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TWILIGHT OF THE EMPEROR

THE WANING POWER OF ROBERT PARKER

by Elin McCoy

Maybe it's time to get over the guru. When my critical biography of Robert M Parker Jr was published in 2005, his far-reaching influence in the wine world had been growing for 20 years, sparking endless debates over whether his immense power was a positive force—or a negative one.

Five years on, much has changed. The global fine-wine industry is nothing if not diverse, and parts of it always resisted his singular vision. Pushback is increasing on all fronts. The “emperor of wine,” as I called him, is increasingly under attack, leading some to suggest that his star is finally beginning to fade.

What's happening and why are partly the result of Parker's own actions; but the rise of the Internet, as well as vast changes in the wine industry, particularly the shifting role of the critic, have contributed even more.

By the beginning of the 21st century, the man from Monkton, Maryland, had morphed from quirky, self-styled consumer wine advocate to a potent mover of markets. Parker is a near-perfect poster boy for personal branding—the idea that success comes from packaging and marketing oneself along the lines of product pushes or pop-music promotion. Whether by accident or design, he came out with a clear and concise message (rating wines on a 100-point scale) and adopted the attractive stance of a taste-it-and-tell-it-like-it-is advocate for befuddled wine consumers. His rise from country boy to uncompromising wine judge was a story he hammered home to all who would listen. It worked. The relentless promotion of his seemingly definitive wine scores by retailers and wineries helped transform him into the world's most important wine critic and arguably the most influential critic of any kind, able to sway production and dominate critical opinion in his field.

“One of the things that attracts us to certain brands is the power they project. As a consumer, you want to associate with brands whose powerful presence creates a halo effect that rubs off on you,” wrote Tom Peters, who coined the phrase “personal branding,” in a 1997 article in *Fast Company*

magazine. Subscribers to Parker's newsletter *The Wine Advocate* felt not just informed but enlightened, even entranced, by the certitude of his judgments. In many circles, his word on a wine was as law and became a self-fulfilling prophecy. If he said it was great (in his succinct phraseology, 95–100 points), it became great and commanded prices that confirmed its greatness.

His reputation and brand are fused with that power. As California enologist Clark Smith once remarked to me, “Parker without power is unthinkable; without it he wouldn't be Parker.” But nothing lasts forever. How much longer can he retain his fabled clout?

Grade inflation

“You've got to stop chasing the scores. The younger generation doesn't even know who Robert Parker is,” Glen Knight, domestic wine buyer for Los Angeles retailer The Wine House, advised Napa Valley vintners at a seminar this spring.

Five years ago, the Parker topic that drew the most criticism was the keystone of his brand: his 100-point wine-rating system, which telegraphed the message that his palate was precise enough to register minute quality differences among wines. Though it was debated and denounced at just about every conference or symposium, high scores were a slam-dunk marketing tool for selling wines—which, in turn, trumpeted Parker's brand.

Rating thousands of wines a year with number scores is what the vast majority of people now consider a wine critic's primary job, and the point system has become part of the matrix of buying and selling wine. So, dozens and dozens of writers—including many former denouncers—have adopted it. W Blake Gray, whose Gray Market Report is one of the most interesting new wine blogs, admitted in an interview that he uses it instead of awarding stars as a way of marketing himself. When Tim Atkin MW issued his first Bordeaux en primeur report this year with ratings on the 100-point scale, UK-based Farr Vintners quickly posted them on its website alongside Parker's and others.



I recently asked a dozen retailers in the United States (and a couple in the UK) whether scores still count and whether the proliferation of other critics' numbers have eroded the influence of Parker's. Their anecdotal answers aren't clear-cut yeses or noes. They depend on who's selling, who's buying, what the wine is, and who's talking.

Most said that the majority of their customers simply look for a high number on a shelf-talker and don't know the difference between 94 WA (*The Wine Advocate*), 94 WS (*Wine Spectator*), and 94 IWC (Steve Tanzer's *International Wine Cellar*). Knight discovered that he sold just as many bottles of one \$35 California Chardonnay rated 94 by *Wine Enthusiast* as a different one at the same price rated 94 by Parker. So, retailers and wineries often publicize the highest score, regardless of which of a handful of critics bestows it. Selling over the Internet, where there's no personal contact with customers, is even more score-driven.

Even if consumers have heard of Parker, they often don't realize that say, "95 WA" doesn't necessarily mean he's personally tasted the wine (that should be an "RP 95"). *Wine Advocate* subscribers and Parker followers do realize, of course, as do the marketplace gatekeepers such as distributors and importers, who say that high Parker scores can still move wines. Liz Willette, a small New York-area importer and distributor, said that in August of 2009 (which is normally a slow month for sales), she managed, in just two days, to sell some \$150,000 worth of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay Parker rated 93 to 98.

Yet more and more specialist US wine shops with passionate, knowledgeable owners—such as New York's Chambers Street Wines and San Francisco's Ferry Plaza Wine Merchants—don't post any scores at all. The website of Weimax in Burlingame, California, proclaims, "We taste before buying. [...] This is a Parker-free and *Wine Spectator*-free zone." At MacArthur Beverages in Washington, DC, Parker's home territory, manager Mark Wessels sees much less interest among consumers in scores. "Yes, a 95- or 96-point wine for \$20 sells. Is it as big a deal as five years ago? No. Importers only sell on points if a wine gets a big, big score." These days, it takes 98+ points to create the kind of feeding frenzy where a wine sells out. In other words, 90 points isn't what it used to be.

"Grade inflation" is one way Parker himself has undercut the credibility of his current scores. Compared to 2000, the latest annual number of 98- to 100-point wines in *The Wine Advocate* (online) has tripled, and about 60 Bordeaux from the 2009 vintage received provisional scores of 96 or more. Parker resorted to adding an asterisk to some 2009s because

he had, in effect, run out of points after his surprisingly high scores for the 2008s. They were meant to indicate that the wines were the best he'd ever tasted from that château. The only problem was, he'd rated some of them higher in 2005.

Ever-higher scores may be a competitive advantage for a critic—a recent study put Parker's at one point or more higher than others—since they'll be the ones quoted. But they have also contributed to score devaluation: The compressed range of high scores doesn't express big enough distinctions to inspire buying one wine rather than another.

Palate dilution?

At the end of 2006, when Parker announced he'd hired five other reviewers (and now a sixth) to increase his coverage of the exploding wine world, he completely changed the character of *The Wine Advocate*. Suddenly, it went from a universe with a consistent point of view to one with reviewers who differed dramatically in tasting skills, wine-style preferences, and reputations. None had the ability to move markets the way Parker has, and they still don't.

Parker's brand was fixed early on by the iconic image of the lone, gifted, and fiercely independent taster scoring a wine's quality without a sideways glance at its pedigree or popularity. But that meant Parker really couldn't hand over his power. That was the case with Pierre Rovani, hired to cover Burgundy in 1997 after Parker lost a lawsuit to François Faiveley and made himself persona non grata in the region. Rovani's very similar wine palate made him a

kind of junior Parker, but he failed to establish himself as an equal weight or as an independent reviewer.

Restricting his own reviews primarily to wines from Bordeaux, California, and the Rhône since the end of 2006 has narrowed Parker's reach, reducing his sway over regions such as Spain and Australia, where he once created instant legends out of obscure labels and regions.

Many importers and retailers I interviewed say that reviews and scores for wines from Chile, Argentina, and (until recently) Australia written by Dr Jay Miller (aka MrBigJ), Parker's longtime friend who took over reviewing those regions, do little for the wines. Instead of extending his brand, Parker only succeeded in diluting *The Wine Advocate*'s impact.

Not surprisingly, other critics happily moved into regions Parker abandoned. The leading guide for Burgundy buyers and investors in the USA is Allen Meadows's Burghound.com. Ironically, one of Meadows's clearly posted guarantees is that he personally tastes and rates every wine.

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The empire strikes back

In Bordeaux this past spring, the châteaux were flying their flags despite intermittent March thunderstorms, their proprietors beaming over yet another “vintage of the century.” They quickly deflected any questions about price. As everyone in the wine world knows, this storied region, with its fabled châteaux and wines, is Parker’s bastion of power, where producers at the smallest properties and classified growths alike normally wait to set their prices until after he publishes his scores. They seem unable to pull themselves away from his seductive grip.

Emmanuel Cruse, who manages his family’s Château d’Issan in Margaux and was named head of the Grand Conseil du Vin de Bordeaux in spring 2010, says Parker still has huge influence. He cited the example of the 2008 futures campaign. “It was very slow, with little selling, before Parker’s ranking came out. As soon as the scores were released, those with a good ranking started selling well.” Indeed. After Parker released his 98–100-point score for Château Lafite at 11pm London time, the price of trades on Liv-ex, the London-based electronic wine-trading platform, went from £2,000 a case to £3,500 overnight. Gary Boom of Bordeaux Index says, “With the 2008s, we saw a huge correlation between demand and the Parker scores.” UK merchants such as Farr Vintners, Bordeaux Index, and Berry Bros & Rudd post his Bordeaux scores but only alongside those of several other critics.

When it comes to the 2009s, Cruse tells a tale of châteaux that knew how good the vintage was well before Parker’s en primeur tastings. “Everyone was discussing how their prices would be at the same level as their release prices for the 2005s,” says Cruse. But when Parker’s scores, the highest ever, were released, explains Cruse, châteaux abandoned their original idea. The prices went skyward. “Everyone is selling by their ranking, not by quality,” he told me. “They tell brokers, this is the score—95—so this is the price.”

Wessels says wines with high prices but without potential 100-point scores were tough sells in the US. He sold 25 times more cases of 2009 Pontet-Canet futures (RP 96–100) than Lynch-Bages (RP 94–96), though both were the same price.

Yet Parker’s Bordeaux influence may not be what it once was. James Miles of Liv-ex points out, “In the old days, when Parker upgraded a wine, you would see a surge in orders and traders repositioning. That doesn’t happen now. I think the market is moving beyond Parker. Bordeaux is behind the times. He’s still their main man, but people now reference his scores against other critics.” Châteaux are seeking to brand themselves rather than rely simply on his anointing.

Parker’s power waxed with the power of America as the prime market for the wines of Bordeaux. Now that market is shifting to Asia, especially Hong Kong and China, where the Parker effect, says Miles, isn’t a foregone conclusion. For buyers there, wine brands are more important than scores. Nowhere is this more obvious than with Château Lafite Rothschild and its second wine Carraudes de Lafite. The Chinese seem willing to spend money on any vintage of the two wines, regardless of Parker scores. When he lowered his rating of 1982 Lafite by three points last summer, Asian sales of the wine at Bordeaux Index still went up 80 percent.

Robert Parker is clearly not in retreat on this front. In fact, he seems to be mounting a campaign to extend his brand recognition in the Far East, although the descriptive references in his tasting notes often have little meaning for Asian drinkers. He added a reviewer based in Singapore to his newsletter, and this past May he presided over a three-day “Ultimate Parker in Asia” event and \$2,500 (Singapore dollars) charity gala dinner there, featuring a selection of his top-rated vintages. The event’s sponsor, London-based Hermitage wine brokers, touted Parker as being “the best bet” for Asian wine speculators to follow.

Over the past five years, as investors hunted for alternative assets in which to park their money and watch it go up, the number of wine-investment schemes has exploded. It’s hard to see how they could play the game without Parker. More than half a dozen major wine-investment funds stuff their portfolios with 95+ Parker wines. Auction houses regularly

quote his scores in catalogs, and Liv-ex itself benchmarks its various indices around his Bordeaux numbers. At a recent Acker Merrall auction in New York, Marc Lazar of St-Louis, Missouri-based Cellar Advisors Inc was bidding on behalf of a US collector who’d asked him to go after every 1989–2000 Bordeaux with a current 98+ Parker score if the price was reasonable. “He represents why Parker is still important. He assumes that the scores will matter when he’s ready to sell those wines,” Lazar says dryly.

But will they? Investors will use Parker’s scores as a key indicator of what will go up in value only as long as buyers see the market following them.

Over the years, there have been many efforts to calculate the exact effect of a high Parker score on a wine’s price rise. In a 2008 *Decanter* article, Colin Hay, professor of political science at the University of Sheffield, after analyzing three vintages, put each Parker point above 90 for a case of cru classé Médoc futures at an extra £120; for premiers grands crus St-Emilion, £201. That first score, he concluded, set the

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long-term price trajectory. The first growths, on the other hand, didn't really depend on his scores—they sold at hugely high prices regardless.

Last year, in an article in *The World of Fine Wine*, Hugo Rose MW suggested that the Parker effect on a wine's price may be more limited, demonstrating that the Parker surge seems to run for 12 months, during which prices for a highly rated wine increase in value as everyone rushes to buy then stabilize and reflect already prevailing market trends. The jury is still out.

As Bordeaux prices rise and rise (along with those of the Rhône wines he praises), Parker, naturally, is being blamed (or credited, depending on one's perspective). In a highly entertaining May post on his blog, wine-life.co.uk, Oliver Styles called on Parker to live up to his consumer-advocate stance and stop reviewing the top 150 wines in Bordeaux altogether!

Taste-shift tremors

One night recently, I was perched on a high stool in the tiny Ten Bells wine bar in Manhattan's Lower East Side, sipping Marcel Lapiere Morgon with a handful of "natural" winemakers from France. The bar, which opened in 2008, was noisy and packed with people dressed casually in T-shirts and jeans, choosing from a scrawled list of wines few Americans had heard of five years ago. I doubt that the Ten Bells could have existed back then. Now it's the cutting edge of a fledgling taste shift that also has the potential to weaken Parker's power.

Part of his brand has been his perceived predilection for big, ripe, "hedonistic wines" that his critics, including me, dismiss as over-the-top fruit-bombs made in an international style. These are the wines to which Parker almost always gives the highest scores. Plenty of wineries have made their names by aping that "Parkerized" profile, which, alas, all too often seems to sacrifice elegance and a sense of terroir for sheer impact. Importer Dan Philips of The Grateful Palate built his wine business by shrewdly importing into the United States sweet, thick, overextracted, high-octane Australian Shirazes that perfectly aligned with Parker's taste. Now those wines have become a tough sell, and their downfall has affected Australian wine sales in the USA.

A growing backlash against that wine style—a mainstay of Parker's brand—is the result of a whole series of overlapping wine-industry changes.

For one thing, producers have rediscovered indigenous grapes with very different flavors. A movie—*Sideways*—

spurred interest in Pinot Noir. The rapid increase in the number of knowledgeable young sommeliers in restaurants has focused more attention on the role of wine with food. Many of them champion lighter styles of wine with higher acidity and more transparent flavors that are better dining partners, and they are anxious to share with customers their own discoveries and wine viewpoint. New young importers and retailers who fell in love with the offbeat wines of obscure regions are willing to educate consumers in order to sell them. Dozens of wine bars like Ten Bells have opened, providing opportunities to taste something different for modest cost.

All this is partly a younger generation rejecting what's come before. Many of them have grown up with wine and are far more adventurous in their drink choices than their parents were. If Parker's generation embraced classic Bordeaux and Napa Cabs, theirs wants to try everything else, making Parker's taste stance look increasingly conservative and out of touch. Studies show that most people under 35 consult their friends for recommendations, and many don't care whether a wine has been given an imprimatur by an

aging guru—indeed, they may not even know who he is. Will wine marketers stop promoting scores (and Parker) if there's a better way to reach the target cohort?

Importer David Bowler—who eliminated Parker scores from his price book a couple of years ago because "it's a system I don't support"—sees cutting-edge retailers and young sommeliers in New York wanting "to get beyond Parker."

Some winemakers, too, are pushing back against "Parkerization." Many, especially in regions like Burgundy and the Loire Valley, who had always resisted his influence are finding fervent new fans. And over the past ten years, growing interest in organic and biodynamic viticulture, authenticity, terroir, and their own traditions has inspired winemakers, particularly younger ones, to make wines in a more "natural" or "traditional" way, regardless of how Parker might score them. There's even a new documentary being released this fall by New York-based Burley Films on how younger vintners struggle against the influence of Parker. *Escaping Robert Parker* follows Julian Faulkner, a young winemaker in France, as he chafes at the question of whether to try to get his new wines validated by Parker or to bypass the critic and try to sell them without the help of a review.

As with contemporary art, there's an emerging parallel paradigm—judging wine on its "process," or how it is made, not just by how it tastes in the glass.

Current attacks on Parker, the 100-point scoring system, and his taste in wine are evidence of his continuing importance. Who would bother to call attention to what Parker says and writes if he didn't still have power?

Admittedly, current attacks on Parker, the 100-point scoring system, and his taste in wine are evidence of his continuing importance, and big, rich wines aren't disappearing. Who would bother to call attention to what Parker says and writes if he didn't still have power?

Other critics acknowledge his influence when they consciously and vociferously define their own taste for more acid-rich, mineral, terroir-driven bottlings as "not-Parker." Taste, as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu suggested, is first and foremost distaste—disgust and visceral intolerance of the taste of others. Just like Parker, other critics don't hesitate to lecture winemakers on how their wines should be made, insisting that the wines they like are the only "authentic" or "true" ones.

There is no imperium on the Internet

As Jeffrey Rosen, a law professor at George Washington University, points out in his recent article "The Web Means the End of Forgetting" in *The New York Times Magazine*, it's no longer possible for anyone to manage his or her reputation: "The Internet is shackling us to everything that we have ever said, or that anyone has said about us."

People have been criticizing Parker for the past 25 years, in which "tall-poppy syndrome" has undoubtedly played a part. But now blogs, bulletin boards, and website forums provide a hitherto impossible level of constant scrutiny of him, circulating any accusation, justified or not, to the greatest possible number of people, who are then able to chime in with their own opinions. That also applies, of course, to any statement that Parker himself voices publicly or posts on his own website.

Over the past two years, questions and criticism of him, his methods, his policies, his views, and some of his new reviewers have intensified and sped around the Internet almost instantaneously.

"His personal taste in wine and some of his statements have made people more critical, which in turn makes his brand no longer 100 percent gold," says Chuck Hayward, who works at California's JJ Buckley Fine Wines.

But it's not just the power of the Internet to spread criticism that will continue to chip away at Parker's authority and power. It's also that the Internet supplies more wine information and recommendations than have ever been available previously, making Parker's scores and tasting notes less necessary.

One of the biggest online sources of free tasting notes is CellarTracker.com, launched by Eric LeVine in 2004 as a free cellar-management system that allows collectors to share their own tasting impressions with one another easily. As at October 10, 2010, its 116,398 users collectively owned or had tasted 20,053,888 bottles and were posting about 1,600 wine reviews a day, for a total of 1,547,875, all freely available. The number of reviews these collectors post in three weeks is about the same as Parker's *Wine Advocate* publishes in an entire year. Added to that is Twitter, permitting wine lovers to send quick wine recommendations easily to their friends.

Reading other collectors' notes, people are quicker to define their own taste preferences and to discover that their assessments may be very different from Parker's, which in turn lowers his influence and authority.

Tom Wark, a public-relations professional who runs Fermentation: The Daily Wine Blog, dates wine blogging as an active pursuit from 2005, when many got their start. More than 1,000 exist in 2010. Anyone can be a wine critic now, and the very fact of sharing your tasting notes with the world emboldens personal authority. Yes, people still want expert voices, but Parker's voice will more and more become only one of many who influence what people buy. Rather than act as a leader to bloggers, Parker, whose beginnings were not much different from many of today's online critics, has self-righteously chosen to condemn most of the new media.

The Internet has also shifted the style of writing about wine, as well as how experts and readers relate. Gary Vaynerchuk's entertaining video blogs are so popular precisely because they are not elitist in tone. The blog-writing model is more about conversation than delivering a judgment, and Parker (trained as a lawyer) has not made that transition. He remains committed to assessing wine as a commodity, even as online wine writing seems ever more focused on personal bacchic experience and interest in wine's "surround"—context, people, news, narratives, passionate advocacy.

The Internet's interactive ability to allow readers to question, comment, and correct has created—at its best—lively dialogue rather than imperial pronouncement. This is not Parker's forte. His once-free bulletin board, run by reviewer Mark Squires, banned some who were too critical from posting comments. This spring, Parker decided to restrict it to his paying subscribers. "He's aware," said Robert Millman, of Executive Wine Seminars, who's known Parker since before he was famous, "that he's under attack."

In some ways, the ground has shifted under Parker. Perhaps it's best summed up in the headline of a recent blog post: "Was Parker ever real?" asked Shaun Crowley on retailer Daniel Posner's website winetalk.com. By which Crowley meant: Was Parker ever the infallible super-taster the wine world believed in, or merely an image that wine lovers, producers, and retailers created themselves?

To be fair, Robert Parker never asked for the kind of power that was bestowed on him. Others elevated him to undreamed-of dominion over the wine world, and others will take his power away when they lose interest in his view of wine and decide that the emperor has no clothes.

But many of Parker's current critics are missing the point. Parker is still trying to do what brands always do in the marketplace of products and ideas: protect turf. There is no way for him to have second thoughts about the validity of the 100-point system, and he must stubbornly insist that his tasting of a wine or vintage is always on target, as well as aggressively defending his own taste preferences and integrity and those of his hired reviewers.

Otherwise, what does the Parker brand have to offer? ■