

South Lake Tahoe restaurateur judges State Fair wine competition

By Evan Williams

SACRAMENTO – The announcements, introductions and instructions have been dispensed with. You wait patiently at your table and the sound of faintly tinkling glassware grows louder as carts laden with wine glasses, each filled with 2 ounces and labeled with a numerical code, begin to parade into the hall. The glasses are lined up in front of you with great care by the stewards. Your panel assistants have provided you with pencils, water, palate cleansers, and a large spit bucket because there is no swallowing. Your clerk provides you with the scoring sheets and now your job begins.

You, and the other three judges on your panel, combined with the other 68 judges in attendance now must determine the good, the bad and the ugly from the nearly 3,000 wines submitted to the California State Fair Wine Competition.

Let the fun begin!



South Lake Tahoe's Evan Williams at the 2013 California State Fair wine

judging. Photo/Provided

Well, actually, we try to make it fun and lighthearted, but it really is pretty serious business, and surprisingly taxing – not physically, but mentally.

I am always mindful that some very hardworking winemaker has poured their blood, sweat and tears into the wine I am about to examine. But I must try to fairly and objectively evaluate this wine and, to the best of my ability, score it in a way that will hopefully aid the retail purchaser looking for good quality and value in their wine purchase.

I've been judging wines since the late 1980s and have worked this competition since 2001. In that time I've seen an evolution in the process from the old "retain or eliminate" format through the "Peterson Method" (named for Dr. Richard Peterson, this is an evaluation process I personally favored, but which could result in the daunting prospect of having as many as 80 to 100 wines on the table at once) and now back to lower volume flights. New this year were computerized entries with a wireless terminal at each panel; greatly helping the clerks in their jobs and expediting the scoring process.

It is the nature of wine competitions that, with few exceptions, the super-premium producers do not submit their wines for judging, nor would it make any sense for them to do so. First, they sell out every vintage, so they really have no need to promote any further. Secondly, they are in a no-win situation. If they win a gold medal, people would say, "Sure they won a gold, look at the price they charge!" And if they don't win a gold, even harsher criticism befalls them, "Look at the price they charge for those wines and they can't even get a gold!"

So what you have at these events are primarily two categories of producers. The high-volume vintners hope they can benefit from having their less expensive wines favorably scored so

they are able to market them as good quality wines and a great value. Then there are the smaller and/or newer producers who have limited marketing dollars and staff, but are able to capitalize on good competition results in press releases and in their tasting rooms, and don't all those pretty ribbons and medals look nice on the wall?

Becoming a judge

What does it take to become a wine judge? Well, you need to taste a great deal of wine! As a buyer for the last 35 years, I am fortunate to have wine show up at my door on a frequent basis. And I do try to taste everything. But it's important also to know what you are tasting, as well, and to be able to identify faults, flaws and additives. And that's where experience, and the UC Davis Advanced Tasting Seminar, comes in.

This is a fundamental, yet fairly intensive wine class that will give you a sound basis for evaluating wines, covering most of the more common defects you might encounter in wines and allow you to test your sensory evaluation capabilities. Then a prospective judge must pass the Sensory Evaluation Exam, as administered by UC Davis, after which the fair officials will accept your application to be a judge.

The California State Fair Wine Competition is the only one that requires all judges to be credentialed.

Starting the process

In professional wine judging (and in the restaurant business, too), there is the problem of inherent differences in individual palates, a phenomenon which was documented in some groundbreaking work by Tim Hanni, MW, who was invariably puzzled as to how two people could taste the same wine and have such remarkably divergent opinions about it (and how this leads to sometimes emotional disagreements on judging panels). In his research, Hanni discovered that it really just boils

down to genetics.

Some people are born with significantly more papillae on their tongues than other people, and there's not a thing to be done about it. Those with the most papillae are referred to as "hyper-sensitive" and comprise roughly 25 percent of the population. (There is actually a small subset of this group called "sweet tasters" who are quite literally are the proverbial "sweet teeth".) Then there are the approximately 50 percent in the middle who are called "sensitive" and then there are the remaining 25 percent who have the least amount of papillae on their tongues and are known as "tolerant" tasters.

The tolerant tasters typically enjoy hot and spicy foods, big, tannic red wines, martinis and single malt scotches along with IPA beers and cigars. The hyper-sensitive tasters are always trying to mask bitter; bitter is their mortal enemy. They drink their cream "with a little coffee in it", usually sweetened heavily. They cannot tolerate grapefruit or artificial sweeteners such as may be found in diet sodas, and given their preference, will gravitate toward white and even dessert style wines. They also are big on salty snacks, and you might think that a contradiction for the "hyper-sensitive" to be salt hounds but again, it is all in the effort to mask bitterness.

Typically, the "hyper-sensitive" will have a more heightened olfactory (and even auditory) sense, as well. The nose is really where most of the heavy lifting of wine appreciation takes place. The tongue is a relatively crude instrument, detecting sweet, sour, salty and bitter, as well as "umami", another discovery for which Hanni is credited.

"Umami" is a term used to describe the savory sensation of most meat proteins. In the aforementioned "Peterson Method" a taster could evaluate larger flights of wines by first relying purely on the nose to begin to differentiate and then rank the

wines into groupings, again based solely on the bouquet and aroma of the wine. (I found this to work well for me.) In a large flight you might spend an hour or more establishing a ranking based on the nose before you even begin to taste a single wine. With rare exceptions, an attractive smelling wine will be pleasant in the mouth as well, but evaluation obviously requires wines be tasted for acidity, sweetness, flavors, mouth-feel and finish.

Then the rankings are further adjusted after tasting to allow to best wines to ascend to the top.

It's no great surprise that most chefs are "hyper-sensitive", as am I, and I have a nose like a bloodhound, which can be a curse at times. My wife, on the other hand, is "tolerant" (some may say she would have to be to live with me) so we complement each other nicely. She eats all the hot food and drinks the Grey Goose and I eat the M&Ms and drink the Chardonnay. (I am still able to evaluate and score big, reds but it's not what I would generally choose to do. Given my druthers I usually opt for whites and frequently end up judging Chardonnays, something a great many judges find boring and tedious, but a long day of Petite Sirahs and Zinfandels will absolutely scorch my palate).

Working together

This year my gracious panel mates were Carol Shelton, owner-winemaker of Carol Shelton Wines and the "Queen of Zinfandel"; Chris Macias, food and wine writer for the *Sacramento Bee*; and David Crippen, director of winemaking for Renwood Wines, right in our own backyard of Amador.

We enjoyed fairly good consensus and more than our share of laughs. It really helps if things don't get too tense on a panel. But what happens when you get a "hyper-sensitive", two "sensitives" and a "tolerant" on a panel? You end up all over the map and it can get to be a very trying scenario. There's a

certain amount of “horse trading” which goes on in every panel, and you just have to give up some ground sometimes in hopes of getting some back later. Everyone will push for their favorite wines and if you don’t help out a little, you won’t get any love back when it’s your turn to push your favorites. So you have to go along to get along. Usually it’s a pretty equitable process.

It was a time of change for the California State Fair Wine Competition this year as longtime (26 years) chief judge G.M. “Pooch” Pucilowski has moved on and was replaced by *Sacramento Bee* food and wine writers and venerable judges, Mike Dunne and Rick Kushman.

Many new judges appeared this year as well. Transitions are always fraught with little glitches and this was no exception. But it seems the event is in capable hands and will go forward fairly seamlessly. Kem Pence keeps a steady hand on the proceedings and the staff and volunteers (over 100). They always go above and beyond the call of duty to see to it that things go smoothly. It is a big event with a lot of moving parts, and I am always impressed with the fluidity with which it runs.

The “Continuing Education” Judge’s Seminar this year was an outstanding presentation on oak flavoring products as produced by Oak Solutions Group, and how this is such a remarkable asset for the winemaker to have in their “tool kit” to not only save money on very expensive oak barrels, but customize flavors and toast levels with more than 100 different oak profiles from which to choose. As a self-confessed “oak whore” this is really cool stuff, and perhaps a topic for another piece.

Evan Williams is the owner of Evan’s American Gourmet Cafe and Cantina restaurants in South Lake Tahoe.