

ROBERT M. PARKER: *Parker's Wine Bargains: The World's Greatest Wine Values Under \$25*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2009, 512 pp., ISBN: 1439101906 (paperback), \$17.99.

[Disclosure: I am the co-author of *The Wine Trials*, another print guide to inexpensive wines. Our first edition was released the year before the publication of *Parker's Wine Bargains*, and our second edition, *The Wine Trials 2010*, was released afterward. While this gives me a unique perspective, it also might be viewed as a source of bias. In the interest of fairness, the editors also offered Parker the opportunity to review *The Wine Trials* for this journal, and he declined. While no author can claim to be perfectly free from bias, I hope that you judge the integrity of my review on its merits.]

Even if the exaggerated style of winemaking championed by the critic Robert M. Parker, Jr., has fallen out of fashion amongst wine geeks these days, there are a hundred legacies that will endure for generations beyond the particulars of the man's palate: his points.

Robert Parker was not the first wine critic to employ a 100-point scale, but it was he that etched the paradigm of attaching numbers to wine into the collective consciousness of the gustatory media. Parker's leading competitors in America—Stephen Tanzer, *Wine Spectator*, *Wine & Spirits*, *Wine Enthusiast*—all currently use 100-point rating scales. Even the divergent foreign competition now gravitates toward other functionally numerical forms of secondary-school-test-mark mimicry: letter grades from A to F, points out of 10 or 20, glasses out of three, stars out of five.

If attaching numbers to wine turns out to be Parker's main legacy, it's a major one. A few decades ago, the wine writer's primary role was merely to describe wines. But the purpose of the wine writer after Parker is to quantify their quality. The few prominent modern wine critics whose reviews *don't* revolve around numerical ratings are in the minority, and they tend to be interpreted by some observers as an anti-Parker faction—even when they have no intention to be. You know that a framework has become canonical when anything in the field that doesn't adopt it is understood as an attempt to refute it.

Canonization can have a stifling effect on the developing talent in the enterprise of writing. The literary scholar Harold Bloom has suggested that the canon can be a paralyzing force in the lives of up-and-coming poets, who struggle with the task of differentiating themselves from the same voices that inspired them to pursue poetry. Read too much, in other words, and you might convince yourself that there's nothing new to write. The novelist Benjamin Kunkel, asked by London's *Observer* whether he was influenced by the more famous novelist Dave Eggers, expressed that tension in a way that will be familiar to many writers: "Everyone I know has read him, but I don't read very much contemporary fiction. I wanted very much to create my own sound, and I didn't want to feel that I was either running to meet him or deliberately running away from him."

Not reading Eggers is a choice that any fiction writer can make. But not reading Parker is hardly an option for the modern wine writer: the shelves of most upmarket wine stores are strewn with past and present *Wine Advocate* shelf-talkers, which function like permanent

retrospective installations of Parker's work. So we have no choice but to engage, and in so doing, we often divide: into those who run to meet Parker, perhaps with deference to Jacques Chirac and decades' worth of popular wisdom from industry veterans; and the increasing numbers that run away from him, perhaps with complaints of global convergence on a big, oaky, high-alcohol style of winemaking, the marginalization of terroir, and maybe just a tinge of jealousy toward the man who made millions tasting wine.

If contemporary critics are split on the merits of Parker's exaggerated palate, though, their revealed behavior of replication shows there to be supermajority support for his points methodology. Parker points were first imagined, in the spirit of Ralph Nader, as the guerilla ammunition for the consumers camping out in the vineyards, their last line of defense against wine bullshit. The funny thing is that the vision of independence from producers that originally inspired *Wine Advocate* seems to have been completely lost on the modern copycat magazines, many of which display full-page ads from the same producers whose wines are rated. Some even solicit application fees to be considered for wine awards. (Ashenfelter et al., 2010). *Decanter*, for instance, charges up to £103.70 or US\$156 per bottle.

Meanwhile, to his great credit, Parker has more or less maintained his independence. He still doesn't accept ads from wineries, and he still makes his money by selling subscriptions and books. Although, inexplicably, he doesn't always taste blind—and although he was recently embarrassed by a lavish junket bestowed by the Argentine wine industry lobby (later documented by wine writer Tyler Colman) upon his right-hand man, Jay Miller—Parker's core principles appear to be almost as unique in the industry as they were when first introduced 30 years ago.

Why, then, has he left behind his points system in his newest book and first foray into the world of inexpensive wine authorship, *Parker's Wine Bargains*, a 512-page tome whose mission is to reveal “the world's best wine values under \$25”?

The proximate answer might lie in the fact that the book doesn't mention specific vintages but instead reviews each bottle in general terms. Readers are referred to the “Vintage Smarts” section at the beginning of each chapter for more specific guidance. But why not at least attach each wine to a point *range*, as Parker has often done with barrel tastings?

Are inexpensive wines simply not worthy of Parker points?

Or, perhaps, is the omission of vintages and scores, along with burying “Vintage Smarts” in the less-read introductory text, connected with the decision not to year-stamp the book's cover, which, in turn, is a response by Simon & Schuster to the troubled bookstore industry's current preoccupation with reducing inventory risk, one of its few levers of cost-cutting?

Another possibility, and a more sympathetic one, I think, is that Parker wanted his inexpensive wine guide to be more accessible to everyday wine shoppers, not just the sort of wine geeks that subscribe to his website and buy his 1,536-page *Parker's Wine Buyer's*

Guide No. 7. Perhaps he saw the potential for the specificity of his 100-point scale (and maybe even his discussion of individual vintages) to be off-putting to the average consumer who is less in search of a wine priced in the hundreds of dollars that needs to be cellared for a decade, and more in search of a good, affordable bottle to drink with tonight's meal—in other words, probably about 99% of wine drinkers.

Whatever the reasons behind the decision to leave out Parker points, I think it fair to assume that *Parker's Wine Bargains* aims to be more accessible and useful to the everyday wine consumer than one of his monster tomes. The back cover calls the book a “handy guide to low-priced wines for both everyday drinking and special occasions.” It's exciting, the prospect of the world's most famous wine critic reaching out, for the first time, to an audience of unprecedented breadth. To what extent does the book achieve these aims?

Taken as a book to be read, not as a guide with which to buy wine, *Parker's Wine Bargains* is an impressive tour through the landscape. More than 3,000 wines appear in the book, each with a short review of a sentence or two. That's quite a number, and it makes for good browsing. So do the concise, helpful introductions to each region, most of which seem aimed at a very general audience, showing welcome restraint. If you know Parker and the critics that work for him, then you know more or less what to expect from the review writing: it's always confident, often of a certain sternness, and generally laden with fruit and vegetable adjectives, some obscure, some not.

As for the coverage, although 178 pages of the reviews in *Parker's Wine Bargains*—almost 40%—come from France, that's to be expected. This is Parker, after all. I admire the fact that Argentina (29 pages), Germany (24 pages), Austria (18 pages), Portugal (13 pages), and Greece (7 pages) are given the treatment they deserve: not as passing novelties, but as regions to be taken seriously, especially in the realm of under-\$25 wines. Washington State gets a surprising 11 pages, almost half as many as California's 24; Oregon gets only three.

Spain is the most slighted region, with a disappointing 20 pages that include just six red wines from Rioja. I consider Rioja reds to be some of the best values in all of the Old World, particularly when it comes to bottle aging before release. It's common to find five-year-old (or, in practice, even six- or seven-year-old) Gran Reservas under \$25. Of course, is well established that Rioja is hardly Parker's style. When he visited Logroño in November 2009 for the Wine Future-Rioja conference—the first time he set foot in Spain since 1972, according to his biographer, Elin McCoy—he chose to hold a tasting of 18 Grenache-based wines (only five of them Spanish), instead of the local Tempranillo for which Rioja is famous. McCoy wrote that this choice “angered local winemakers” so much that “some boycotted the event.”

While a preference for intense, heavy styles is to be expected from a Parker book, the marginalization of dry rosé cannot be overlooked in a guide to inexpensive wine. Even finding a rosé wine in *Parker's Wine Bargains* is a major challenge; so far as I can tell, there is no index or list of them, and in one of the book's several major organizational flaws,

you're stuck flipping through 512 pages and keeping your eye out for pink shading (as opposed to red or gray) in the tiny glass schematic next to the wine name.

Three-quarters of wine produced in Provence is rosé, so that chapter, written by David Schildknecht, might seem a natural place to start. But Provençal rosé is dismissed wholesale by Schildknecht as an “ocean of pink plonk,” whose “existence” is blamed largely on the “uncritical comportment” of the “tourists who flock there” (although the “natives” share some blame as well). As a result, only the “small upper echelon” of rosés is “interesting.” How ignorant, those vacationers on the seaside who gaze out at the waves and simply *enjoy* the refreshing local wine with their grilled seafood instead of complaining about how *uninteresting* it is!

Of the more than 1,000 French wines under \$25 recommended in the book, just seven are rosés from Provence, and even these seem chosen for their un-rosé-like qualities: one displays a “white-wine-like personality”; one has “carnal undertones...impressively concentrated”; another is “meaty.” One wonders whether Schildknecht has sworn off bread and salad as “plonk,” too, and eats only boar and venison, even at the beach. It would behoove Parker to assign Provence to a critic who actually enjoys the region’s archetypal style: not “carnal” rosé, but rather crisp, thirst-quenching, *rosé*-like rosé, the savior of many a summer afternoon for the fishermen of Marseille, for the billionaires of Antibes, for the vacationing winemakers of Bordeaux and Burgundy. To everything, there is a season.

That principle is better embodied by one of Parker’s other critics, Mark Squires, who covers Portugal and Greece. Parker, like any good businessman tackling growth, has been delegating much of his work to an expanding cast of characters, and each of them writes differently. One of the benefits of this approach is the work of Squires, whose open-minded palate and minimalist prose turn out to be the most appropriate of anyone’s, including Parker’s, for a nonvintage guide to inexpensive wine.

Not only is Squires’ chapter on Portuguese wines versatile—for instance, rightly lauding both the complex concentration of Alentejo and the refreshing acidity of vinho verde—but it’s also relentlessly accessible. In 99 reviews, Squires cites only five specific fruit flavors (blueberry, grape, plum, lemon, and lime), focusing instead on basic properties like acidity, tannin, oak, and sweetness. Given that the review is supposed to be generalizing about several different vintages, this choice makes a lot of sense. Instead of communicating the details of his *own* experience of a given wine, Squires predicts what the *reader’s* experience of the wine is likely to be, even if the reader tastes a vintage that Squires hasn’t, and even if the reader doesn’t speak wine-speak. He writes, in other words, with the book’s purpose and constraints in mind.

Just as importantly, he also knows when to stop writing. Squires’ reviews average about 15 words, roughly half the book’s norm. Behold his entire review of Quinta do Ameal Loureiro: “Bright, somewhat mouthwatering, and delicate, as most Loureiros are.” Too obvious? Only to a real snob. Helpful, even to a wine geek? Absolutely.

Immediately following Portugal is South Africa, where Schildknecht surpasses Squires' chapter-long specific-adjective count in a single review, his fourth of the chapter, which describes Backsberg's Klein Babylons Toren as having a "rich, polished, barrel-enhanced mélange of tobacco, sealing wax, plum, blackberry, humus, iodine, underbrush, and sweetly floral notes, all suggesting a Bordeaux wine that would cost at least three times its price." Ah yes, that unmistakable sealing wax-underbrush-iodine profile of Bordeaux costing at least \$63. Maybe that's what those ignorant tourists in Provence should be yearning for.

By the end of Schildknecht's eighth South Africa review—we're still only on the second page of the chapter—he has also mentioned quince, wet wool, lime zest, mulberries, sage, fresh green beans, apple, nuts, lemon, rose hip, more flowers, saddle leather, licorice, "smoky black tea," vanilla, "lightly cooked blackberry and blueberry," mint (twice), tobacco (twice), black pepper, sap, "dried black currants," tar, (just plain) tea, baking spices, black olives, acacia, peach, cress, and white pepper. Later in the chapter, he identifies such pomposities as "salted grapefruit," grapefruit rind, winter pear, "restrained gooseberry," milk chocolate, roasted red peppers, "smoky Latakia tobacco," beef jerky, soy, baked apple, tangerine zest, "salt-tinged nuts and grains," and "tomato foliage."

If the small size, friendly cover, and omission of vintages and point scores in *Parker's Wine Bargains* invites in a new audience of everyday wine drinkers, then adjectives like that cast them right back out again. This spotty but persistent out-of-touchness with the mainstream audience is the central tension of *Parker's Wine Bargains*. Consider, for instance, how little attention is paid to dry sparkling wine, a category much sought out by American consumers, whether as a dinner-party apéritif or for one of the "special occasions" mentioned on the book's back cover. The past few years have seen an explosion of widely available *méthode traditionnelle* wines under \$25 from Spain, California, and Washington State. Yet of the 3,000 bottles listed in *Parker's Wine Bargains*, only 19 (0.6%) are dry sparkling wines, of which only three are Spanish Cavas and none are American.

But that's not the worst of the out-of-touchness. Inclusions and exclusions are always debatable in a wine guide, but the disorganization and poor indexing of *Parker's Wine Bargains* harm the book's usefulness to almost any reader. Wines are categorized only by region, and within region, they're alphabetized by producer. Nowhere are they indexed or listed by style or color, whether red, white, or rosé; by intensity or sweetness; or by any other metric of choice, other than one (puny) list of sparkling wines. These gaps would be problematic even in a book of 100 wines, but in a book of 3,000, they're disastrous. Whether you're shopping for wine to drink with oysters, grilled fish, steak, or dessert, it's not clear how or where you should begin your search.

The natural thing to do might be to flip to the brief "Best of the Best" section, which appears at the book's conclusion. But there, the editing is sloppy (Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay appears as one of the best "medium-bodied red wines"), and the holes in coverage are baffling enough to transcend the facially defensible subjectivity of the undertaking. For instance: although the Mâcon region is described as "effectively the world

capital...of Chardonnay and arguably home to the world's greatest values from that grape," apparently that's not good enough—not a single Burgundy, white or red, makes the “Best of the Best.” Of the eight Pinot Noirs in the section, one is French, but it's from Aude, in the Languedoc, and seven are from the New World (mostly New Zealand).

No Beaujolais—neither village nor cru—makes it into the “Best of the Best” either, even though in that chapter's introduction, Schildknecht writes (now inexplicably sounding like an Italian translating his native language into English) of the region's “sensational quality-price rapport.” In fact, the only two red subdivisions of “Best of the Best” are “medium-bodied” and “full-bodied.” Here, as in Provence, the message is clear: light-bodied just doesn't cut it, and the best bang for your buck comes not from the styles and regions that are naturally inexpensive—Provençal rosé, red Beaujolais—but rather from New World imitations of more expensive, concentrated styles of wine. Squires' dissident voice is lost in the chorus, and the “Best of the Best” is plagued by imbalance.

The sloppy editing of that section points toward a broader sloppiness throughout the book. For example, one wine—the Cuvée Alexandre Apalta Vineyard Merlot from Casa Lapostolle, a well-known Chilean producer—is accidentally listed in *Parker's Wine Bargains* twice, once in the Chile chapter and once in the Argentina chapter, with two completely different reviews. It's described on page 84 (Chile) as having an “expressive bouquet of smoke, pencil lead, spice box, black cherry, and black currant,” while it's described on page 14 (Argentina) as having “an attractive nose of black currant, blueberry, vanilla, and clove.” Only the black currant appears to have made the trip over the Andes.

Certainly it's puzzling how Jay Miller, author of both of these chapters and an expert on both regions, could not have caught this mistake. But rather than overreacting to that fact, we should focus instead on the larger implications of the differences between the two reviews: not only is the whole business of attaching fruit adjectives (never mind point scores) to wines problematic in the *intersubjective* sense (i.e. what you smell and taste might be unrelated to what I smell and taste from the same wine), it's even problematic in the *limited subjective* sense: the same person—even a renowned wine expert like Jay Miller—smells and tastes different things in the same wine from one day to the next (Goldstein et al., 2008). This is a problem whose treatment is insufficient in all of Parker's literature, and indeed, in most wine literature. Richard Quandt's “On Wine Bullshit” and Raffi Khatchadourian's fascinating *New Yorker* article on commercial flavor factories, “The Taste Makers,” are both important pieces of reading for anyone who still takes most of these fruit adjectives seriously.

But the biggest flaw in *Parker's Wine Bargains* lies not in its poor organization or arbitrary adjectives, but rather in the fact that many of the wines reviewed in the book are unavailable in the marketplace. It's not clear whether or not there's a production or breadth-of-distribution minimum for inclusion—none is mentioned in the introduction—but a good portion of the recommendations turn out to be practically useless, even to the savviest of Internet-ordering readers. Take, for instance, the listing of Veldenzer

Grafschafter-Sonnenberg feinherb, a Riesling from a Mosel producer named Günther Steinmetz. If this wine is currently available for sale at any store in the United States, this reader, at least, was unable to locate it after an exhaustive search, which included a lot of time on Google and an inquiry with *Mosel Wine Merchant*, Steinmetz's importer, who told me that 2007 was its last imported vintage, of which only 21 cases were distributed, all of them in Oregon and Washington State.

Some of the 100-point cult wines in *Parker's Wine Buyer's Guide No. 7* may be famously elusive, but if wines recommended in *Parker's Wine Bargains*, whose stated mission is to recommend bargain wines for "everyday drinking," are impossible to find, even in America's largest cities, it brings the book's central function into question. What is Parker's purpose, exactly?

Certainly his longstanding success does not derive from his ability to catalog the current inventory of your local supermarket, nor does it derive his ability to pick out blackberry or tobacco from a wine's bouquet. It does not derive from the consistency of his observations, from his stated purpose of sorting out the good wine from the bad, or from any other of kind consumer advocacy. It comes, rather, from Parker's talent for escapism, from his confident use of superlatives to capture the sensory imagination.

For most readers, flipping through an issue of *Wine Advocate* and reading about 100-point wines is like flipping through an issue of *Motor Trend* and looking at pictures of a Lamborghini: it's an act somewhere between aspiration and entertainment. You're not really considering whether the Diablo's 5992 cc of displacement would be sufficient to get you where you're going quickly and comfortably. You're not even looking to buy a car. You're reading the magazine because imagining yourself behind the wheel of a Lamborghini recreates the seventh-grade psyche of perfect possibility that is still buried somewhere in your weary folds of cortical memory.

Teenagers feel immortal, people always say. They think the finish really lasts forever.

It is the mix of idolatry and attainability that make Parker's prose so compelling: these wines that win 100 points are described as Platonic forms, yet they're also physical objects with real molecular structures; they're liquids that can, at least in theory, come into contact with your mouth. Your local wine store doesn't have the object of worship, and you couldn't afford it anyway, but that's hardly the point. It's the ontology that matters: the idea that some wines really *do* win 100, that it is concretely possible to taste perfection, is irresistible. The very thing that invalidates Parker's writing as nonfiction is what redeems it as fiction: his topic isn't wine. It's human contact with the divine.

Many of the people within the wine world that have become increasingly disgusted with so-called "Parkerization"—the tinkering with a style of winemaking to bring out more fruit, more oak, and more alcohol in hopes of improving a Parker score—would paint the celebrated critic as a power-hungry dictator with designs on reshaping the wine world just to please his palate and fortify his wealth. But to adopt that view is to misunderstand the fundamental human mechanics of Parker's vast appeal. Winemakers may feel obliged to

please him, but consumers are under no obligation to follow him. If you want to understand Parker, look in the mirror.

Robert Parker is no dictator. He is a storyteller. The magnetism of his prose is that of J.K. Rowling's, too: you're first presented with a set of familiar facts and situations, and then, slowly, you're seduced into suspending reason and believing in the perfectly impossible. Escape into a Parker review, and for a few sentences, there you are, back in junior high, the great critic's palate—and yours, too—cured of its nagging mortality. In this counterfactual place, there is no perceptual bias, just perception. There is no confidence interval, just confidence. Parker's 100-point wine is Gatsby's green light, the orgiastic ghost of taste's future, the tongue a sudden lattice of infinite resolution, the nose a sudden instrument of preternatural whiff.

Take away the Parker points—a slight disturbance that might at some point have seemed merely cosmetic to the book's editors, like a font change—and that alternate reality suddenly slips away, like the memory of a dream in the seconds after you awaken. All that's left in the sober morning light is an iterating network of fruit-adjective configurations in black and red type violating 512 sheets of white paper.

It's not easy to be a wine writer after Parker. This fact, even Parker must face.

Robin Goldstein
Fearless Critic Media

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