The Australian wine show system: a SWOT analysis

James Halliday
WinePros, Vic.

This keynote address presents a SWOT analysis—strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats—of the Australian wine show system.

**Strengths**

A history stretching back over three centuries
The history of wine shows does go back a long way—over three centuries. That's one of those funny things that we do now, when we really mean 150 years. But it's striking, when reading back, how many of the issues today were in fact issues back in the 1800s—perhaps of slightly different dimension, but they certainly existed.

George Wyndham wrote to the Royal Agricultural Society (RAS) in Sydney in the 1880s, complaining bitterly about the fact that they were now awarding mere parchment certificates instead of gold—meaning real gold—silver and bronze medals. He also urged that the Royal Sydney Wine Show be held not in February, which was in the middle of vintage, but be moved to the far more sensible time of May. A hundred and fifty years on, nothing has been done about that. You can't rush these decisions, obviously!

There were also quite striking differences of opinion between the councillors of the RAS and the stewards running the show about the minimum volumes for entry.

Broadly speaking, it has worked very well, and certainly better than the system(s) in operation in any other country
The system has worked well over this period of time: the frequency of shows; their structure, which is, or has been very logical; the experience of Australian wine show judges; and the basically cooperative environment which, at least in recent times in the shows, has existed both between the judges themselves and between the judges, the stewards and the committees.

There is a legion of tales from earlier of battles royal between judges. In Brisbane, three of the judges got into such a tizz on the first day that they stalked out and refused to speak to each other at all during the ensuing three days—not even what time they would be in the lobby and whether they were going to get a bus or a taxi. There was also the famous Peter Lehmann line that 'I can take off more points than you can add on' when becoming involved in a fairly heated discussion. There was a time when the chairman of judges at a particular show went to sleep in the morning, having had a few quick snorts to start the day off, and was still asleep when the judges went to lunch. When they came back they found that he'd rejudgeted the classes of that morning for them, with very different results. But those are things in the past, and one always goes for the headlines in that sort of circumstance.

It is transparently open to the whole industry to participate
The system is a transparent one, and the fact that some makers choose not to enter does not in any way, shape or form indicate a flaw in the system. It's simply a choice situation. It should be widely recognised that show results are but one indicator of a wine and its potential. There are many other ways of coming to a view about that wine, and certainly a single take or even a multiple take from a wine show isn't the end of the road.

It can and does serve two masters to a surprising degree
There are two master issues which will inevitably be discussed today—improving the breed on the one hand; promotional marketing on the other. Wine shows should continue to be, as they were originally conceived to be, for the improvement of the breed. This view disagrees with Brian Croser in his attitudes or in his initiatives at least, taken with the Adelaide Show, to try to introduce price classes that are aimed at helping, or intended to help, the consumer. Marketers will always take advantage of show results if they so wish and the results are there. That should be the tail. It should not be the dog under any circumstance. There will inevitably be more discussion about these issues during the day.

It promotes the proactive discussion and development of style between the industry's top winemakers in a non-adversarial environment
There is a perception that judges determine wine style, that they somehow or other take the industry by the nose and say, 'You will make a Chardonnay this way; you will not make it that way.' The corollary of that is that exhibitors enter wines specifically structured for wine shows. But what does the perception that judges determine style really mean? If it means that they assist in the development of style and the improvement of the style, it's good. If, however, it means that one gets stuck in a tram track—of excessive oak, for example, which was tolerated for a while—that is not good. It's one of those emotive lines that are often used by journalists who don't really have any particular understanding of the way the wine show works.

The discussion that occurs at the end of the classes, in the more general environment and in the panel chairman's instruction to the judges is fundamental to the show. It is a fully proactive environment and that discussion at the end, particularly about the gold medals and the points of disagreement, is very, very valuable.

It has an in-built succession plan through the training of associates
The in-built succession, of course, comes through the associate judge system and to a certain extent, the junior judges, remembering that you have then got panel chairmen and show chairmen to come through the system. This is under severe threat at the moment. Indeed, it would not be going
too far to say that, at the moment, it's basically been thrown out with the bathwater through the time pressures. This will be examined again shortly. But nonetheless the system is there and it's a very, very worthy system, having the three associates backing up the three judges.

It provides extra-curricular general wine education for judges and associates

Len Evans was one of the people, if not the person, most responsible for getting this tradition going. It must have been in 1977 that this author brought along a '61 Burgundy to a wine show dinner. Brian Barry took one sniff of it, immediately rejected it as being unfit for drinking because it was volatile, and so far as he was concerned that was the end of the matter. When questioned, it turned out that he'd never tasted a Burgundy in his life; he'd never even tasted a Pinot Noir.

It's strange, looking back on this relatively short period of time, how common that was through the Australian wine industry. Many winemakers and judges had no experience of the great wines of the world and, in particular, those from France. What happened then was that seeing an array of these wines in the evening caused the senior winemakers, who are judges, to go back to their companies and say, 'Hey! We ought to spend some money and we ought to do some Friday afternoon tastings, because we think that there is a great deal to be learnt out of that.' This duly happened, so the next thing was that the senior winemakers then went off overseas to see for themselves where and how these wines were made, and that in turn led to the flying winemakers.

Important networking opportunities for participants

One of the major reasons for the Australian wine industry's success has been the willingness within the industry to share knowledge, to share thoughts, to share questions. There are very few no-go areas. One or two companies might have a few, but the vast majority doesn't. This has been a focal point for that sort of networking and, of course, bringing winemakers from all over Australia together.

Weaknesses

The seeming inability to control the ever-growing:

a. Length of show

Here we get to some of the nasty bits—the length of the show, the number of panels, the size of the classes, and the number of wines to be judged every day. The length of a capital city show should be a maximum of three and a half days or towards the end of a fourth day, not five or more, for two main reasons. First, if you're there for a whole week at the show, you're really away from your place of work, effectively, for nine days once you add in the weekends, and that is clearly excessive. If you at least get back on the Friday, you can clear the desk and it's not so bad. One has to remember that the more senior the judges, the more senior their position in the companies for which they work or, if they are freelance-style judges, they are probably self-employed and the implications are not dissimilar. Second, the concentration required to be experienced to be believed, and four days leaves a judge mentally exhausted.

b. Number of panels

The number of panels should be three, preferably. You can possibly extend it to four, but under no circumstances can a show be effectively run if there are five panels. The chairman of the show has a full-on job, rushing between light-bodied table wines, fortifieds and reds, as it is. If you go to four panels, the more likely it becomes that there will be intersecting and radically different classes to deal with simultaneously. With five panels, this is certainly so.

So what then happens? Well, either the chairman doesn't get to give any input at all, or some of the classes will be standing around waiting for the chairman to get free of the discussion at the other side of the room. The chairman, for his or her part, becomes acutely aware that people are standing on their feet waiting for him, and probably won't give as much time to the discussion. Some classes really do require a lot of discussion, and the value of that discussion has already been mentioned.

c. Size of classes

Humungous these days; classes of more than 200 for Chardonnay, Shiraz and Cabernet are now the rule rather than the exception. Some shows expect the judges to sit down at the start of the day and work their way through 200 Chardonnays or 200 one-year-old Cabernets or more, and the numbers in these classes are going up alarmingly. A class should not be greater than 60, and certainly nowhere near 200. Yes, you can split the classes between judges. It's a bandaid solution; it does give rise to practical problems; it does slow the show down.

d. Number of wines to be judged every day

This should not be more than 150. Yes, judges have shown themselves capable in terms of getting through the day and putting some points against all wines, but doing up to 220, 230, even 240 is ridiculous. Contrast that with what the OIV says is a proper approach: no more than 15 wines in a class and no more than 45 wines in a day. While it is not suggested we adopt that standard, you can't ignore it as entirely frivolous.

Confusion and/or disagreement on the fundamental purpose

There is obviously confusion about the purpose—and this is going to be a repeating theme through this paper and others. It underlies some of the less well-argued or informed criticism, basically suggesting that shows ought to be made simpler for consumers; that Class 1 in Sydney should be the same as Class 1 in Canberra, and so on and so forth. Manifestly, that's impossible. Let's assume for the sake of the argument that Riesling is Class 1. (It used to be; it no longer is in most shows.) In Canberra (which is held in November) the wines will all be the wines of that year. In Sydney (held nine months earlier) they will not be of the year of the show, but the year before. And as you go back throughout the year or go on, your compositional base is changing as wines sell out and are no longer available. Also, of course, they will have changed significantly if they are light-bodied wines.

Increasingly insufficient time for training associates (and hence succession planning)

This point concerns succession planning. Judges really do have to rush on through the calling of the points. It is forced on them by the system to say to the associates, 'We're going to add up the judges' points and concentrate on those. If you don't understand what the judges have done or if your points are wildly askew, please shout and we'll stop.' It doesn't often happen; most of the time they are intimidated. It shouldn't be that way. It should be the judges seeking to involve the associates in discussion if they are really going to properly train them and gain the benefit of having them there in the first place.

Blatant inconsistencies in results/pattern of results between shows/groups of shows

It is generally accepted by the industry that there are shows
which could be called ‘good’ and shows which could be called ‘bad’—shows at which the results, or success, are generally regarded as meaningful and other shows less so. After an examination of the pattern of results (and this in turn may also reflect the commonality of judges) the Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Hobart and quasi national shows tend to group together on one side of the divide—Adelaide, Sydney, and the national show in Canberra on the other side. The pattern that emerges is quite consistent.

No generally agreed criteria for:

a. selection of judges

There are no generally agreed criteria for the selection of judges. So far as selection, some shows exclude exhibitors. Other shows, equally insidiously, have a ‘one judge per wine group’ rule. Going back to the issue of excluding judges as exhibitors, the industry has passed beyond the stage where that is a necessary or proper approach, although the argument is understandable.

The ‘one judge per group’ is of concern. From experience at the Adelaide show, it was essential to have four good panel chairs. You really can’t run a show as chair unless your panel chairs are good, so there were four good panel chairs who, in almost all instances, were senior winemakers with one or other of the big companies. That meant there could not be any junior judges from the same companies, who by right should have been in the show. Not inviting the seniors so the younger judges could have a go was a possibility, but the cure might well have been worse than the illness.

b. qualification of wines for entry

There are varying rules for quantities. This is not necessarily disturbing, but it’s one of the factors in making the shows less transparent and easily understood by consumers. If you start yapping at them about 2,250, 4,500, 9,000 and 22,500 litres, their eyes will glaze over. The other issue is what could be called true ownership, which will be addressed later on.

c. description of classes

This ought to be the easiest problem to solve, but each show determinedly marches off in its own direction. Some write specifications (or guidelines) for each class, others none at all. Some arrange the classes by variety and vintage, others by (for example) body and finish, thus medium-bodied soft finish, full-bodied firm finish, and so on.

Big companies bowing to demands of their marketing departments and using scatter-gun approach to entries

This has been discussed by some of the group winemakers in the big companies—that they should refuse to enter wines unless they genuinely think they have a chance of winning a gold medal. It’s always there as an idea. There are a number of possible solutions here. One is ‘Three strikes and you’re out.’ In other words, once a wine has been entered three times and hasn’t won a medal on those three entries, that’s it, it can’t be entered again. Also, one could tighten up on the ‘one entry per class’ rule—commonly two entries, but you can take that back to one. Lastly, there is the pre-qualification route, which again is going to come up for discussion later this day—the pyramid system.

Entry of un-bottled wines permitted by some shows

Un-bottled wines have no business in national wine shows. Also, there should be no continuation of the ‘very highly commended’, ‘highly commended’, ‘commended’ system. That is the ultimate deceit so far as consumers are concerned. Where should un-bottled wines appear? In the regional shows. But there they should be entered on the basis that all the judges will do is comment on the winemaking faults or, for that matter, virtues. This method works at the Tasmanian Wine Show, albeit a much smaller show with much easier one-to-one contact. Reactions may be, ‘Bottle it immediately. It’s great now. Don’t muck around;’ ‘For God’s sake, get some sulfur into it;’ ‘Fine it heavily;’ or ‘Don’t even bottle it.’

Opportunities

To devise means of simultaneously clarifying messages to consumers and improving the breed.

To better educate both trade and media about the process and outcomes of shows

Obviously, to be positive, ways should be devised of simultaneously meeting the improvement of the breed and marketing functions. This and the next point—better education of trade and media—are linked. Those who have seen some of the most virulent criticism know that it comes from people who either have not participated in a show or who have some particularly iconoclastic views. Some people at this seminar may have read a marvellously vitriolic paper by John Middleton, who might have delivered it today had he not been certain that he would have had a cardiac arrest while giving it.

But it turns out—and Middleton says this in his paper—that his experience of wine shows came from just one; it was many years ago; it was in Perth; and the rudeness that he saw there between the judges and hostility between them made him realise that the show system was a farce. However, that’s just not the way the show system works these days.

To devise a pyramid system of qualification criteria for entry of wines into shows:

a. regional

b. state

c. national

This issue will not be addressed, as it is the subject of Tim James’s presentation. However, it will be a major point for discussion, and the closer you get to it the more questions arise, even though it may ultimately be only one of the likely solutions.

As part of the pyramid system, to take back ownership from Royal Agricultural Societies whilst preserving their income and PR opportunities

No objection should be raised over the existing structure. What is of concern is that the shows should deliver the right outcomes for the wine industry as opposed to the right outcomes for the agricultural societies. Rightly or wrongly, there is a perception that shows are very good money earners for the show societies and that the councillors take away ever-increasing boot-fulls or truckloads of the wines left over.

Threats

Implosion due to inexorably increasing numbers of entries and class sizes

This is the biggest threat, and it comes out of all of the things earlier, as these figures show. If you have five panels of three judges, you get 15 man-days (or person days). If you judge for five days, it’s 75 person days, and if there are seven shows, that equals 525 person days. If you then double that because you’ve got three associates, assuming you have three associates and three judges, you’ve got 1,050 person days. If you do
the same exercise with three panels of three judges at three and a half days, you get 220 and 440 respectively—in other words, significantly less than half.

Pseudo-national shows run by small regional associations
There is also what could be called the pseudo-national shows. Cowra is the most obvious of those, and it’s acknowledged that there are people from Cowra here, but there are other shows which fall into the same camp—the Murrumbateman show, for heaven’s sake. These either can or will discredit the system as a whole, and they worsen an already acute problem by the confusion that follows from the duplication.

If you then add in, on this workload, 20 worthwhile regional shows—two panels, three judges each, by two and a half days—you get another 300 person days. Add that up and you’ve got 1,550 judge or person days. This means that 310 weeks or six and a half years is being invested in the wine industry each year, and that cannot go on forever.

The pseudo-nationals like Cowra and Murrumbateman have an understandable value to the local communities. It’s really like the RAS’s, but multiplied because the background is smaller. But we can’t sustain this. They are not logical.

Additional duplication of shows through (e.g.) cool climate shows, e.g. Mornington Peninsula, Bathurst
There is also further duplication through these curious shows: Mornington Peninsula, which the author has judged; Bathurst, which Nick Bulleid has judged. What does ‘cool climate’ mean? What’s this all about? It goes nowhere in helping, unless they can be in some way equated and accredited to regional shows. There’s a vague argument for it, but not a totally convincing one.

Cynical manipulation of brand ownership by large companies to effectively double or treble their entries in each class
This is one of the author’s hobbyhorses; he attempted to rewrite the Adelaide regulations some years ago, with no success. Take the Seppelt Great Western Shiraz at the last Adelaide Wine Show. There were several gold medals for this wine, both in its standard and reserve form. There were perhaps four or six entries, and two of the Shirazes (because you had two entries per class) were entered by Great Western Champagne, noted producer of red wine! The remainder came from Seppelt’s bona fide business name. All the big companies are guilty of this, trying to increase the number of entries they have by using subsidiaries which are just there in the corporate system—stock transfer journal done just before the entry is made, so legally it’s okay.

Here the solution should be perfectly obvious: a medal can only be claimed, advertised or in any way used if it is the brand shown in the show entry and on the bottle when it is sold. In other words, there’s a direct link to the brand entered in the show and shown in the catalogue—very important—and the wine that’s ultimately sold.

Artificial barriers to selecting judges with the greatest skill and experience, e.g. Melbourne, Adelaide
These artificial barriers have been touched on before. If we do nothing to address the main issues, this is not necessarily going to lead to a contraction of the pool because these restrictions are already in place. However, it won’t allow the pool to expand to meet the ever-increasing demands that are going to be put on the system.

Conclusion
The way forward will not be easy; wherever you look, the devil is in the detail. But the importance of a fully viable show system cannot be overstated. It has played a pivotal role in the past and must be allowed to do so in the future if the Australian wine industry is to keep its competitive edge in an increasingly competitive world.