



Closing Date: 12-23-09

Issue 186

The Independent Consumer's Bimonthly Guide to Fine Wine

RATING SYSTEM

Robert Parker's rating system employs a 50-100 point quality scale. It is my belief that the various twenty (20) point rating systems do not provide enough flexibility and often result in compressed and inflated wine ratings. THE WINE ADVOCATE takes a hard, very critical look at wine, since I would prefer to underestimate the wine's quality than to overestimate it. The numerical ratings are utilized only to enhance and complement the thorough tasting notes, which are my primary means of communicating my judgments to you.

96-100	An extraordinary wine of profound and complex character displaying all the attributes expected of a classic wine of its variety. Wines of this caliber are worth a special effort to find, purchase, and consume.
90-95	An outstanding wine of exceptional complexity and character. In short, these are terrific wines.
80-89	A barely above average to very good wine displaying various degrees of finesse and flavor as well as character with no noticeable flaws.
70-79	An average wine with little distinction except that it is soundly made. In essence, a straightforward, innocuous wine.
60-69	A below average wine containing noticeable deficiencies, such as excessive acidity and/or tannin, an absence of flavor, or possibly dirty aromas or flavors.
50-59	A wine deemed to be unacceptable.

TASTING NOTES AND RATINGS

When possible all of my tastings are done in peer-group, single-blind conditions, (meaning that the same types of wines are tasted against each other and the producers' names are not known). The ratings reflect an independent, critical look at the wines. Neither price nor the reputation of the producer/grower affect the rating in any manner. I spend three months of every year tasting in vineyards. During the other nine months of the year, six and sometimes seven-day workweeks are devoted solely to tasting and writing. I do not participate in wine judgments or trade tastings for many reasons, but principal among these are the following: (1) I prefer to taste from an entire bottle of wine, (2) I find it essential to have properly sized and cleaned professional tasting glasses, (3) the temperature of the wine must be correct, and (4) I prefer to determine the time allocated to the number of wines to be critiqued.

The numerical rating given is a guide to what I think of the wine vis-à-vis its peer group. Certainly, wines rated above 85 are very good to excellent, and any wine rated 90 or above will be outstanding for its particular type. While some have suggested that scoring is not well suited to a beverage that has been romantically extolled for centuries, wine is no different from any consumer product. There are specific standards of quality that full-time wine professionals recognize, and there are benchmark wines against which others can be judged. I know of no one with three or four different glasses of wine in front of him or her, regardless of how good or bad the wines might be, who cannot say, "I prefer this one to that one." Scoring wines is simply taking a professional's opinion and applying some sort of numerical system to it on a consistent basis. Scoring permits rapid communication of information to expert and novice alike.

The score given for a specific wine reflects the quality of the wine at its best. I often tell people that evaluating a wine and assigning a score to a beverage that will change and evolve in many cases for up to 10 or more years is analogous to taking a photograph of a marathon runner. Much can be ascertained but, like a picture of a moving object, the wine will also evolve and change. Wines from obviously badly corked or defective bottles are retasted, since a wine from a single bad bottle does not indicate an entirely spoiled batch. Many of the wines reviewed have been tasted many times, and the score represents a cumulative average of the wine's performance in tastings to date. Scores, however, do not reveal the important facts about a wine. The written commentary that accompanies the ratings is a better source of information regarding the wine's style and personality, its relative quality vis-à-vis its peers, and its value and aging potential than any score could ever indicate.

Here then is a general guide to interpreting the numerical ratings:

90-100 is equivalent to an **A** and is given only for an outstanding or special effort. Wines in this category are the very best produced of their type. There is a big difference between a 90 and 99, but both are top marks. As you will note through the text, there are few wines that actually make it into this top category because there are not many great wines.

80-89 is equivalent to a **B** in school and such a wine, particularly in the 85-89 range, is very, very good; many of the wines that fall into this range often are great values as well. I have many of these wines in my personal collection.

70-79 represents a **C**, or average mark, but obviously 79 is a much more desirable score than 70. Wines that receive scores between 75 and 79 are generally pleasant, straightforward wines that lack complexity, character, or depth. If inexpensive, they may be ideal for uncritical quaffing.

Below 70 is a **D** or **F**, depending on where you went to school. For wine, it is a sign of an imbalanced, flawed, or terribly dull or diluted product that will be of little interest to the discriminating consumer.

In terms of awarding points, my scoring system gives every wine a base of 50 points. The wine's general color and appearance merit up to 5 points. Since most wines today are well made, thanks to modern technology and the increased use of professional oenologists, they tend to receive at least 4, often 5 points. The aroma and bouquet merit up to 15 points, depending on the intensity level and dimension of the aroma and bouquet as well as the cleanliness of the wine. The flavor and finish merit up to 20 points, and again, intensity of flavor, balance, cleanliness, and depth and length on the palate are all important considerations when giving out points. Finally, the overall quality level or potential for further evolution and improvement-aging merits up to 10 points.

Scores are important for the reader to gauge a professional critic's overall qualitative placement of a wine vis-à-vis its peer group. However, it is also vital to consider the description of the wine's style, personality, and potential. No scoring system is perfect, but a system that provides for flexibility in scores, if applied by the same taster without prejudice, can quantify different levels of wine quality and provide the reader with one professional's judgment. However, there can never be any substitute for your own palate nor any better education than tasting the wine yourself.

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BOND	2007	E PLURIBUS	SPRING MOUNTAIN	(not yet released)	RED	(96-100)
BOND	2006	E PLURIBUS	SPRING MOUNTAIN	(\$225.00)	RED	94
BOND	2007	MATRIARCH	NAPA	(not yet released)	RED	(91-93)
BOND	2006	MATRIARCH	NAPA	(\$125.00)	RED	90
BOND	2007	MELBURY	NAPA	(not yet released)	RED	(93-95+)
BOND	2006	MELBURY	NAPA	(\$275.00)	RED	94
BOND	2007	QUELLA	SPRING VLY./ HOWELL MTN.	(not yet released)	RED	(94-96)
BOND	2006	QUELLA	SPRING VLY./ HOWELL MTN.	(\$275.00)	RED	92
BOND	2007	ST. EDEN	OAKVILLE	(not yet released)	RED	(96-98+)
BOND	2006	ST. EDEN	OAKVILLE	(\$275.00)	RED	94
BOND	2007	VECINA	OAKVILLE	(not yet released)	RED	(96-99)
BOND	2006	VECINA	OAKVILLE	(\$275.00)	RED	95+

To reiterate what I have written in the past, Bond is the world-class project of Harlan Estates owner Bill Harlan. It is a simple concept – take 20+-year leases on some of the finest vineyard sites in all of Napa Valley, bring in your own winemaker (the well-known Bob Levy, along with Michel Rolland in the background), and produce these single vineyard wines, with the stuff considered not good enough culled out and blended together into their second wine, called Matriarch. All of these wines are aged for nearly two years in 100% new French oak and bottled with no fining or filtration. They are all meant for 25 or even possibly 35+ years of aging. There are now five separate vineyards in the Bond portfolio. Quella comes from a 10-acre vineyard in Spring Valley near Howell Mountain, planted on volcanic white ash called tufa. The St. Eden comes from a valley floor vineyard in the Oakville corridor. Melbury is from Pritchard Hill, overlooking Lake Hennessy, Vecina a east-facing hillside neighbor to Harlan Estate, and E Pluribus a Spring Mountain vineyard overlooking St. Helena. The 2006s, which seemed tannic and unevolved last year, have put on weight, elegance, and for the most part, showed in the upper point ranges I gave them last year from barrel.

Starting with the **Matriarch**, this wine is the easiest to drink young. Dark plum/purple, with plenty of smoke, black currants, espresso roast, oak, and chocolate, the **2006** is dense, round, and best drunk over the next decade. The **2007 Matriarch** should be a killer. Sweet blueberry and blackberry fruit intermixed with espresso roast, chocolate, and smoky oak is followed by an opulent, exuberant wine that should prove to be as brilliant as the 2005 Matriarch turned out to be. The **2006 Melbury** has a dense plum/purple color and a big, sweet, scorched earth, crème de cassis and blueberry nose, with hints of charcoal, spice box, and graphite. Rich, well-made, and showing exceptionally well from bottle, it is a wine that will certainly evolve for 25 or more years. The **2007 Melbury** gave the impression of slightly sweeter tannin and perhaps even more blueberry liqueur-like notes intermixed with crushed rock, mountain floor, and sweet cassis. Some licorice emerges from this full-bodied wine, which displays beautifully sweet tannin and an exuberant, fleshy, intense mouthfeel and finish. Give it 2-4 years of bottle age and drink it over the following 25+ years. The newest entry into these single-vineyard wines (which are virtually all 100% Cabernet Sauvignon) is the **2006 Quella**. Dense purple, this wine comes across as the most austere of any of these wines. This dense, rich, elegant wine displays impressive notes of espresso roast intermixed with blackberry and floral-infused blue fruits, but in the finish the tannins kick in, and the wine seems closed and in need of considerable aging. I would sit on this

for a good half dozen years, and drink it over the following two decades. The brilliant **2007 Quella** exhibits the superb texture, opulence, and fleshy mouthfeel of this vintage, but with terrific delineation and minerality. Full-bodied and inky purple-colored, the wine displays blue fruits, acacia flowers, crushed rock and spicy oak in an opulent, impressively endowed style that should age nicely for 20 or more years.

From the valley floor vineyard in Oakville, the **2006 St. Eden** has shed some of its tannic clout of last year and taken on a generously endowed style, with stunning black fruits, roasted herbs, sweet cassis, graphite, and new oak. Fleshy and even opulent (an anomaly for a 2006), this is an impressively endowed Cabernet Sauvignon to drink over the next 25 years. Approaching perfection is the **2007 St. Eden**. Opaque purple-colored, with notes of burning embers, pure *crème de cassis*, cedar, and spice box, the wine has that typical Oakville character that seems to vaguely suggest a top Pauillac from Bordeaux. Great stuffing, a multi-layered texture, and tremendous purity and length make for a wine that seems more approachable than the 2006, but with more concentration and intensity. This is a stunning wine that should be accessible young, yet age for 30+ years. The **2006 Vecina** has turned out even better than I expected last year. Graphite/lead pencil notes intermixed with hints of burning embers and charcoal, an opaque purple color, and sweet blackberry and roasted espresso notes are all present in this wine, which is masculine, muscular, tannic, but incredibly well-endowed and a potential candidate for 30 years of aging. This wine needs 4-5 years of cellaring and should last three decades. The **2007 Vecina** exhibits that scorched earth, volcanic character of burning embers and barbecue smoke, with black and blue fruits as well as graphite. Tremendous richness, full-bodied power and density, and an amazing finish make for a wine that borders on perfection as well. Give it 2-4 years of bottle age, and drink it over the following 25+ years. The **2006 E Pluribus**, like all of these Cabernet Sauvignons, is youthful, with an opaque purple color and a big, sweet nose of blueberry liqueur intermixed with spring flowers and wet rocks. Full-bodied, powerful, and backward, with sweet tannin but formidable structure, this wine needs to be cellared for 4-5 years and drunk over the following 25. A profound effort, the **2007 E Pluribus** displays a complex smorgasbord of aromas, ranging from new saddle leather to cedar wood, *crème de cassis*, blueberry, charcoal, and truffle and smoke. Superbly concentrated, with great texture, intensity, and near-seamlessness to all of its component parts, this is a massively endowed wine with elegance, balance, and great purity and length. Forget it for 4-5 years and drink it over the following three decades. Tel. (707) 944-1441; Fax (707) 944-1444