Stakeholder presentation: the wine writers’ views

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Wine writers, apparently, are the vocal chords of the wine industry. This is how a large company winemaker/brand ambassador recently described them, and certainly there is a strong view among many in the industry that the media—through newspaper articles, magazines, websites and elsewhere—is nothing more than an extension of the public relations arms of Australia’s wine companies.

While some wine writers would disagree with this view of their craft/profession/vocation/art, or hobby, many seem happy to go along with the analogy. This will be covered later; but for now, let us take it to the logical conclusion, and say that, if they are indeed vocal chords of the industry, what are they saying about wine shows? How are they telling the story of the Australian wine ‘show system’?

If you search through any of this country’s extensive newspaper and magazine archives you will find hundreds of articles on wine shows. They will range from regurgitated press releases, praising the success of ‘Windy Creek Ridge Estate’ at the Wodonga Small Winemakers Show, to scathing attacks on wine shows and their failings, penned by vitriolic opponents of the system. However, on the whole, Australia’s wine writers are telling a fairly critical story about wine shows.

Many wine writers were contacted by e-mail in the preparation of this paper, and the responses received generally echoed the criticisms aired by other speakers at this conference.

Most writers acknowledge that the show system, in its purest ‘improvement of the breed’ form, has done a lot of good for the industry.

Tim White in the Financial Review, 4 August, 2001 wrote, ‘The golden era for wine shows began in the late ’60s and continued to the late ’80s. I don’t think anybody out there, even the sternest critics, would deny that the show system in this period had a profound influence in lifting the standard of Australian wine across the board. Without the show system, it is unlikely that Australian wines would have taken off the way they did at the start of the current export boom. It should be remembered that the wines which led the overseas charge a little more than a decade ago were not $50-a-bottle super-premium Shiraz (there was only one at this price point back then, anyway) but ‘value-for-money’ sub-$12 bottles of wine.’ (1)

Most wine writers agree that the shows are too big, although one writer was proud of his ability to ‘slug it out with 180 wines for five days straight’ (2).

Lester Jesberg, editor of the consumer magazine Winewise, said, ‘At the big shows, class size and the make-up of classes is obviously a major issue. Some judges feel they can whip through 100 two-year-old reds and feel that the 16.5 they awarded to wine 99 was as spot on as the 17.5 they gave wine number one. You and I know that this is complete bunk.’ (3)

Many wine writers feel that the shows are dominated by large companies and show societies.

The most vocal of these is Philip White, of The Advertiser in Adelaide. He says, ‘Australian wine shows exist to satisfy two major groups. Firstly, the organisers, who are usually agricultural and horticultural show societies. They make a profit from the entry fees, and end up with hundreds (or thousands) of leftover bottles for their ‘club rooms’.

The other beneficiaries are the wine companies. These enter their wines, then offer their winemakers, fully-paid with airfares and living expenses, to go and judge them, hoping they’re smart enough to bring home a trunkful of booty. If their PR team is on the ball, the results are then fired vigorously at wine journalists, who are expected to promote them.’ (4)

The irony of the system is pointed out frequently.

Tim White again. ‘Those for the show system talk about its function of “improving the breed”, while those against point out that many of Australia’s finest producers—wineries such as Bannockburn, Giaconda, Leeuwin Estate, Torbreck, Rockford—play no part in it whatsoever and yet are greatly respected for wines of the highest quality.’ (5)

Many writers feel very strongly that no unfinished wines should get a medal.

Huon Hooke, in a wide-ranging article in the Australian Gourmet Traveller Wine magazine, said ‘giving awards to unfinished wines is an absurdity which should be stamped out.’ (6) This was one of Hooke’s more hot-under-the-collar moments—and his is not the only temper being tested! Take for example Philip White’s assertion, that ‘winemakers down-point rival wines (i.e. some judges recognise the style of a rival maker and point their wines lowly, so they have no chance of winning)’ (7). This was defamatory, according to James Halliday (who, being an ex-lawyer, should know). (8)

One of the questions to be specifically addressed in this paper was ‘Are wine writers influenced by medals?’

Wine writer and marketing consultant Drew Lambert answered this very well in his article for the Australian and New Zealand Wine Industry Journal (9). He posed the question to 55 wine writers and got the following responses:

‘They are a waste of time (generally we bin them... they may have been a good idea once but it’s now overkill with so many shows and so many medals).’

‘The wine companies are crazy to be wanting to push out this stuff.’

‘Wine show results are, I believe, irrelevant to the wine-drinking public.’

‘Basically I think medals are bollocks.’

‘The wine companies are trying to push me to publish the results as well as the ratings. (I don’t care for this, but I may have to do it to make some money.)’

This view was echoed by Paul Clancy, publisher of the Wine Industry Journal. ‘The shows look archaic,’ he said. ‘Stupid silverware and sumptuous suppers in silly suits.’ (10)
Ultimately, though, the most pressing question for the Australian wine industry is summed up by Tim White: ‘Who is the show system there to benefit?’ (11)

It’s not all criticism and questioning, though. Some wine writers are supportive of the system. Andrew Corrigan, Master of Wine and contributor to Winestate magazine said: ‘I think there is too much of a tendency for wine writers to quickly jump on the bandwagon of criticising the overall system. Critics are forgetting two big stakeholders, firstly, the exhibitors (i.e. producers) and secondly the public. In fact, strident criticism of wine shows is just plain elitism! The public are fascinated by the process.’ He goes on to defend the Jimmy Watson Trophy. ‘This interest is still relevant. Many wine lovers talk about their happiest and most striking experience as being a visit to a winery and trying a barrel sample – the young wine. Even though it may taste a bit raw, there is magic in the experience. Therefore an award to a young wine is still relevant.’ (12)

Chris Shanahan, writer for the The Canberra Times, also threw up an alternative view.

‘There is no “wine show system.” Australia’s many independent wine shows, events, awards, competitions—call them what you will—complement each other in some ways but also compete for judges, sponsors, producer support, status and consumer appeal. No matter that some judges move from show to show and that various organisers watch what others do—and even swap or pinch good ideas—little about this gaggle of stubbornly competitive, individual events, viewed collectively, could be called systematic. There is no system. There is, thank God, no central control, no standard schedule and no formal ranking, just an intense, wholesome rivalry that tends to promote change for the better, via endless discussion of style and wine quality—and the rewarding of quite disparate wine styles over time. When was the last time we heard a wine judge say ‘Australia makes the best wines in the world?’ Some judges I know wish that we did, and worry that we don’t. They compare Australian wines privately and in shows but drink French wines. It’s not cultural cringe. It’s reality. It’s competitive. It whets appetites. It promotes the desire to do better. It stumps on complacency. It happens outside of the show circuit too. But it reaches great intensity during the social events surrounding shows—making shows, in a sense, the universities of wine style. Freedom of thought reigns. And not a medal gets awarded during the process.’

This last point – freedom of thought reigns – brings up three interesting issues.

If, as Shanahan points out, the strength of Australia’s shows are indeed their almost chaotic, unregulated nature (a lot like Australia’s essentially very free winemaking culture), then do we really want a more regulated system, whereby a lot like Australia’s essentially very free winemaking culture), then do we really want a more regulated system, whereby a central control is imposed, where a team of professional, trained, specialised judges roam the land, purple teeth and bad breath announcing their presence?

The image this conjures up is that of the Lynchbob cartoon: ‘Attack of the Killer Wine Tasters’ (They’ll breathe on you! They’ll bore you!)

Isn’t this centralisation, restriction and control precisely the thing the wine industry is trying to avoid with the implementation/imposition of the GIs across Australia?

Or, do wine writers continue on the way they are and let things find their natural course? Does the industry let chaos theory reign and see the capital city shows become ever larger until, like Monty Python’s Mister Creosote, they simply self-destruct, to be replaced eventually by regional shows and new alternatives? If it’s the latter, you’d get most of the wine writers barracking for the new blood shows, straining at the leash to have a go. Look at the increasing number of shows either organised or strongly supported by the wine media. There are now major annual, or at least regular, shows and judgings run by Winewise, Divine magazine, Australian Gourmet Traveller’s Wine Magazine, Good Taste magazine, Wine X magazine, Uncorked magazine (in The Age and the Sydney Morning Herald) and others, not to mention the growing number of annual guide books (at least seven at last count), which are judgings of a kind (albeit involving one or two judges—the writers). All these comparative tastings jostle with the wine show results for the consumer’s attention.

Another question to be addressed was ‘Can a journalist be objective and judge?’

The answer is that yes, he or she can. As journalists, they theoretically have no vested interest whatsoever in wine shows or their results. But then again, few of Australia’s wine writers are ‘true’ journalists, writing without fear or favour, unfettered by commercial affiliations of any kind. Many are also intimately connected to the show system itself, through regular judging gigs.

Look at James Halliday (ex-employee of Southcorp, director of the increasingly commercially-focused Winepros website, chief judge at many shows), Stuart Gregor (director of a wine PR firm, Liquid Ideas), Chris Shanahan (an employee of Liquorland), or, until March 2001, myself, (an ex-employee of the wine e-tailer, Wine Planet).

No wonder Australian winemakers see journalists as ‘the vocal chords of the industry’.

This throws up the age-old potential for conflict between participation and reporting. For example this author has been invited to judge at a number of shows this year. Is he being invited because of his reputation as an exceptional palate? Unlikely.

To paraphrase Groucho Marx, ‘I’m kind of suspicious about being part of any show that would have me as a judge’. In other words, ‘I’m not sure my palate is up to the job of really intensive show judging, or whether I’m being invited because the show organisers want some nice words about their show written in a magazine.’

There’s nothing wrong with this, of course. But it does conclusively place wine shows in the realm of promotion and marketing, and away from pure ‘improvement of the breed’.

Which takes us back to Tim White’s question, ‘Who is the show system there to benefit?’ And leads to ‘Who is the wine writer there to benefit?’

The Australian wine industry may see most of the Australian wine media as an extension of the PR machine (and many wine writers may be happy to collude with the industry on this). However, those writers who think more deeply about such things usually come to the conclusion that their primary responsibility is, or should be, to their readers and their editors. And if this is the case, if wine writers really feel strongly that there’s something wrong with the system, then why don’t they really use the power the industry keeps telling them they wield to ask the difficult questions?

It seems many articles have been published over the years that appear highly critical of the system. But are they really reaching the right people? It would appear not. So do we have to turn up the heat a little? Surely most wine writers with show judging experience have seen enough and heard enough to blow the whistle on the shonkier elements of the game. In this respect, getting wine writers in as judges is a potentially risky practice on behalf of the show organisers.

We might learn too much about how things really work.

Perhaps writers should go on strike—not write about the
shows that lack credibility; not publish regurgitated press releases from ‘Windy Creek Ridge Estate’; not write about what a sham the Jimmy Watson Trophy is. Just not mention the show system at all.

Seriously, perhaps more wine writers should start behaving like journalists rather than lifestyle content providers and, at the very least, report fairly and objectively on what appears to be the industry’s most serious attempt yet at gaining more credibility for wine shows. In other words, it is not, or shouldn’t be, up to them, the wine media, to help sort out the wine show mess. It’s up to them to critically report on how you, the wine industry, sort out your mess. It’s up to them to be the consumer’s eyes and ears, to find out what the real story is, not the story you want the consumer to hear.

Acknowledgments
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References
5. Tim White, ibid.
11. Tim White, ibid.