

Judging a wine competition ... or the selection of the best darn drink

By Kris Stafford

The desire to hold an impartial, fair, wine competition prevents us from arbitrarily selecting individuals to judge competitions. Sure it requires someone who doesn't have a stake in the outcome, but people are fickle in what they like. Consistency is good, but unlike marriage where faults are difficult to see (hopefully), recognition of faults is essential. Both of these traits are vital for a meaningful competition.

Judge certification, now there's our answer. After searching two alternatives become evident. The American Wine Society has a certification process or we can look to see how the problem was solved in other guilds. If time is irrelevant the AWS has an excellent program. Certification takes a minimum of 3 years (max of 4). After passing a qualifying test, an individual can enter the program.

Year 1: Essentials of Wine Evaluation includes vocabulary, components, appearance, aroma, flavors, texture, balance, flaws, as well as objective evaluation and scoring.

Year 2: Factors Affecting Wine Quality and Variety Identification includes topics on influence of viticultural (grape growing) and enological (winemaking) practices, variety characterization and identification, wine styles, wine components and flaws, and objective evaluation and scoring.

Year 3: Judging of Wine Styles includes classes and types of wines, blending, judging environment, wine components, wine competitions, and objective evaluation and scoring.

This curriculum verifies the wine acumen of the judge, but it does fall short on one issue. Where is the verification that the judge has consistency in rating wines.

The San Antonio Regional Wine Guild, went a slightly different route. Who can blame them, aging wine can be a laudable goal, but aging the judges just delays the fun. They tried external certification processes, but finally decided to craft a curriculum which meets their needs and desires. There are 2 types of certification "Certified Home Wine Judge" (CHWJ) and "Certified Wine Judge" (CWJ). Completion of the following 3 test is rewarded with receiving the CHWJ certification.

Test 1. Fault detection. Ten wines will be tasted with known faults. The aspirant must identify at least six of the faults correctly to pass the test. Faults will be typical type faults that are encountered by home winemakers.

Test 2. Consistency Test. Five different white wines will be tasted and ranked by the aspirant. Then, the same five wines will be presented and ranked again. The process will be repeated a third time. The aspirant must rank the five with no more than two bottles being out of place in the three rankings. The process is then repeated with five red wines.

Test 3. Wine Classification / Balance Analysis Test. For this test the aspirant will use the SARWG wine judging form. A selection of ten wines having specific class characteristics, such as a Rhine-style white wine, dessert wine, dry red wine, etc. will be tasted. The aspirant must correctly match at least seven of the wines to the correct class. The classes will be the same as designated in the SARWG by-laws for the semi-annual home wine competition.

They can be taken in any order and there is no timeframe requirement (the website mentions a 1 yr limit, but this is really overlooked).

Completion of a fourth test is required to remove the term "Home" from the certification.

Test 4. Wine Varietal Recognition Test. Ten different varietal wines will be sampled. The aspirant must correctly identify six of the varieties to pass. Five of the varietal wines will be home made and five will be commercial.

Talking with Jack Keller, they offer 2 tests every year. So it is conceivable that we'd have a judge in less than 2 years. It turns out that SARWG's officers are currently holding their yearly planning. Jack is presenting to the group a request that people from the NTWG enter into their certification program. And, we've asked about currently certified judges coming north to help us with our competitions. We should know in a few weeks. Get the bottles ready!!!!