

HOW BURGUNDY IS TASTED AND EVALUATED FROM BARREL

I find it interesting that wines now are most often sold with numbers, but no description of the wine. To me, an accurate (i.e devoid of hype) description is what I am looking for. Numbers are just one person's opinion which do not correspond to everyone's taste. And, the numbers do not say when or how the wine was tasted – before or after bottling, with hundreds of other wines, or alone. Most people who use numbers now use a range of numbers for wines tasted from barrel, but once again there is no indication of when the wine was tasted. Tasting wine from barrel is very different than tasting wine after bottling. And the earlier it is tasted the more difficult it is to evaluate the wine. Tasting after the wine has been in barrel for a year or so is easier than tasting it earlier. Generally the easiest time to taste is in the barrel or in the holding tanks just before bottling. Here you can get the best idea of what the bottled wine is likely to become.

When tasting wine from the barrel, there is the matter of barrel variation and not tasting the final blend. Hence, I find very precise notes on wines tasted at this stage of evolution to be at best an educated guess and at worst not accurate.

So we try not to make excuses for wines that are in a stage where they do not show their real potential. For instance, we do not taste wine very early. Usually it is a year or so after the vintage before we taste individual wines. The harvest information can give you a good idea of the ripeness and the health of the grapes at harvest and hence can be useful to determine the potential for a particular vintage. But it cannot tell you about individual wines. The wine produced by a small group of very consistent producers may be predictable but a lot of other wines are not until they are ready for bottling.

Also, when tasting from barrel in Burgundy, you go from location to location. In Burgundy, to the best of my knowledge, there are no drive by sip and spit tastings whereby a few hundred wines are sent to an off site location for a big numbers guy to come in and appoint his chosen wines (see my Underground Wine Line article on this in the archives). The tastings on site follow a particular order – the village wines first, then the Premier Crus and finally the Grand Crus. Moreover, the latter wines are usually presented in the order preferred by the producer with what are thought

to be the best wines presented last. Most people doing the tastings produce notes that follow this sequence. To taste the wines blind (that is not knowing what they are) would likely produce very different results. But to taste and rate village wines and Premier Crus with lower scores and Grand Crus with higher scores is easy. However, to be fair, it is mostly true that all things being equal, most producers' Grand Crus will be better in a given year than Premier Crus and Premier Crus better than village wines. But, however the results are tallied, it is extremely important to know that notes of wines before bottling are often made based on guesstimates as to how the wine will evolve and are subject to a wide divergence.

We have always used a relatively narrow range for scoring barrel samples. All are based on potential. They are one barrel very good potential, two barrels outstanding potential, three barrels extraordinary potential. When we feel a wine may be slightly better than its category we use half barrels. The reason so many tasting notes on Burgundies are from barrel is based on a number of factors. First, quantities are sometimes as few as one barrel or 25 cases up to 10-20 barrels or several hundred cases. Compared with Bordeaux where quantities are usually in the thousands to tens of thousands of cases, the quantity is very small. The scarcity and cost of individual bottles makes it difficult for the producers to do a lot of tasting of the wines after bottling. Besides, the wines are usually sold quite quickly. So in order to be able to taste and evaluate the wines, it is necessary to taste from barrel. But one must always keep in mind the limitations of doing so and recognize that wines evaluated in this way are not finished wines.