

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

By Lettie Teague
May 3, 2018

What Savvy Wine Buyers Should Know About the Points System

In the world of wine, a rating of 95-100 equals retail magic. But what do those points really mean? Our wine columnist investigated, and tasted high-rated wines to determine which ones really make the grade



PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, STYLING BY JARED LAWTON PRODUCTION DESIGN

WHAT'S THE difference between a wine with a 94-point score and one awarded 98 points? A lot more than a mere four points. Jeffrey Sapara, a New Jersey-based wholesale sales representative for importer VOS Selections, recalled that when the 2010 Contino Gran Reserva Rioja was awarded 94 points by Robert Parker Wine Advocate, Vinous and Wine & Spirits, three well respected wine publications, in previous years, a few retailers bought a case or two. But after wine critic James Suckling's website awarded the same wine 98 points in January 2018, Mr. Sapara was deluged with calls.

"All of a sudden there was a feeding frenzy. I didn't have enough wine to sell," Mr. Sapara recalled. The retailers who had only purchased a single case of the wine from his New York-based company suddenly wanted everything he had in stock. The 98-point score "quadrupled" the interest, he said.

The distance between points at the top of the scale may be greater today than ever before. Winemakers, wine buyers and retailers are all chasing big numbers, since a very high score from a wine critic versus a pretty good one can be the difference between a wine that sells reasonably well and one that pretty much sells itself. But do the wines that win the big scores really deserve their big numbers? And do those big numbers all mean the same thing when they're awarded by different wine critics?

Not all retailers rely on this point system to sell wines. Steve Flynn of Manhattan's Amsterdam Wine Co. almost never posts scores in his store because he believes his knowledgeable staff can sell the wines better than a number can. But even he will use scores online and in emails to appeal to a national audience of buyers who can't talk to his staff.

For a critic, awarding a wine a big score can result in a boost in visibility. Many retailers cite the critic's name next to the numerical score in shelf talkers, the notes describing a wine that stores post on shelves, websites or emails to customers.

At Gary's Wine & Marketplace in Wayne, N.J., a shelf talker informed me that wine critic Luca Maroni had awarded a 98-point score to the 2014 Montalbera Piemonte Rosso Fuori Catalogo (\$15). I'd never heard of Mr. Maroni, but, according to Montalbera spokesperson Daniela Gasparri, he is an Italian wine critic who is "little known by the large foreign public but highly appreciated by insiders (buyers)," as she wrote in an email. And he appeared to have helped sales at Gary's: It was one of their best-selling reds in that price range, according to salesperson Bill Brown.

With further sleuthing, I found that Rome-born Mr. Maroni is a self-described "sensory analyst" who founded the Rome-based Taster of Wine magazine and rates wines according to a "pleasantness index" that

factors in a wine's "consistency, balance and integrity," with a possible score of up to 33 points awarded to each characteristic. He states his scoring method in a theorem: $PI=C+B+I$.

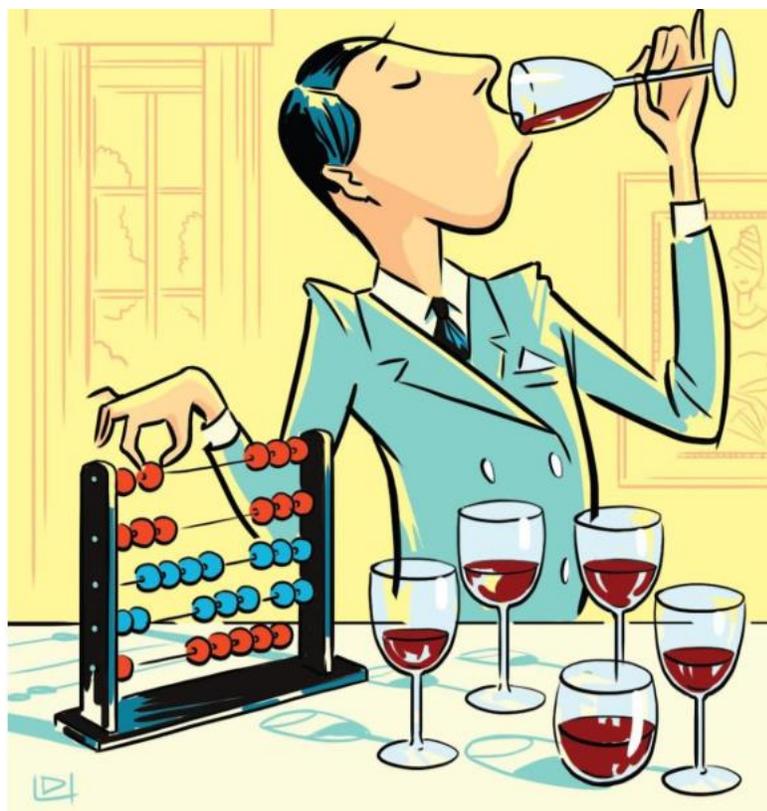


ILLUSTRATION: DAVE URBAN

Mr. Maroni is one of many wine critics whose numerical scores help retailers move wines off the shelves—though certain publications and critics are considered more reliable than others, according to retailers I spoke with. The three publications whose names were cited most frequently are Wine Spectator, Vinous and Robert Parker Wine Advocate, aka “Parker,” after the newsletter’s founder, Robert M. Parker, Jr. , who sold a majority stake to investors in 2012 and remains a minority shareholder today. Mr. Parker is no longer actively reviewing wines, but most of the retailers I talked with still refer to the publication’s scores as “Parker points.”

Mr. Parker and Wine Spectator are most often credited with popularizing the 100-point scoring scale, modeled after the 100-point grading system used in American schools. Many, many other publications, critics and wine professionals have adopted this system, including JamesSuckling.com, Wine Enthusiast, Burghound, James Halliday, Tastings and Decanter, an English magazine that switched from awarding stars (a maximum of five) in 2012. As Decanter managing editor Amy Wislocki explained in an email, the publication moved to the 100-point scale “so our scores would get more air time.”

I found points from all these sources cited in stores on a recent search for high scoring wines in and around New York, and retailers told me they understood some critics to be more generous than others. For example, Daniel Schmude, a regional manager at Bottle King in New Jersey, thought Mr. Suckling's scores tended to be higher than some. When I reached Mr. Suckling in France and asked for his reaction, he said there's been an "incredible" improvement in winemaking since he began rating wine in 1981, and quality was much higher overall. (See "Who's Keeping Score" at right for a summary of Mr. Suckling's judging criteria as well as those of the other leading wine critics and publications.)

Mr. Suckling noted that he had rated some 10% of the more than 17,000 wines he and his associates tasted last year as worthy of 95 points or more, which he defined as wines that made him want to "drink the entire bottle," he said. Mr. Suckling's percentage was double that of the team of reviewers at Vinous, who rated only 5% of the roughly 23,000 wines they tasted in the past year 96 points and higher. (The top point category of Vinous is 96-100; at most other publications, 95-100 represents the top of the scale.)

At Wine Spectator, tasters are even tougher: Only about 3% of the 16,000 wines its editors tasted last year rated 95 points or more, according to executive editor Thomas Matthews. He added, "I am certain we are the most conservative of the major critics."

Wine Spectator and Vinous are two of the publications that Tracy Maxon, wine buyer at Varmax Liquor Pantry in Port Chester, N.Y., trusts the most. She posts their scores in her store, along with an occasional score by Mr. Suckling if his number is particularly high. "But we taste all the wines too," she said.

Ms. Maxon's was one of half a dozen stores I visited while shopping for wines with big scores. I was looking for wines rated 95 points or more and priced less than \$50 a bottle, since wines in that price range are what most drinkers are likely to encounter. This proved no easy task: Wines with big numbers tend to cost quite a lot, sometimes hundreds of dollars. They also tend to be red. Very few whites were rated 95 points or more, and I couldn't find a single high-scoring rosé or Champagne. When I mentioned this to Ms. Maxon, she noted that Champagne is perhaps the only wine that is "immune" to wine scores. People tend to choose Champagne by brands, not numbers, she said.

I ended with a diverse group of 14 wines costing \$15-\$49 a bottle, all of which earned between 95 and 98 points. (Alas, there were no perfect 100s in my price range.) I purchased three whites and 11 reds to taste with a group of point-minded friends.

This group pays attention to numbers, especially if the wine is an unfamiliar one or “if it’s a gift for a friend,” said my friend Michelle. A wine with a score of 95 or higher always got my friends’ attention, and a high score plus a low price would almost always compel them to make a purchase. They reported that they don’t pay much attention to who’s awarding the number.

The wines I purchased came with high scores from various sources: Wine Spectator, Vinous, Robert Parker Wine Advocate, JamesSuckling.com and Mr. Maroni—whose 98-point 2014 Montalbera Piemonte Rosso Fuori Catalogo (\$15) proved to be the only one our group considered truly unworthy of its big number. It was a weirdly confected-tasting and also sharply tannic. My friend Alan “generously” gave it an 87-point score and nobody finished a glass, let alone a bottle (Mr. Suckling’s criterion for a 95-100 point wine).

The other wines ranged from the crisp and excellent 2016 Sigalas Santorini Assyrtiko (\$18) to the silky and seductive 2015 Bodegas Chacra Cincuenta y Cinco Pinot Noir (\$49), both 95-point bottlings. The 2014 Ferrer Bobet (\$45) from the Priorat that Mr. Suckling awarded 95 points was well made, with a warm berry-inflected nose, but was deemed “nothing great.” While the 2014 Tapiz “Alta Collection” Cabernet from Argentina, awarded 96 points by JamesSuckling.com, was delicious and eminently drinkable—not to mention a great find for \$15—no one thought it deserved its score.

The ripe, dense 2015 Château Puech-Haut Pic Saint Loup “La Closerie du Pic” (\$30) from the Languedoc that the Wine Advocate gave 96 points was also delicious, though not profound. “I don’t think that the point scale is valid for lower priced wines,” my friend Alan observed. He thought that wine rated 95 points and above should have an additional dimension beyond mere deliciousness.



From left: 2015 Bodegas Chacra Cincuenta y Cinco Pinot Noir; 2016 Sigalas Santorini Assyrtiko; 2016 Château Doisy-Daëne White Bordeaux Sec; 2014 Tapiz "Alta Collection" Cabernet Mendoza; 2015 Château Puech-Haut Pic Saint Loup "La Closerie du Pic" PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/ THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, STYLING BY ANNE CARDENAS

I had purchased the 2016 Château Doisy-Daëne White Bordeaux Sec (\$26)—quite good, with a vivid floral aroma—based on a shelf talker in a Total Wine store stating that it was awarded 95 points by Wine Spectator, only to learn later that it actually received a score of 89-92 from that publication. As Mr. Matthews of Wine Spectator noted, the number posted in the store was inflated. This is sadly not an uncommon occurrence and something buyers should beware when shopping by points. “It’s infuriating to us,” said Mr. Matthews. When reached for comment, David Trone, co-owner and co-founder of Total Wine, speculated that it could have been a mix-up in signage, confusing one vintage for another. (When brought to their attention the shelf talker was promptly corrected.) But all points aside, this wine was delicious and a good buy.

The majority of the wines we tasted were good—with exceptions, such as the confected 2014 Montalbera and a deeply unpleasant 2012 Chateau Malbec Bordeaux that Decanter unaccountably gave 95 points. Our favorites delivered pleasure, not to mention bang for the buck. If they hadn’t come with those scores, we might have overlooked the Patagonian Pinot Noir, the cheap Chilean Cabernet and an obscure wine from the Languedoc.

Perhaps the high scores accomplished exactly what retailers, critics and winemakers hoped that they would: They compelled me to buy the wines. But a high score can only inspire a single purchase. The quality of what's in the bottle, not the number bestowed on it, is what will compel me to buy a wine again.

**2015 Bodegas Chacra Cincuenta y Cinco
Pinot Noir (\$49)**

Italian nobleman Piero Incisa della Rocchetta founded his Patagonian estate in 2004 and set about producing single-vineyard Pinot Noirs. This lithe, lovely red, awarded 95 points by the Wine Advocate, comes from a vineyard planted in 1955. It's marked by notes of bright red cherry and spice.



PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/ THE WALL STREET JOURNAL