 distinct wines, which dwarfs what the major critics have in their databases. Moreover, the same wines are being reviewed vastly more often on CellarTracker, giving readers the kind of frequent updates that Parker, Tanzer, and *Wine Spectator* are incapable of providing. LeVine points to one other CellarTracker advantage: Most of its reviews are done under conditions that correspond much more closely to how people actually drink their Barolos and Côte-Rôties—which is to say, most of the wines are evaluated at the table, with food.

Although CellarTracker's basic features are free of charge, it now includes some premium services (notably, an automatic cellar valuation) that are available to users who make voluntary contributions. To date, 10,000 people have chipped in, but LeVine has no intention of creating a "walled garden" and turning CellarTracker into a subscription-only service; he plans to rely on donations and advertising to cover the site's financial needs. Nor does he believe that CellarTracker will displace professional critics; in his view, they will remain the primary buying guides because they have experience and access that most amateurs lack. But LeVine says that there is wisdom in crowds, and the cumulative weight of the reviews gathered on his site and the smoothing-out effect that comes from merging so many opinions will make CellarTracker (and any service that comes along to challenge or even displace it) a source of invaluable supplementary information. People will still turn to the Parkers, Tanzers, and *Spectators* for most of their buying advice, he says, but they will increasingly look to their online associates for tips on when, where, and how to drink the wines they have acquired.

So maybe the apocalypse is not quite nigh. Certainly, the leading publications look to be in fairly ruddy health. *Wine Spectator* is a thriving franchise, and there is no reason to think this will change anytime soon. Parker's influence remains strong, and while some of his new associates have perhaps been faster to win acceptance than others, *The Wine Advocate* appears to be weathering its transition just fine. Meadows is flourishing; ditto Tanzer. Other professional outlets will undoubtedly emerge in the years ahead—individual voices for sure, but perhaps also collective efforts. The Grand Jury Européen has made a name for itself on both sides of the Atlantic, though its ambitions will always be constrained by logistics—a point Mauss readily concedes (there are only so many times a year he can bring the Grand Jury together).

But there is no question that the business of wine advice is fragmenting; there are vastly more information providers now, and consumers are utilizing many more sources of advice than ever before. Not only that: CellarTracker and other online venues clearly attest to the growing self-confidence and self-reliance of everyday wine drinkers, particularly in the United States; Americans are trusting their own palates to an unprecedented degree, and this trend is only going to accelerate in the years ahead. It won't squeeze out the established pros, but it does suggest that the small universe of people and publications making more than token money from wine criticism is not going to expand anytime soon. Indeed, given all these combined circumstances—the rise of the Internet, the limited number of wine regions for which fee-based reviewing is viable, and the soaring cost of fine wines—it may even contract.

Beyond spitting and scoring

But no doubt because of the power wielded by the critics, we have come to equate consumer-oriented wine criticism with wine journalism. The two are not, however, one and the same, and spitting and scoring is not the only form that wine

journalism can take. It can also entail real journalism, in which stories are chased down and reported. And as it happens, wine sits at the nexus of some of the defining issues of our time: globalization, climate change, the emergence of an international overclass. There are important stories to be told these days about wine and its place in the world, and it is important that these stories are told by people with real knowledge of wine. This is not to suggest that non-specialists are incapable of writing with authority about wine; the articles about the Hardy Rodenstock affair that appeared last year in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New Yorker* were excellent, and Benjamin Wallace's forthcoming book on the same topic, *The Billionaire's Vinegar*, is even better. (Full disclosure: Wallace is a friend.)

Often, though, wine articles written by people with limited experience of wine suffer for it. Take, for instance, the much-discussed profile of Robert Parker published in *The Atlantic* magazine in December 2000. The author, William Langewiesche, is one of America's preeminent journalists, but wine was apparently virgin territory for him—and it showed, notably in his discussion of Bordeaux's garagiste movement. Langewiesche appeared to believe that the controversy surrounding these new-wave St-Emilions stemmed in part from concern that the wines were indistinguishable from one another—a claim he dismissed as bogus because he tried the wines himself and found them all quite distinctive. But this was a complete misunderstanding of the rumpus over the garagistes. The issue was never whether the wines all tasted the same; rather, it was whether the wines tasted authentically Bordelais. It is an error that a seasoned wine writer, familiar with all the wines and all the players, presumably would not have made.

The good news is that we are now starting to see a real flowering of high-quality wine journalism, both in print and online. Jamie Goode, in these pages and others, has contributed mightily to our understanding of the science behind wine production and wine appreciation. Tyler Colman, who holds a doctorate in political science from Northwestern University and blogs under the name Dr Vino, has just published a very informative book called *Wine Politics* that looks at how politics influences the production, distribution, and consumption of wine on both sides of the Atlantic. He also recently coauthored a much-discussed study of the carbon footprint of wine. Alice Feiring, an American wine writer and popular blogger, has come forth with a book of her own: *The Battle for Wine and Love, or How I Saved the World from Parkerization* is an opinionated look at the fight to preserve authenticity and diversity in wine, and it is already provoking controversy (the book's title pretty much ensured it). The Internet has even given the wine world its first muckraker: Californian Tom Wark uses his blog, *Fermentation*, to expose the absurdity of America's three-tiered distribution system and the money politics that perpetuates it. These are fresh voices taking wine journalism in new and important directions, and we need more of them. ■