PhiIn Phillip began his presentation with the following remarks: I've only ever once before been asked to speak to a professional gathering in the wine industry, and that was about style in Pinot Noir, about which I know a few things but not enough. My presentation must have been so bad that now I've been relegated to the task of talking about a subject that I know almost nothing about and to give the reasons why I don't participate in a process which I know almost nothing about. In fact, I think it's most appropriate that I quote the famous Neddy Seagoon from *The Goon Show*, which sums up my position on some of these things:

‘Little do I know of the little I know about the little I know about the wine show system—
for if I knew a little of the little I know, I’d know a little.

So I'm keeping my little ears open, and I've actually learned quite a lot this morning.

When Nick asked me to participate in this forum, I vehemently argued that I really had nothing to contribute. It's already been said this morning that it's difficult for somebody to comment on aspects of a wine show when he or she has never participated in it. There has not been any research for this presentation, as it was inappropriate to come in half-baked on some of the issues. It will therefore come in totally uncooked.

**Introduction**

This address will very briefly summarise the reasons why Bass Phillip doesn’t participate in the show system and give you an impression of some of the key factors that are behind that view, although it’s not a terribly well formed one. Hopefully an out-of-the-loop peasant farmer can make some generalisations which will contribute.

It has no particular notions about the show judging system, no preconceived ideas, no axes to grind. There have been three or four days of thought—quite intensively—but no research into it, so what you get is what you’re going to hear.

The show system deserves a great deal of respect for the achievements in quality control or developing the breed that have come out of it. It’s very obvious, even to the non-participant. It has certainly had quite an impact in international markets, yet must be one of the basic contributing factors to international success of Australian wines, particularly at the commercial level—whatever that means—the tough low end of the business. All those people who have been involved in the system for decades deserve to be congratulated for that.

A number of the wine industry leaders who have been involved in the show judging system heavily inspired Bass Phillip’s entry into the wine business, so any criticism that you might imply from questioning or poor understanding is certainly not personally directed. It would be wrong to offend these great people.

Bass Phillip’s business operates about 40 acres of vineyards, yet still only releases something like a thousand cases of wine on the market. The vineyards have three and a half thousand vines per acre, so there’s a fair bit of work. There is one full-time employee and some pretty crude facilities, so there is not much time for unproductive work. If asked to list the 10 reasons why Bass Phillip doesn’t participate in the show judging system, the first nine are that it doesn’t have time. The unproductive time is either spent drinking burgundy or seeking permission to trade overseas from the Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation.

Some of the other factors are that the wines—it’s just the way it is—are pretty ugly in their first 18 months to two years and, in Pinot Noir classes, that basically counts them out of show judgings. The stipulated production limits aspects of the wine show system are a complete mystery. To give a parallel, a neighbour breeds Angus bulls. If they set up the same rules in his field as we do in the wine industry, he would have to have at least 50 dozen bulls in the paddock at home with the same DNA profile as the sash winner.

Now, the wines—you know, this is all very personal—the wines show many more dimensions when they’re tasted with food. If they were to introduce that aspect into judging processes, well, the judges would have a lot of fun, but they wouldn’t go back and do any more work for weeks. It’s a difficult one. Also, there’s the question of ‘Drink now or drink later? Again, there are some uncertainties about that. It’s commonly understood that the show judging system decides on the best wines on the day. What consideration is taken of keeping potential and so on—development—is not clear, so it’s another reason to have uncertainties about the system.

Blockbuster wines have been talked about. There’s no need to repeat those things, but certainly Bass Phillip does tastings in the winery and it occasionally has customers—both private customers and trade customers—in for a look at a batch of barrel samples, and clearly wines with a bit of personality have a big impact or produce a big response. It seems to be the same in the show system which is concerning. Bass Phillip doesn’t make blockbuster wines. But aside from those basic reasons, it doesn’t participate because in most cases the wines don’t comply with the commercial production limits. So that’s all very boring.

Now, if Bass Phillip did enter the show judging system and did achieve some good results, what would it do with that information? How would we market it? There’ll be more about that a little further on. So, basically, there’s a
mild lack of confidence in the system. It probably doesn’t suit our business.

On the matter of scoring systems, it was really pleasing to hear Brian’s comments before. There are descriptions like ‘palate structure, texture, nature of tannins, etc.’ and these factors don’t necessarily primarily enter into the 3-7-10 system. Bass Phillip never uses the 3-7-10 system in assessing wines in the winery. So there’s some background behind the uncertainties.

Let’s go into this in a little more detail and look at the four contributing major parts or stakeholders or players in the business: the judges and producers on this page. You probably can’t read there, but that’s Professor Emile Peynaud judging a bracket of wines. I’m impressed so far with what I’ve heard about the professionalism of the approach to technical judging, and I don’t think that needs any discussion.

Comment should be made about fatigue and the impact of alcohol. These are addressed in the letter from John Middleton, which has previously been talked about. This spends several paragraphs explaining why ethanol produces fatigue and influences decision-making. In the Bass Phillip winery, no more than 35 to 40 wines are tasted without staff starting to lose the plot, there’s certainly no swallowing. The OIV recommends a similar maximum number. Tasting 150 wines thoroughly should be a concern.

Style is an interesting issue. It’s been touched on in a number of ways and it’s a subject that requires hours—the definition of style and what you mean by style guidance or judging for style. Style is the realm of (1) the winemaker and (2) the critics who are competent to talk about it and who should be accountable. Whether judges at wine shows should be concerned with it is not immediately obvious.

On the matter of non-contestant judges or non-exhibitor judges, it’s easy to appreciate very well in the Hunter Valley case why it’s appropriate to have local winemakers involved in the judging process. But if the highest level shows involve contestants amongst the judges, then they’re always going to be open to criticism.

As far as the producer is concerned, Bass Phillip has only entered shows—they were regional shows—twice, and that was 15 years ago, so we have almost no experience, as an exhibitor. There are no major expectations as a producer about the show judging system, excepting that there be professionality and accountability on the part of the judges, although there’s room for uncertainty as to where the accountability factor comes in with judging in the wine show system. Would Bass Phillip get a fair go in the judging process? Firstly, there’s the ‘blockbuster versus finesse’ factor. And then, it makes unfiltered wines. They don’t have much hope in the wine show system unless they’re decanted, and so it goes on.

What is the marketing value of medals? For a large company, that’s been made very clear by Peter Dawson. At the beginning, this presentation claimed to have used no research. That was a lie! Conversations in the last two days with a couple of wine merchants and a restaurateur revealed this information. The interesting one is that one of the wine merchants said, ‘Well, it’s not so common for gold medals to be placed on wines that are more than $30 a bottle.’ Now, this is not a survey, but that’s an interesting factor. It was also said that medals are most useful in the supermarket-level wine sales context; also, that consumers would ask firstly what was the medal awarded for and secondly who awarded it, because it’s not always clear when these things are marketed on wine labels.

It is not always absolutely clear what the basic objectives of the show system are, although this morning has helped us to understand this better. But there are quite a few uncertainties.

Now, the reason Bass Phillip was founded, which meant a change of professions quite a few years ago, was basically because a keen wine buyer and drinker wanted to have a go at it. That shows some understanding of where consumers are coming from to some extent. There are no consumers speaking today, and they’re an important part of the equation, so let’s look at this very quickly.

Firstly, the rocket scientist problem: to understand the class types and the designations and so on that may or may not be written on a wine bottle when you pick it up in the supermarket, you really have to have some special background. It’s difficult to understand it. When asked recently ‘What about gold medals? How important are they?’ the sommelier in a popular restaurant a few two nights ago said, ‘Oh, they’re not important at all,’ and he cited two examples. He brought the bottles out. One of them was a very nice Cabernet which had this large gold medal upon which was written ‘Medaille d’Or Brussels 2000’—some wine competition in Brussels, absolutely meaningless to anybody. When asked, ‘Well, have you had experience of people asking about that?’ he said, ‘No. Two nights ago we had a group of Americans here.’ They had a look at the bottle. They didn’t read the medal, they didn’t ask about it. They just looked at the bottle and they said, ‘Oh, well, it’s Coonawarra, it’s 1998. Yeah, we want that.’

And so we come back to one of the comments of that wine merchant earlier, who said, ‘Medals are not so important.’ It’s a small boutique shop, but a very experienced wine merchant, and he basically said the important factors for people buying quality wines were a question as to the region of origin, the performance of the wine, particularly the vintage, and some history about the wine production company and the winemaker. They were the three important issues for him.

The second example in this restaurant was a very heavy 14.5% alcohol Shiraz which had won some prominent medals in a regional show. In fact, the print on the two gold stamps on the label was so small that it was unreadable without a magnifying glass. The sommelier translated: ‘It says class 11. What does that mean? The Americans were offered this wine a few nights before and they didn’t want it because the region didn’t appeal to them. This poses some questions about consumers’ reaction to medals on bottles. Other issues of concern—unfinished wines, cellaring potential and so on—have been handled quite fully. What’s concerning is the position for consumers and how the results of the show system might impact on our marketing of wines, now that we’re dealing with a global market. Now, Peter Dawson touched on some aspects of that earlier, and the Australian show judging results fit into a total segmented pattern of information that’s available to consumers nationally and internationally. What are the priorities? What makes people buy wine internationally, because it seems that a very high percentage of our production in the next few years has got to go internationally and not just be consumed here. The Royal Agricultural Society show results are very low on the list. Now, this is basically in line with what Peter had said. If we’re to present and promote and market our wines overseas—and if you see it as important that the show judging system contribute to the whole issue—then the show judging approach and the results need to be slotted into the right niche in a total presentation of information. Maybe that's
something for discussion further on.

Basically, there are three areas in which the show system has an influence, and the first is in technical quality control, benchmarking, improving the breed. That’s being done very thoroughly. The second respect is in style guidance, and there are a lot of questions about that. How relevant is it? Style appreciation is a very subjective thing, and it seems that show judges are not personally accountable for their decisions about those things.

The third one is marketing impact. The wine market is highly segmented, the products are highly segmented and the available scores, rating systems and benchmarks are quite segmented, from show judging results right up to the scoring systems out of 100 that some of the journalists specialise in, and do very well. There is a need for a horses-for-courses approach to looking at the way in which we promote the results of these rating systems.

Just to simplify, there are three respects in which we need to look at that. One is for commercial/industrial wines or perhaps, just for argument’s sake, wines that are less than $30 or $35 a bottle. That’s clearly a realm in which the show judging results are contributing a great deal. In the ultra-premium and icon classes we have renowned experts who, whether they’re doing masked or open label tastings, have a lot to say, and the international market takes note of that.

Lastly, there are rating systems around the traps based on the history of performance of wine producers. Now here’s a disappointment. A few weeks ago, this little commercial lift-out fell out of a newspaper that was being used to stack between layers of bottles in a bin in the winery, and it shows Houghton’s White Burgundy—one of the great wines of Australia at the low end of the price range, and probably one of the three best value-for-money white wines around—and it’s written up here as having four bronze medals and becoming one of Australia’s favourite BYO bottles. But there was no reference to the fact of its great heritage, background and the respect that we should beaccording it. So there’s a history of great wines in this country which have been continued by the large companies.

Another measure is free market auction performance. We have a Langton’s rating system in this country. Overseas buyers take note of that. How can we weave that into a total package for marketing ourselves?

**Philip Jones** concluded with these remarks:

That’s virtually all I have to say. I guess, to finish the story about the times I entered the show system, my first vintage of Pinot in 1984 came last in the Lilydale Show regional show judging. It’s still not a bad drink. And the ’85? I did a lot better with the ’85 vintage in the ’86 show. It came second-last, but I have no axe to grind about this. A magnum of that wine sold six months ago for 400 bucks, so somebody must like it.

Thanks for your time.