

THE DAVIS 20-POINT INTERNATIONAL WINE SCORING SYSTEM

Judging wine quality is not easy. Substantial amounts of practice (someone has to do it) and a systematic approach is required. Several wine judging methods have been developed, but the 20-point system, developed at the University of California Davis, is the method used by most professional winemakers and tasters. This system is easily learned, and it provides a practical and convenient wine evaluation tool. The 20-point system uses ten descriptive factors to evaluate wine quality. Each of these quality factors is discussed below.

1. CLARITY / APPEARANCE:

Wine is seen before it is tasted, so our first impression of wine is a visual one. Today, properly made wines are expected to be brilliantly clear, and consumers are always disappointed when a wine does not meet these visual expectations. Even the most zealous wine advocate shies away from turbid, dirty-looking wines, so appearance is always an important wine quality factor.

Several common conditions can cause cloudy wine. Clarity is the term judges use to describe the absence of suspended materials in wine. Suspended bacteria and yeast cells cause a hazy-white appearance. Similar milky-white hazes are caused by excessive amounts of iron. Excess copper often causes a reddish-brown haze. Tiny suspended crystals of potassium bitartrate can produce a dense, milky appearance in white wines.

Brilliant wines are clear and have a distinct sparkle (2). Bright-clear wines look like clean glass (1.5). Translucent wines have a dull appearance and may have a hint of haze (1.0). Cloudy wines exhibit an easily recognized haze (0.0).

2. COLOUR:

The hue, and how much color, constitutes another important wine quality factor. But, the human eye often has trouble distinguishing the hue in dark red wines. Hazy red wines often look somewhat darker in color, but wine clarity should NOT influence the score a judge gives for color. Color should always be typical for the type and age of the wine being judged.

Appropriate colors for white wines range from light straw to dark amber. Sometimes white table wines, such as Sauvignon Blanc, are a light straw color with a slight greenish tint. Brown tones may be appropriate for some types of white dessert wines, but brown shades are undesirable for white table wines. Colors for blush and rose wines range from light pink to light red. Brown shades are never appropriate for these wines, and orange tints are undesirable. Red wine colors range from light red to dark,

almost opaque red. Purple/violet shades are prevalent in young red wines. Brick or brownish shades may be appropriate for older red wines. In general, ready to drink, red table wines show neither purple/violet nor brown colors. Brown or tawny colors are often appropriate for older, red dessert wines.

When the color of a wine is typical for type and age, the score is (2.0). A nearly correct color receives a score of (1.5). When the color is slightly off, the score is (1.0). When wine color is distinctly off, the score is (0.0).

3. AROMA / BOUQUET:

Wine odors are complex and made up of many different components. To simplify describing wine odors, winemakers divide normal wine odors into two distinct components. One of these components is "aroma," and aromas refer to the odors in the wine imparted by the varietal characteristics of the grapes. The aroma characteristics of any wine are present in fresh juice before fermentation is started. For example, Muscat Blanc wine has a distinctive smell and most of this odor comes directly from the Muscat grapes used to make the wine. The best varietal wines exhibit easily detectable and discernable varietal aromas. Wine "bouquet" is the term used to describe the odors produced by the winemaking process. Wine bouquet is generated by fermentation byproducts, oak barrels, controlled wine oxidation, bottle aging, etc. The term "bottle bouquet" is used to describe the special odors that develop when some wines are aged in the bottle for several months. Bottle bouquet contributes to wine complexity.

Undesirable wine odors are occasionally encountered. These off-odors result from accidents or poor winemaking techniques. Sulfur dioxide, hydrogen sulfide, oxidized, raisin, green, mousiness, bacterial, rubber, moldy, etc. are a few of the off-odors encountered in wine.

The nose of a wine is composed of aroma, bouquet and any off-odors. If the nose is correct and has distinct varietal characteristics, the score is (4.0). Wines with a fruity nose are scored (3.0). Wines having a clean nose are scored (2.0). Wines with a fleeting or underdeveloped nose are scored (1.0). Wines with defective or off noses are scored (0.0).

4. TOTAL ACIDITY:

Wines taste balanced when the total acid, alcohol and body are in the correct proportions. Wines low in total acidity often taste flat, insipid and uninteresting. Wines with excessive amounts of total acid taste sharp, under-ripe and unbalanced. Wines with good balance and appropriate for the type are scored (2.0). Wines with slightly low or slightly high acid are scored (1.0). Flabby or overly tart wines are scored (0.0).

5. SWEETNESS:

Normal table wines are either dry or off dry. Dry table wines do not have a significantly sweet taste. Many table wines are finished with 0.5 to 0.74 % residual sugar. These small amounts of sugar can enhance the mouth feel but not produce perceptibly sweet tastes. Off dry table wines such as Riesling have a slightly sweet taste, but an appropriately high acid content balances the sweetness. Aperitif, sparkling and dessert wines contain large amounts of residual sugar, and they are expected to taste sweet. Consequently, some wines contain too much sugar and some wines contain too little sugar. A sweetness that provides a good balanced wine and one appropriate for the wine type is the desired condition. If the sweetness is appropriate and balanced, the wine is scored (1.0). If the wine is sweet edged (slightly too sweet) or not quite sweet enough, the wine is scored (0.5). If the wine is cloying, syrupy or lacking, it is scored (0.0).

6. BODY / TEXTURE:

The body of a wine is a difficult concept to describe. Body is a way of describing the way wine feels in the mouth. A mouthful of milk feels differently than a mouth full of water. The milk feels heavier and thicker than water. The same concept applies to wine. A full-bodied wine feels heavy and viscous in the mouth, and the drinker is inclined to chew the wine. Dark red table wines are more likely to be full-bodied than white table wines, and the body should be appropriate for the wine type. If the body of a wine is appropriate, the wine is scored (2.0). If the body of a wine is nearly correct, the wine is scored (1.5). If the body of a wine is slightly thin or heavy, the wine is scored (1.0). If the body of a wine is empty, thin or clumsy, the wine is scored (0.0).

7. TASTE / FLAVOR:

Wines have a tremendous range of tastes and flavors, and the flavor changes as the wine ages and matures. This wine quality factor addresses how well the various flavors interact with each other. The flavors should be typical for the type of wine, and the wine should be smooth and balanced. In other words, Sauvignon Blanc wines should taste like Sauvignon Blanc, not like Riesling.

If the flavor is complex, the wine is scored (2.0). If the flavor is fruity, the wine is scored (1.5). If the flavor is agreeable, the wine is scored (1.0). If the flavor is lacking, the wine is scored (0.0).

8. BITTERNESS:

In general, bitterness is undesirable in wines because bitterness contributes to harshness. Most wines should be well balanced with no discernable bitterness. However, some grape varieties, such as Muscat, often exhibit slight amounts of bitterness, and skillful winemaking is needed to minimize this inherent bitterness. In

general, these wines should not be downgraded because of this varietal characteristic unless the wine is unbalanced and the bitterness detracts from the wine. If the wine is balanced, the score is (1.0). If the wine is citric or slightly bitter, the score is (0.5). If the wine is bitter, the score is (0.0).

9. FINISH/ASTRINGENCY:

Excess tannin in wine produces a dry, puckering sensation in the mouth, and it gives the teeth a coated feeling. Astringency is the term used to describe these sensations. White wines contain less tannin than red wines, and in general, white wines should not exhibit much astringency. Young red wines often contain excess tannin, and they may exhibit too much astringency. However, astringency decreases as red wines age, and properly aged red wines become smooth and round. Since astringency changes as wines age, some judgement must be exercised when tasting young red wines. If the finish of the wine is appropriate for age, the score is (1.0). If the finish is nearly correct, the score is (0.5). If the finish is astringent or harsh, the score is (0.0).

10. GENERAL QUALITY:

Many judges use this factor to fudge their scores one way or another. Some wines may not look very good but taste great. Other wines may score well on all the above factors but may not taste quite up to par. All of the above factors contribute to the general quality of a wine, and drinking the wine should be a pleasurable experience. Noble, etc. tasting wines are scored (4.0). Charming tasting wines are scored (3.0). Characteristic tasting wines are scored (2.0). Wines with no exceptional features are scored (0.0).

11. MEDAL CLASSIFICATION:

Gold Medal :: 18.5 points or more
Silver Medal :: Between 17 and 18.4 points
Bronze Medal :: Between 15.5 and 16.9 points