

## Wine Competitions Points

### Georges Meekers

Today's discerning wine consumer has a genuine need for advice and guidance in choosing wine from the vast range on offer from all over the world. Overseas wine competitions examine thousands of wines each year and publish the results as a helpful buyer's guide to consumers.

The UK, a relatively neutral and an increasingly important wine market, is now home to three significant international wine competitions.

The International Wine Challenge and the even longer-running UK-based International Wine & Spirit Competition have both just announced this year's results coinciding with this year's London International Wine Fair. The results of the Decanter World Wine Awards were also announced at the London International Wine Fair but are available only to the wine trade until they will get published in the October 2008 issue of Decanter magazine.

By consulting the official website for the respective competition wine enthusiast can easily take advantage of the tasting skills of the judges and look up results and wine tasting notes for literally thousands of wines.

Things were more modest at the outset, though. The International Wine & Spirit Competition was launched in 1969 originally as *Club Oenologique*, by its founder, the wine chemist Anton Massel. He had the idea of creating a competition which was based not just on organoleptic judgement, but where all entries also had to undergo chemical analysis.

In 1978 the name of the venture was changed to the International Wine and Spirit Competition and has meanwhile tied in with Harpers as its publishing partner. Wines are still being tested, of course. This gigantic job is nowadays entrusted to Corkwise, the UK's only independent specialist wine laboratory. Having personally witnessed Geoffrey Taylor and his team at work at their well-equipped premises in Surrey, I can vouch the technical analysis of wine competition winners is carried out in a most diligent fashion eliminating any faulty wine samples.

But the two events in the UK that truly compete for the title of the most important wine competition of the wine trade are those once launched by wine consumer publications. On the one hand, there's the International Wine Challenge, allegedly the world's biggest blind tasting and now in its 25<sup>th</sup> year, which was initiated by Wine International magazine. And, on the other, there's the other main one, being the Decanter World Wine Awards, founded only in 2004 by Decanter.

An enormous difference between the two competitions is that at the Decanter World Wine Awards, an expert panel of tasters from around the world, chaired by the highly-respected Steven Spurrier, is given an idea of the price of each wine. International Wine Challenge judges, on the contrary, are told strictly to disregard any considerations of price.

The International Wine Challenge was dreamt up in 1984. The latter competition has traditionally attracted far more entries. This year submissions were received from 1,435 companies, registering an increase of 15 per cent on the previous year.

To ensure the highest quality of judging and consistency throughout, 2008 saw the introduction of 20 Panel Chairmen, a core group of tasters, responsible for leading their panel of judges for all 9 days of the competition. The Panel Chairmen are the best of the best. They are Masters of Wine, winemakers and experienced wine writers. They support the 5 Co-Chairmen, namely Charles Metcalfe, Derek Smedley MW, Sam Harrop MW, Tim Atkin MW and Bob Campbell MW. The judges use a more American scoring system based on 100 points as opposed to 20 at Decanter. This year's judges at the International Wine Challenge included more than 40 Masters of Wine supported by Co-Chairman and faults specialist Sam Harrop MW who has been monitoring wine faults particularly carefully.

Obviously any competition has its critics and its credibility depends on the credentials of the judges endorsing it by participating. In this respect it's interesting to see that Tim Atkin MW has nailed his colours to the mast; as a leading journalist he might in the past have been one of the critics of a competition such as this. Anyone who has participated as a judge in the International Wine Challenge will agree that it truly is an achievement for any wine to satisfy a panel of judges as to reap an award. With such new rigour, the International Wine Challenge medals are meaningful and likely to be a useful guide to wine consumers and professionals alike.

Wine competitions are good for the wine trade and by setting standards they help to improve the quality of wine. They inspire and motivate producers all over the world by allowing comparisons.

Amongst the 39 participating countries, Malta fared rather well at this year's edition. Last week the press reported on no fewer than six commendations for Maltese wines, all of which were entered by Emmanuel Delicata. Their award-winning wines are the Medina Girgentina Chardonnay; Medina Sangiovese I.G.T.; The Maltese Falcon Merlot, Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon; The Maltese Falcon Chardonnay, Girgentina, Moscato; Victoria Heights Chardonnay and Victoria Heights Rosé Shiraz Superior D.O.K. Gozo. The six commendations given to Delicata's wines bring the company's total international medal count to 72. This includes the two French Bronze medals won earlier this year in Bordeaux for their Gellewza Rosé Frizzante and in Burgundy for their barrel fermented Gran Cavalier 2006 Chardonnay.

The credentials of the judges as well as the complete list of award-winning wines can be found here: <http://www.internationalwinechallenge.com>