

Wine Doc Debunks Points Rating System
Tina Caputo's "Robert Parker's Bitch" is a 95

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EARLIER THIS YEAR, I had the pleasure of dining with Tina Caputo, the young and savvy editor-in-chief of the Santa Rosa-based Vineyard & Winery Management magazine. At the time, Caputo had just wrapped up a documentary, "Robert Parker's Bitch: The Wine Media's Influence on Winemaking," which she wrote and directed last summer in the Napa Valley. It was originally produced as a presentation for the American Wine Society, but has since garnered a small but devoted following on the Web.

As the title notes, the 26-minute film examines how the numerical ratings of two super critics -- the Wine Advocate's Robert Parker and James Laube of the Wine Spectator -- have come to control an industry and shape a global wine style. In the documentary, which features interviews with veteran winemakers and balanced-wine crusaders Randy Dunn and Tom Eddy, the critics are charged with having palates that wield too much power.

More to the point: They like bold, ripe, high-alcohol wines -- probably because they hit you over the head and stand out in tasting lineup. As a result, they give wines made in that style coveted scores of 90 points and higher. So, winery owners frustrated with a distribution system that keeps them at a distance from their consumers may pressure winemakers to produce a big Parker darling -- or not let the cellar door hit them on the way out. We've all heard the rumors.

If this is true, it would certainly explain why the average alcohol level of Napa Valley grapes has risen from 12.5 percent in 1978 to 14.8 percent in 2001, according to Napa winemaker and consultant George Vierra. It would also explain why it is even harder to detect differences between wines produced from the county's different appellations.

Nature or pressure?

As the film points out, the industry tries to tell us California's warm climate and terroir create those high-alcohol fruit bombs, or that new, super yeasts are capable of withstanding 16 percent alcohol during fermentation, rather than dying off as they once might have. But isn't it possible at a time when wine is competitive and consumers don't trust their own palates, wineries will do whatever it takes for "points-driven immortality?"

As Karen MacNeil, chairwoman of wine studies at the Culinary Institute of America, states in the film, wine has been around for 8,000 years and for more than 7,970 of those years it functioned without a numerical system. But, she is quick to shoo the pointed

finger of blame off Parker -- she writes for his Web site -- and instead challenge California winemakers to produce powerful wines that retain their elegance and ageability. I agree there.

On a personal note, I can't imagine assigning a number to a wine. That's like telling rap music fans that the new Death Cab for Cutie album is a solid 8. What does that mean to them? Rather, I try to tell readers that a particular Zinfandel is made more in the Primitivo style, or it's one from Lodi that tastes like you dumped a bottle of Popov into a jar of Smucker's. If someone asks me to rate it within those confines, I'm happy to get all numerical on them.

Last week, I called up Caputo to dig a little deeper into the issue. Here's what my detective work uncovered.

Corkheads: First off, to MacNeil's point, do you think we can have power with elegance in California? If so, who is doing this well?

Caputo: Yes, there are wineries out there that have good balance. Golden Eye Winery is a good example. Marimar Estate (for their Pinot Noir) and Rocha Family Vineyards. They all have power without toppling over the edge.

Corkheads: What, if anything, has the wine blogosphere done to take back the power? Are these citizen critics shifting the focus away from Parker and the Spectator?

Caputo: They are having an effect but it's more of a generational one. People in their 20s and early 30s are paying more attention to what's on the blogs and to word of mouth when it comes to finding wines they like. They (the citizen wine bloggers) don't have a retail store like Gary Vaynerchuk, so through things like Twitter they are posting wines they like and helping people think for themselves. And they don't assign scores to the wines.

Corkheads: In your research, did you talk to any winemakers who confirmed that they were pressured to make a big wine?

Caputo: I've heard stories of people making wines in a particular style because that's what their owners want. Also, there's this whole controversy in the industry right now as to what constitutes physiological (grape) ripeness. Some people say you need to wait until the grapes are at a (sugar level of) 28 brix while others says it's at verasion that they reach maturity. Or they blame it on the hot climate in California. I just got back from Rioja where I tasted plenty of delicious, balanced wines with low alcohol. And they don't exactly live in the tundra.

Corkheads: Have you heard from Parker or anyone from the Wine Spectator? What do they think of the film?

Caputo: Tom Matthews of the Spectator contacted me about five months ago saying he was curious and wanted to see it. But I never heard back from him. I'm waiting for the review to come out in the Spectator but I doubt it will.

The problem with this whole thing is not that people are making wines in this (big) style. The thing that disturbs me about it is that some winemakers are being pressured to make wines in a style to suit two critics as opposed to what they were dreaming about making when they were in school at UC Davis.