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Big numbers, bright lights

Wine critic Robert Parker J. and his 100-point rating system has helped to cement the image of Central Coast wines as a region of world-renowned, quality varietals

By Ermina Karim

In the most recent issue of *The Wine Advocate*, influential wine writer Robert Parker rated more than 700 Central Coast wines, giving high marks to many San Luis Obispo County wines. A high score by the man who invented the 100-point ranking system -and is seen by many as the most important wine critic in the world- can translate into sold out wines. A low score is dreaded. Either way, local wineries say that Parker has had a significant influence on elevating the profile of San Luis Obispo Country wines on the national and international horizon.

Stephan Asseo, owner and winemaker at L'Aventure in Paso Robles, saw the immediate impact of Parker's clout when the August 28 report was published. Several L'Aventure wines scored above 95 -including one that garnered a rare 98- meaning that Parker thought the wine was extraordinary. The scores hit the Web site in the early morning hours of August 30, and by the time Asseo had arrived at the winery that day, he had received more than 100 orders.

"We immediately sold out of our wines," said Asseo, who explained that the winery had placed about two-thirds of its wine before the scores sold out. L'Aventure produces 8,000 cases of wine annually.

"We could have sold five times the volume on every wine he reviewed," he added. "The effect is huge, huge, huge." To be clear, L'Aventure has scored well historically with wines earning scores in the 90 to 95 point range. However, the bump up above a 95 "put us in a new dimension," Asseo said.

The Parker effect

Launched in 1978 by Parker, a former attorney, The Wine Advocate is a bimonthly newsletter that touts itself as the independent consumer guide to fine wines. With a subscription base of nearly 55,000 readers between the newsletter and Web site, The Wine Advocate publishes nearly 6,000 wine reviews a year. The scoring system is quite straightforward. A 90 to 100 score is equivalent to an "A" -although there is a significant difference between a 90 and a 99. An 80 to 89 equals a "B" and a 70 to 79 is a "C". Wines that make the pages of The Wine Advocate typically score above an 86.

Parker's grading system has revolutionized how wine is perceived and purchased. The scores make it easy for consumers to understand a wine, so retailers quote them in promotional materials and on shelf talkers. In addition to quantifying the quality of a wine, Parker was instrumental in introducing readers to a dramatically larger world of wine. He promotes wine he enjoys -not just the traditional enclaves of fine winemaking such as France. Parker is often on the go, sampling wines all over the world. He was unavailable for comment for this article because he was out of the country on a wine tasting trip.

"One of the inestimably significant things that he has done is democratized the wine industry," said John Alban of Alban Vineyards in the Edna Valley. He is consistently the recipient of the highest Parker ratings in San Luis Obispo County.

"In an industry where birthright used to tell the whole story, Parker has made it such that you can be a nobody in a garage making 5 gallons of wine. If you make the right 5 gallons, you can be a superstar. That had never happened before," he said.

Good scores equal sales

Indeed, a high score in Parker's Wine Advocate -one of a handful of publications closely followed by wine lovers- stirs up demand for a wine and helps to ensure good sales.

"Without question, it makes our job easier," said Benjamin Kirschner, domestic business development manager at Frederick Wildman & Sons, a New York-based wine importer that represents several area wineries including L'Aventure.

"A very high score means I can sell the wine without even having the buyer taste the wines," he added. "It becomes more of a question of whether the restaurant can get the wine, rather than if we will sell the wine."

Brian Denner, the winemaker at his family winery, Denner Vineyards in Paso Robles, saw a surge in hits on the winery Web site and received numerous calls and emails from consumers, retailers and distributors after Parker's

most recent report came out. Labeled an "up-and-coming winery" by Parker, Denner wines received scores ranging from 88 to 93.

"It really puts you on more people's radar," he said. "We were pretty excited. We've seen a good pop in interest."

Wineries and wine sales people take advantage of a good score to market the wines and reach a broader audience of buyers.

"I use it (Parker scores) every day of the week to sell my wine. I have copies of the reviews, and I share them with my sales staff and my customers. We also send the reviews to our extensive mailing list," said Doug Beckett, owner/vintner of Peachy Canyon Winery in Paso Robles.

Wine scores are so closely watched and utilized that a low score is feared. After consistently receiving scores in the upper 80s in recent years, Edna Valley-based Baileyana Winery was dealt a 75 for one of its wines in the most recent review.

"We're definitely disappointed with the score," said winemaker Christian Roguenant. After receiving word of the score, Roguenant and several others at the winery immediately conducted an internal tasting against several similar area wines. Their conclusion was that the bottle submitted to Parker was probably a bad bottle. They decided to not make any changes to the winemaking going forward.

Roguenant has not seen the score affect the wine's success at being placed in restaurants. However, he said "it will absolutely have an impact at the retail level, which is more sensitive to scores."

"We got nailed on this one, but we will go on," Roguenant said. "We got good scores last year, and we will get them again."

Central Coast advocate

Parker's impact on the Central Coast goes far beyond recognizing a few industry leaders. For several years, he has been a strong proponent for the region as a whole. In 2004, he famously predicted in Food and Wine Magazine that "California's Central Coast will rule America," noting that "no viticultural region in America has demonstrated as much progress in quality and potential for greatness as the Central Coast, with its Rhone varieties."

Then in October 2004, he granted Central Coast Rhone varieties -more than 20 grape varieties like Syrah and Viognier, which are grown in France's Rhone Valley- a spot in his vintage guide, which is a rating of each vintage for the major wine regions of the world. While entire wine producing nations -like New Zealand or South Africa- are not yet included in the vintage guide, the Central Coast Rhone varieties earned their own distinction. It is the only wine subcategory in California outside of the North Coast.

"Parker has given this area a stamp of credibility to the whole world. The Advocate is not simply looked at in one region. It's translated into multiple languages and followed by the cognoscenti," Alban said. "When the Central Coast gets a chance to have the spotlight on that big of a stage, it's a bright light."

Local wine industry professionals uniformly said that the strong scores that a number of wineries received in the August report speak to the high quality of winemaking in San Luis Obispo County. They believe that it will help to further validate the region to a wider audience.

"His scoring was a very forceful statement about the overall quality of the region," said Jason Haas, general manager at Tablas Creek Vineyard.

Lorraine Alban, president of J & L Wines Inc., a Central California wine distributor, and the wife of John Alban, said that she was surprised by the number of wines that received a 95 or higher."

"Paso Robles used to be a stigma. The region wasn't respected," she said. "Robert Parker has gotten behind us and supported the wines. He's helped to raise the respect of the region for buyers out of this area." John Alban is hopeful that the momentum for the region will continue.

"If it were just one wine or winery (receiving high scores), it would be a neat oddity. When it's a number of wineries, it has critical mass. It's a happening that can build on itself and snowball," Alban said.

"I don't know how far it can go, but I don't think any of us thought it would go as far as it has."