



On with the show—or not?

With marketing dollars under more scrutiny these days do wine shows represent the best bang for your buck? MISHA WILKINSON looks at wine shows in New Zealand.

Reverberating in my mind is a story I heard a few weeks ago about a well-regarded winemaker who was doing some contract winemaking in addition to crafting his own wines. He was asked by some bright-eyed hopefuls if he could make a gold-medal Pinot Noir for them. He said he could and proceeded over the next year to do so. With the wine duly delivered to the small winegrower, it was subsequently entered in its first show and won gold. Job done. A gold medal wine was produced exactly as per specifications—or was that a wine that just *happened* to win gold—and is there a difference? There was no gold medal in sight for the winemaker's own wine—which was either not up to par or he just chose not to enter the competition.

I've heard a lot of winemakers and winery owners cast aspersions on those wines that seem to win every award on the planet, often with comments along the lines of "it's not a serious wine, it's a show wine" or, "if the judges had gone back and tasted the wines the following

day it would have been a very different result". That may well sound like sour grapes, but could there also be some truth in it? A wine like a Pinot Noir, the petulant variety that it is, may not present as well a few weeks after bottling as it might do the following year, or even two or three years after that. In fact, any well-structured wine that's been sitting in oak for many months may have a nose that's somewhat closed until it's had some time in bottle to mature. Perhaps it's often the case that wines with less structure and made in a style that doesn't require long cellaring time, may be better equipped to flaunt themselves at a show with their more overt and beguiling aromas and a palate that exudes an abundance of fruit, warmth and soft tannins.

But the economic reality is you probably can't wait for even a year or two before entering your wines in competitions because, a) you're unlikely to have much stock left when you do (and there are some minimum stock levels required for most competitions), or b) you'll be out of business because of the lack of cashflow while paying for warehousing costs without selling anything. So the question facing wine producers is whether wine shows are really the best way to have your wine evaluated and celebrated—or is it better

just to field comments and scores from individual journalists in private tastings and samples sent out for review?

Olly Masters, one of New Zealand's foremost winemakers and judges with four of NZ's top five wine shows to his credit for just this year, says, "From my point of view the main role of wine shows is to improve the quality of New Zealand wine, although this is not how wine shows sell themselves—but it is why I'm there." Masters' view is that not all wines that deserve medals get them but, more importantly, bad wines do not get medals. On the question of why certain wines do better in shows, Masters concedes that unfortunately being subtle is not the easiest way to get noticed in a crowd. He says the next challenge for judges is to spot "the weirdo standing still".

Masters admits there are potential flaws in the show judging system compared to how you might carry out the exercise from a purely scientific point of view, but given that taste is actually subjective he tends to regard shows as just part of the marketing effort rather than the answer to it. "These days I think there are very few wines that win golds or trophies that you wouldn't enjoy a glass of, but whether all of them are still entertaining you at the end of the evening is where they differ," he says.

In NZ there are five main wine shows

(excluding the odd regional or varietal specific show and a supermarket show which sets a retail pricing maximum). Four of the shows are similar in size, with the fifth, the Romeo Bragato Wine Awards, attracting about half the number of the others and focused on recognising viticultural excellence (e.g. single vineyard wines).

As with all wine shows in various markets, the bigger ones seem to compete with each other in terms of which is the biggest, or oldest, or even the newest. The four biggest shows are the New Zealand International Wine Show, the Liquorland Top 100 International Wine Competition, the Royal Easter Show Wine Awards and the Air New Zealand Wine Awards—the latter two being exclusively for NZ wines. (See www.wineshow.co.nz for information on all these shows).

The New Zealand International Wine Show wins the title for the newest show (starting in 2005) and by all reports is also now the largest, boasting more than 2,000



Nearly 700 guests gathered in Christchurch in November for the Air New Zealand Wine Awards. Photos courtesy of New Zealand Winegrowers.

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entries in 2009 with domestic and international wines entered. Next, in its 16th year, is the Liquorland Top 100 International Wine Competition receiving 1,480 entries this year from some 200 wine producers around the globe. This show, with a slightly different twist to the others, has an objective to find the 100 best wines available in NZ and describes itself as “New Zealand’s largest commercial wine competition”.

Then there are the two shows specifically for NZ wines. The Royal Easter Show Wine Awards wins the title of NZ’s oldest competition with this year’s show being the 56th. With 1,562 entries, it seems to be increasing in popularity with entries up 17% on last year. (Perhaps its popularity has something to do with the 952 medals that were awarded this year—60.9% of entries).

That just leaves the Air New Zealand

support from naming-rights sponsor Air New Zealand, they also qualify for being the biggest wine show specifically for NZ wines attracting 1,655 entries this year, just down from 1,751 wines last year.

Participating in all these top wine shows is a very expensive proposition and every winery needs to have a show strategy in place with respect to what they enter, why they enter and whether the possible results justify the ‘investment’. For example, if one was to enter their best Pinot Noir in each of the four largest NZ wine shows, it would cost NZ\$260 in entry fees and a total of 19 bottles of Pinot Noir to satisfy all the entry requirements. If that wine was to win gold in all four shows (or make it to the top 100 list in the case of the Liquorland show), an extra NZ\$1,625 in promotional fees would be required plus an additional 29 bottles of Pinot Noir. And

don’t forget there are also those additional clauses with some shows giving them the right to purchase more wine “at a concessional wholesale rate” and of course then you have a range of gold stickers to purchase.

These costs certainly make one think about other less expensive (and more assured) ways of garnering some positive accolades for one’s wines. While it may be comforting to think you’re making a magnanimous gesture by playing your part in improving a nation’s wine quality, as per Masters’ view on the purpose of shows, methinks there needs to be a little more of “what’s in it for me?” given the cost—and of course the potential embarrassment when your Reserve gets pipped at the post by a second label newcomer.

And of course the cost of show participation doesn’t end there. As NZ is exporting to more and more markets, so too are there more and more wines appearing in an ever-increasing variety of shows across Australia, the US, UK and more recently in Asia.

But back to NZ where “the most prestigious” wine show has just concluded and it would be remiss of me not to mention the highlights. The industry’s largest black-tie event was held in Christchurch in November with nearly 700 guests attending. The Elite Gold medal winning wines were announced along with the trophy winners. Taking Champion Wine of the Show was Julicher Pinot Noir 2008—the first time in 30 years that a Martinborough Pinot Noir has claimed the top trophy, and a Central Otago Riesling, Olssens Annieburn Riesling 2009 was named top sustainable wine. (Full list of winners at www.airnzwineawards.co.nz)

For all the gold medal and trophy winners, the Air New Zealand Wine Awards has a very complete program of post-event marketing as well as taking New Zealand’s “best and brightest” to be “discovered” in Australia at trade and media tastings and degustation dinners. So that’s all great news for the winners, but I wonder if those with less than gold feel the investment was justified?

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Wine Awards, which have been running for almost 30 years and long been regarded as the official competition of the NZ wine industry on the basis that it is run by NZ’s grapegrowing and winemaking industry body, New Zealand Winegrowers. Positioned as NZ’s “most prestigious” wine competition with

if the wine won a trophy in the three shows that offer them, a further NZ\$595 would be required and another two free cases of Pinot Noir. So all in all, a Pinot Noir that performs brilliantly across all four shows could cost a total of NZ\$2,481 plus 72 free bottles of your best drop—and that’s just with one wine entered. And