Setting quality categories for particular markets

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Introduction
Vintage 1999 has produced a record crush in excess of 1,100,000 tonnes (Winemakers' Federation of Australia 1999). With increased plantings estimated at 9000 hectares over the next year the industry will have little difficulty achieving a projected production figure of 1,283,687 tonnes by 2003 (Winemakers' Federation of Australia 1999). Both the Winemakers' Federation of Australia and the Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation support the view that the increased production will be absorbed by the Australian and International markets.

The important assumption with the upswing in production is that it is led by consumer demand. An Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures from 1998 reveal that current wine consumption is 18.7 litres per capita. This is a 10 year high and reflects a 5.9% five year growth increase. Also, research by A.C. Nielsen (December 1998) indicates that the premium greater than $10 dollar red wine market continues to grow. The consumer is setting demands for particular markets.

Definitions
For the purpose of this discussion 'particular markets' will be defined as the broad market quality categories of super premium, premium, semi-premium, commercial etc., and 'setting quality categories' will be the mechanics of knowing the requirements of different markets, particularly in terms of quality and quantity, and setting up systems to meet these requirements. With particular emphasis on grape growing, this paper is about the assessment of the potential quality of grapes in the vineyard, where quality is defined as appropriateness for end use, to ensure the best end use for each block. If quality categories are set for particular markets then vineyards can be accurately assessed and ultimately managed so that grapes can be grown to the specifications of a particular market. After assessment, the characteristics of the vineyards can be defined and translated to guideline specifications. If vineyards are managed to specification of a given quality category then the required tonnes of that quality category should be produced (Figure 1).

Why?
Every company has products in particular markets that they must meet the requirements of in both quality and quantity. These requirements, particularly quantity, are arrived at by the long-term sales forecasts. Moreover, the breakdown of available tonnages into suitability for particular markets, or appropriateness for end use, will determine how effectively the company will meet the requirements of their products in particular markets. The winery must know what needs to be grown to meet market demands and be able to communicate this to the grower by particular categories.

How?
How are the quality categories to service the demands of these particular markets arrived at? How are the available tonnes assigned to these categories? Moving beyond historic assessment of wine quality to only assessing potential in the vineyard, Southcorp Wines want to have a clear picture of the breakdown of available tonnes into quality categories. To this end it has developed a scale to assign a numerical value to quality categories. This system is known as the Grape Value system.

The values are arrived at by the winemaking department using the following criteria:

• Determination of the most valuable products. By comparing the cost of goods, wholesale price and contribution margin of each product, the products can be ranked in terms of value to the company.
• Winemaker adjustment—the resulting ranking is adjusted if necessary to reflect perceived quality and style.
There is a broad categorisation from A–E to indicate particular markets; then within these categories, products are ranked further and aligned with a numerical value. The numerical values are relative to each other. The scope of the ranking allows quality categories to be discussed independently of end use (Table 1).

Leaving value and contribution margins aside, the assigned values can then be used as a tool to discuss relative qualities of parcels of fruit. Assigning a Grape Value to a batch of fruit/vineyard has three benefits:

- Allows relative quality of vineyards to be compared, without focusing on product/end use.
- Facilitates uniform batching of vineyards.
- Allows an accurate account of grape quality, separate from wine quality/end use.

### Vineyard Assessment

Using the Grape Value rankings in conjunction with a vineyard assessment sheet allows an accurate quality assessment and record of grapes in the vineyard. The objective of vineyard assessment is to provide an indication of the potential winegrape quality.

**What does vineyard assessment achieve?**

- Assesses potential for quality in the vineyard just prior to harvest.
- Batching of uniform parcels to maximise end use potential which assists in facilitating winery operations.
- Identifies differences in quality from one vineyard/block to the next.
- Provides reasons to growers as to why their fruit is batched with another.
- A more consistent evaluation of Grape Value (GV).

**What is assessed/measured and how?**

**Analytical—Objective**

- These are fruit measurements such as the standard maturity sampling analysis Baume, TA, pH.
- Specialised fruit measurements carried out in project work GG assay, total phenolics, total anthocyanin, berry weight.

**Field—Subjective**

- Growing tips
- Lateral growth
- Shoot length
- Periderm development
- Leaf condition
- Fruit exposure
- Colour in berries
- Flavour description
- Tannin description
- Skin chewiness

The weighting for each parameter and the relationship to Grape Value is a decision individual viticulturists/winemakers/wine companies must make for themselves. Which parameters have the most effect on wine quality or end use? The weightings on the Southcorp Wines assessment sheet are the result of considerable field work by viticulturists and winemakers. These weightings can vary between variety and also by variety between regions. This is due to the concept that grape composition can be affected by the manipulation of some cultural practices but ultimately individual regions have a tendency to produce grapes which are appropriate for only a portion of the total style spectrum (Figure 2).
The measure of quality is not just about achieving a required target Baume. Flavour as well as sugar ripeness is important when producing premium fruit which has depth, concentration and length. This measurement may be subjective, but as the vineyard assessors become more familiar with exactly what they are tasting and recording, and at following up end results and comparing that to vineyard assessment notes, the more accurate the vineyard assessments are becoming. Individuals from Southcorp Wines can independently assess vineyards and be within one Grape Value point of each other. However, the aim of vineyard assessment must not be forgotten—it is not ultimately to make all decisions in the vineyard, but to record an assessment of wine grape quality in the vineyard and to facilitate batching for the winery.

What does this mean for the Southcorp Wines winegrower?

The majority of contracts in the Central Region are based on rewarding growers for quality. Quality is the appropriateness for end use and growers are expected to produce fruit at a certain standard in accordance with the products Southcorp produces, at a pre-determined minimum Grape Value (GV). By setting quality categories via the Grape Value system and Vineyard Assessment the grower and the winery have a common goal. The contractual agreement gives the grower the security to grow what is required and it also gives the winery security of supply to meet long-term forecasts. This document is the foundation of a successful relationship between grower and winery and should lead to a 'win/win' situation. It is not just a matter of stipulating a product that a grower should be aiming to achieve but a mutual understanding of expectation aiming to:

- Meet Southcorp Wines specifications of Baume/TA/pH
- Achieve a pre-determined minimum Grape Value (consider understanding what the potential of the vineyard is and appropriateness for end use).
- Meet quality control standards.

Quality Assurance Program

If the Australian wine industry is to continue its successful expansion into international markets, winegrowers and wine companies must continuously strive to optimise quality. Quality must be built-in from start to finish, which means that winegrowers and wine companies need to work co-operatively in improving our wine quality. Quality Assurance is that winegrowers and wine companies need to work co-operatively in improving our wine quality. Quality must be built-in from start to finish, which means that winegrowers and wine companies need to work co-operatively in improving our wine quality. Quality Assurance must be a team effort that sets quality categorisation of available grapes will provide clear discussion and common goals with and for the wine grower and wine company.

Quality Assurance Program allows for a consistent assessment of wine grape quality and is a numerical ranking that allows quality to be discussed independent of end use.

The Grape Value System in conjunction with vineyard assessment not only facilitates breakdown of available tonnages into suitability for particular markets, but also provides clear discussion and common goals with and for the wine grower and wine company.

Vineyard assessment allows for a consistent assessment of Grape Value and gives a record of wine grape quality and how a Grape Value was arrived at.

Many parameters are subjective and the weighting they are given as to their importance on grape and wine quality is an individual decision.

Ultimately a batch of fruit will have a vineyard Grape Value and initial Grape Value (grape quality) and a preliminary and final Grape Value (wine quality).

Using these quality categories will determine the breakdown of available tonnes into suitability for particular markets.

Conclusion

Industry and market knowledge are paramount for business survival. Knowing and understanding the primary resource of grapes available to a company will enable that company to ascertain if they will satisfy their particular markets. A system that sets quality categorisation of available grapes will assist companies to satisfy the market. With good grower relationships, clear quality category specifications and grower vineyard knowledge, individual vineyards can be managed for end use to the benefit of both grower and winery.

References


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