Contrary to some media hype and conjecture the Australian wine show system is alive and well. So well in fact that it is proliferating at plague rates.

There is an ever-increasing number of shows; of potential and actual winemaker exhibitors; of exhibits per class, and there is no shortage of aspirants to be judges or associates. Even sponsors seem to proliferate as major global corporations appear as sponsors of some fairly parochial and small regional shows.

Raising entry fees does little to slow the appetite of exhibitors for classes to match their wines, or to find wines to fill out classes.

The contemporary commercial relevance of wine shows cannot be diminishing if the reactions of the major sponsor of one of our prestigious national wine shows are used as a guide. Being a good retailer, its disappointment is palpable when awards are announced for wines in very limited supply. Its joy is spontaneous when a freely available commercial wine carries off an award.

More exhibitors, more wines, more shows, more judges, more awards. If failure is imminent it is from demand overload, not from lack of relevance to the stakeholders or their lack of interest.

Most of the big challenges in commerce are centred on the creation of demand. This is why there is a proliferation of marketers in the universe. The real issue for the Australian show system is containing demand so that the system does not die of overload.

The Australian wine show system can be regarded as a biological system or species. Every show can be recognised for its similarities to another (although interbreeding is an untried concept). Each is however, individual in its class profiles, time of year (hence the judging conditions) and the composition of its judging panels. Just as individuals make good, mediocre and bad judgements, so do panels and wine shows. The more elevated in the system the judgement, the less chance of aberration emerging. Averaging three judges in a panel may eliminate aberration, both good and bad. Similarly at the trophy level, 10 or 13 judges can collectively settle on the average wine for the trophy that nobody regarded as outstanding.

It should come as no surprise that a top wine in one show misses an award in another show. Nor does the occasional emergence of an obviously inferior wine as a trophy winner surprise. This is a reflection of the spectrum of wine show traits and the biological variability inherent in the subjective show system. Often surprising however is the degree of unanimity about the very good wines in a class judged by people from different continents, with different levels of experience, and from a diversity of backgrounds.

Judges as a group are consistently in greater agreement with each other than the associates, and have more point separation between terrible and great wines. This is simply the reflection of another biological variable—experience.

What to do then with all this biological variability within and between wine shows? To eliminate it would be impossible. To discipline it by training all judges to judge the same would eliminate one of the essential forces the show system exerts on wine quality and style—evolution. Biological variables should be recruited and encouraged. Judging panels should be diverse in background, opinion and even experience as long as all judges have had sufficient experience.

To an extent, and certainly from an excitement and marketing viewpoint, the more variability between shows and their results the better, as long as all top awards are credible in that role. Furthermore the recognition of diverse styles encourages the production of diverse styles. This is another blow to the national cellar palate that threatens to emerge at times.

There are a few covenants attached to this advocacy of diversity. These are that judges, panels and shows must be consistent unto themselves. That is, given the same show, panels, exhibits and conditions, the same results would be more or less achieved on successive judgings. This is a concept rarely tested.

How then is the system to be improved given the danger of overload and the potential for loss of credibility?

Recommendations

- Allow the system to flourish and proliferate. It will anyway.
- Encourage diversity of schedules between shows and in composition of judging panels.
- Individual shows should establish their own charters of responsibility to exhibitors.
- These charters should address:
  - the composition of judging panels
  - a commitment to the education of associates
  - the environmental conditions of judging (glasses, temperature, noise, light)
  - the maximum entries judged per panel per day
  - the maximum entries in a class
  - the auditing of exhibitors’ entry claims.

The contemporary Australian wine industry which has harvested so much from what was sown by those who have gone before, should invest thoughtfully in the future of the wine show system. The current commitment of resources to the wine show system is enormous. Including the seven major city shows there are in excess of 20,000 entries, 100,000 bottles or 8,000 cases of the nation’s best. These represent $1.6 million in value, $1 million in entry fees, 600 free-of-charge person-days per annum from the nation’s best as judges and associates (value at least $0.5 million) plus travel and accommodation for winemaking teams to the...
awards tastings (approximately $0.3m).

The total bill to the industry for the seven major shows is conservatively $3.4 million. Combined with regional shows it is probably in excess of $5 million. This does not include the value of the sponsorships to the various shows.

As an indication of this quantum, a $5 million injection into Australia’s viticultural and oenological research and education system would more than double its current annual resources. The industry monitors and influences that investment very carefully. It should also be aware of its investment in wine shows.

It is important that the Australian wine industry, through its formal organisational structures, puts a collective effort into the administration of the Australian wine show system where it invests so much money. To support the style and conduct of the wine shows (in which they annually invest so much unaudited, uncoordinated funding) the Winemakers Federation of Australia should establish equal funding with the venerable Royal Agricultural and Horticultural Societies.

This would ensure the establishment of charters of commitment to the exhibitors without robbing the shows of their individuality. It would also put more resources into the national development of the AWRI Advanced Sensory Assessment Course, to serve as a cornerstone of the education of aspiring judges.