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Felix Salmon

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The decline of the Robert Parker empire

By Felix Salmon | DECEMBER 17, 2012

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WINE

Since I'm on the subject of fallen emperors, it's worth catching up with the latest Robert Parker news.

Decanter's Adam Lechmere has seen an email to French wine blogger Vincent Pousson, which seems to confirm the rumors: Parker isn't just giving up editorial control of The Wine Advocate, but also 'command and control' of the business as a whole.

The price here seems astonishingly low. If Parker has 50,000 subscribers paying \$75 per year, that's \$3.75 million in annual print revenue alone; the company's new revenues, from online advertising, 'virtual tastings', and a series of international wine education courses, will probably be bigger still.

That said, Parker's influence has already been evaporating for some time, as Eric Asimov points out; Talia Baiocchi, for one, reckons that he's had very little influence on her at all. One reason: Parker helped make first-growth Bordeaux so expensive that it's nowadays basically impossible to afford what Brits of my father's or grandfather's generation would consider a basic wine education.

Among Parker's acolytes, however, his influence is still incredibly strong. Jeff Leve was shocked that I might say that an 85-point wine is sometimes better than a 95-point wine, and in the comments even goes so far as to suggest that it's possible to do the same thing for pop music.

I was also recently pointed to a column by Jason Wilson, who teaches a wine class for students.

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Felix Salmon is the finance blogger at Reuters.

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The students, displaying an admirable quantity of common sense, pushed back when Wilson tried to describe wines by talking about “the sensation of licking stones”, or cow manure, or petrol. “It wasn’t the wines that my students found gross,” he writes: “it was the descriptions — the standard wine-world terms — that were turning them off.”

And yet Wilson was seemingly incapable of stopping himself from using such ridiculous terms to describe wine. He’d become so deeply Parkerized that the *only* way he could talk about wine was by using elaborate and silly olfactory metaphors — the kind of language that, pre-Parker, no one would ever dare attempt. (The Brits had their own silly wine language, too — as [wonderfully recounted by Malcom McLaren](#) — but it wasn’t as silly, even if it was just as intimidating.)

Parker’s influence will live on, then, whatever happens to TWA, and even if we’re seeing a diminishing marginal effect of his new ratings on wine values. Every time you pick up a label which starts talking about raspberries and vanilla, every time you see a wine graded on a linear point scale, and nearly every time you encounter any kind of [blind tasting](#): behind it all is the influence of Parker. I sincerely hope that the whole edifice will crumble, but that’s going to take decades. But at least now we’re headed in the right direction.

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DEC 17, 2012
12:07 AM UTC

I’m mostly on board with you – huge Talia Baiocchi fan, never really cared about Parker in part because I can’t afford to drink along with him – but I will say I find “cow manure” and “petrol” and similar unromantic olfactory terms accurate and helpful. And I find the old-British sexualized style of wine writing extremely tiresome and unhelpful when, for instance, Jay McInerney does it every two weeks in the Journal.

Posted by MattL | [Report as abusive](#)

DEC 17, 2012
4:50 AM UTC

There are only TWO objective categories of wine: the undrinkable that anybody with taste buds can identify and the drinkable. Within the drinkable it is all just personal taste. Everything else is silly pretense. Useful for snobs and others to waste time discussing.

Posted by Chris08 | [Report as abusive](#)

DEC 18, 2012
8:05 AM UTC

Two categories?

No, let’s make that four:

- The undrinkable, ‘nough said
- The acceptable, many wines, actually. It’s hard to really foul up a wine nowadays, anyway. Most affordable decent Parker favorites rank there.
- The truly pleasant, all those little unexpected wonders you can stumble upon now and then, those wines that have that little *quelque chose* that makes for memories, just not those overtly wooded bludgeons Parker

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spent his career promoting.

- The inspiring, like a really good quarts-de-chaume you marry on a whimsey with a well matured livarot at the close of a late summer lunch, and then, shhhhpahhhh, a moment words cannot describe.

Then, there is a fifth category, the unaffordable, which, even if you can actually afford it, blows such a hole in your pocket and your self-respect that you cannot really appreciate it, no matter how good it is (and it isn't always so great anyway).

Posted by Frwip | [Report as abusive](#)

DEC 18, 2012
2:40 PM UTC

"Acceptable, truly pleasant, inspiring"...what are those but expressions of personal taste? I stick with two categories.

Posted by Chris08 | [Report as abusive](#)

DEC 18, 2012
3:45 PM UTC

This is the last time I'll quote this, even if this time I've modified it a bit. "The market for wine is unlike any other, because it's built on some notion of true, underlying value"

As Lindmann would say: De gustibus et coloribus non est disputandum. But to take that seriously that would have to apply to values as well, so the point is not the right and wrong but the argument. Would you rather have an ongoing debate about wines, or follow someone else's prescriptions? The criticism of Parker's enological monoculture is longstanding.

And of course Taleb would call it "fragile".

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Posted by Juan1 | [Report as abusive](#)

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