There was a time, however, when one of the major producers of wine decided to put a big ‘song and dance’ about winning a gold medal. Most will remember the wine that won the Jimmy Watson Trophy, and Taylors continued to do it year after year. The wine sold like hot cakes, and it was easy job to convince retailers to stock the wine. The wine was awarded gold medals for its first release red wine. It was important to note that the wine was of first class quality. The down side to this is that it is very hard to then recommend a wine that has not won a gold medal.

Why do gold medals sell wine?

It is quite simple. Any well-trained shop assistant will tell you that the easiest way to recommend a wine is to say that it won a gold medal. The consumer takes this to mean that the wine is of first class quality. Then the fact that the wine has won a medal is going to weigh heavily in favour of the wine proud to display it. Most consumers are aware that Ljubljana had wine shows, let alone which category the wine was in and with whom it competed. To cap off his early success Wolf Blass won the Jimmy Watson three times in a row. Rest assured, being a master blender he deliberately set out to win this award knowing how valuable it was. More importantly, he continued to tell everyone how important it was, and that he was the greatest winemaker in the country. Many other makers have followed in his wake.

Another overnight success was Taylors of Clare who put three gold medal stickers on their first release red wine. It was then an easy job to convince retailers to stock the wine. They also placed large advertisements in the national daily press proclaiming their success. The wine sold like hot cakes, and Taylors continued to do it year after year.

Today virtually every winemaker worth his salt will make a big ‘song and dance’ about winning a gold medal. Most will acknowledge this by putting a gold sticker on the label. There was a time, however, when one of the major producers was so successful at the national wine shows that it withdrew from competition for a few years. This is not the case today as the shows are a very important forum for assessing the quality of the competition. They give the winemaker a unique opportunity to have a good look at what the guys next door is doing. The shows are also a predictor of change, and the judges play a very important part in determining what styles will be developed when they award medals to a particular style or grape variety.

By and large the public are oblivious of this. The benefits of show success mainly flow to the larger companies as they are in the position to boast how many medals they have won at a particular show. This reinforces in the public’s mind that a particular brand must be good as the company wins so many medals.

Do medals sell wine?

‘You bet they do!’

There is no better example than the Jimmy Watson Trophy award at the Royal Melbourne Wine Show for the best one-year-old red wine in the show. The winning wine is immediately sold out on its release and the industry is often quoted as saying that it is worth $1,000,000 to the winner. To a large company it is worth a lot more. The scramble for the wine by consumers is really quite extraordinary and there is no other award that comes close in its drawing power. Yet it is doubtful that many consumers could say exactly what the trophy is awarded for. Significantly, the winner can ask a lot more for his wine and the consumer happily pays this premium.

Wolf Blass (undoubtedly one of the greatest wine marketers this country has seen) is the most successful user of wine show success. He proved that it did not matter where you won the medal; you just had to make a big fuss of it. Nobody could forget those early Wolf Blass labels emblazoned with medals from the Ljubljana wine show. Most were unaware that Ljubljana had wine shows, let alone which category the wine was in and with whom it competed. To cap off his early success Wolf Blass won the Jimmy Watson three times in a row. Rest assured, being a master blender he deliberately set out to win this award knowing how valuable it was. More importantly, he continued to tell everyone how important it was, and that he was the greatest winemaker in the country. Many other makers have followed in his wake and tried to emulate his success.

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A lot of time and effort must be put into training staff, but it is worth it. Then the fact that the wine has won a medal is simply another form of recognition that the wine is worthwhile.

It is interesting to note that Australia’s single biggest wine retailer, Cellarmasters, are ‘masters’ at using medals to sell often ‘own labelled’ wines. Phrases such as ‘Gold Medal Dozen’ are familiar to most.

There is no doubt that the single most important selling phrase apart from ‘you will save 75% off retail’ is ‘gold medal winner’.

In today’s increasingly self-service environment there is no doubt that a consumer will be attracted to a bottle with a bright gold medal near the top of the label. Most consumers invariably buy in a set price range and it is simply a matter of what wine to buy in that price range. The presence of a gold medal is going to weigh heavily in favour of the wine proud enough to display it.

Many years ago Peter Walker of Rhinecastle wines used to put a gold sticker on almost every wine he sold. The sticker had a serrated edge and imprinted on it were the words ‘gold medal quality’. He put it on the early Redman wines, which were extremely successful. Murphy used a similar idea in his
own stores on wines that were highly recommended by his own tasting panel. The stickers read 'Philip Murphy Wines & Spirits Tasting Panel Award of Excellence.' There is something very compelling about a gold sticker on a bottle to the uninformed consumer, and that is because he has little or no recourse to other information. Hence the importance of the specialist retailer who takes the time to learn more about the products he sells.

There are obviously pitfalls for the producer as he cannot rely on winning a 'gold' every year. Furthermore, if a cheaper wine wins a gold medal and he/she wins silver or bronze they feel disadvantaged. From the consumer's point of view there is no obvious reason why one wine should be much more expensive than another is. Many smaller producers will not put medals on their wine for that very reason.

The other problem is that the stickers themselves are too small to contain much information about the award. The best one can get is 'Gold Medal Class 25 Melbourne'. Unfortunately most retailers do not understand the judging system and do not go to the trouble of getting the results from the major shows.

One way to overcome this is to invite enthusiastic staff to be stewards, or even associate judges as they do at the Victorian Wine Show. Another would be to produce a book that lists every show in Australia and describes every class in the show. Then a retailer could reference the class number and show on a sticker, and inform the consumer that a wine has won for example, 'best full bodied dry white' at the Adelaide Show.

A large poster could be produced that would be displayed in liquor stores across Australia listing the major shows and awards.

As a judge and associate at several shows over the years, the author has the greatest admiration for the skills and ability of the judges. He believes it is a pity that more people are not aware of the process that takes place, and how a gold medal is awarded. The points system universally practised should be included on any material used to promote the shows. It should be explained that so many points are awarded for colour, bouquet and flavour, and that it takes years for a judge to learn the skills necessary to qualify for a seat on the panel.

Murphy feels the 'regional shows' do not get the attention they deserve. Everybody would like to know who produces the best cabernet in Coonawarra over a number of years. This is very relevant to consumers who consistently prefer wines from specific regions, as is often the case. The significance of this cannot be understated for the smaller producers and it should support the price of their wines if they continually win medals. It will also sort out those producers who charge exorbitant prices for their wines but never win medals.

The major shows seem to concentrate on the varieties or styles and not the regions. This is possibly appropriate, as some consumers just want to know what is the best Cabernet regardless of region.

What is of utmost importance is this: the more the consumer understands the show system, and the different classes, the more he will understand about wine.

There is too much 'mystique' and not enough information for consumers. Back labels should be a valuable source of information, and are a great idea if they are used intelligently, and not used to talk about somebody's grandfather. A lot more can be done to make the show system of more relevance to the consumer and in the main this can be done through the retailer. Booklets on shop counters are very helpful. Historical references to past winners of some of the more important trophies are fascinating and reinforce the value of these awards.

Information about the shows themselves and their timing each year is important. Advance publicity of upcoming shows will attract more attention, and increased accessibility to the winning wines will encourage more people to visit the shows themselves.

The results of shows are published, and major producers take advantage of this the day after with advertisements that do not hide their light under a bushel. However, it would be more beneficial if large advertisements were placed in the daily newspapers describing the classes, and giving the full show results of the major shows. It would certainly increase sales of some of the lesser-known wines if consumers were able to see who won the medals, and seek out those wine-makers they had not come across previously.

In conclusion, the wine shows of Australia have an important and ongoing role in the promotion of wine. The more relevance they have to the consumer, the more discerning the consumer will become, and the quality of Australian wine will continue to shine around the world.

If medals are a measure of the quality of wine, then surely this message must be clearly conveyed to the consumer. Presently, there is no other benchmark of quality apart from the international ratings systems that are extremely selective, and not predicated on the same thorough analysis as the Australian show system.

Some of these suggestions will require significant amounts of money, but if the consumer is made a more informed drinker, it is the Australian wine industry that wins in the end.