

In the arcane world of wine geek bickering, the question of wine scores occupies a disproportionate amount of territory. Those who, like me, are parsimonious in allocating points suggest that no useful purpose is served in scoring hundreds of current vintage wines in the 95 - 100 point range. There's not enough differentiation, there's no room for the truly exceptional, there's no real benchmarking if whole hordes of products are deemed "world-class" within weeks of release. Just as employers have become deeply suspicious of the value of a matric certificate in an era where the pass rate hovers around 75%, so wine drinkers are entitled to doubt the value of a standard which can be so easily attained.

Those who are more generous argue that their mean-spirited colleagues have failed to recognise the brilliance which they have been able to discern. There might be some truth to this, though the more cynical commentators observe that high scoring is merely self-promotion. The problem is that whoever buys over-hyped wines on the strength of an inflated score will only discover they've been conned when they get to open the bottle five or ten years hence. By then they will be told - if they even bother to challenge those who led them astray - that the wine was worth its score when it was rated, but that the bar has since been raised, along with the expectations of the next generation. Scores, they will be told, are not absolute, and a 98 point wine in 2010 is not the same thing as a 98 point wine in 2018.

There's some wisdom to this - the world does change - but if a 100 point score is supposed to be "perfect," it seems fair to expect a slightly more absolute standard. It doesn't happen, partly because consumers who use scores as a purchasing guideline demand new thresholds, and partly because those who score (especially those who score generously) market themselves through the highest numbers.

Robert Parker, who first popularised the 100 point system over 35 years ago, has been something of a front-runner in the business of score inflation. In the 1980s his very highest scoring wines (from the widely accepted top sites in the world - such as the Medoc First Growths) would garner between 88 and 94. When, 25 years later, he awarded 18 of the very fine 2009 Clarets 100 points, he suggested that this reflected the quality of the vintage. It would have been more honest to acknowledge the devaluation of the currency.

Parker's scoring system has an effective range of less than 20 points (very few wines score less than 82). Accordingly, when his category average moves from 87 points to 97 points (pretty much what has happened with Bordeaux in the past 30 years) either the wines are now twice as good, or a 2018 98 point score is worth half of a 98 point score from three decades ago.

I recently attended a blind tasting of a vertical of one of South Africa's icon wines, the Mvemve Raats De Compostella. On my scoring system anything over 90 points is a gold medal and a handful reach 93. In the De Compostella line-up the 2012 achieved a creditable enough 87. The 2013 89, likewise the 2014. The 2015 90 - which incidentally is exactly the same score as I gave another bottle just over a month earlier, also in a blind tasting. The latest release, the 2016 came in with a very creditable 92.

When I shared these scores with Bruwer Raats, the winemaker, he was palpably disappointed. With all the hype around 100 point scores you could see he thought anything under 98 was hardly worth a mention in his marketing communication. In these days of score hyper-inflation he may be right. But 92 is one of my top 15 scores for 2018 and it comes in hard currency, not in Zim dollars.

For the scores of the DeCompostella vertical go to <https://winewizard.co.za/article/553>