

Judging the Festival Wines

Written by Terry Connor

Tuesday, 23 February 2016 11:56

The judging of the wines that will be featured at the Hilton Head Island Wine & Food Festival usually takes place approximately six weeks before the festival. This year the Judging took place at the Sonesta Hotel on Hilton Head the weekend of February 5th and 6th. I've had the pleasure of reporting on the judging event in past years and, as in the past, I became witness to a potential logistics nightmare that is controlled by some very competent people (mostly volunteers) who arrange the wines to be judged in a very orderly manner. Let's just say that after 30 years of experience, the judging committee "has it down to a science."

It all starts with the committee soliciting wineries to submit entries for the judging. The entries could conceivably come from any winery in the world, however most are from the US and Europe. Most of the wineries do not need a solicitation. After so many years of participation, the management staff at the various wineries have their selections ready and submit them at the appropriate time.

The wineries choose from their own line-up which wines to submit – three bottles of each selection. Some of the wine will be used for the judging and any wine left over is held for the Silent Auction that takes place in March on the night of the Grand Tasting. (The auction event is a first-rate fundraiser for Scholarships to be awarded to Culinary Arts Students.) The wine held for judging is separated by varietal and color – i.e. red, white, rose, sparkling, dessert, etc., and is assigned a four digit code. It is then moved to a room that's is divided in half. On the one side is the wine arranged by varietal, and on the other side is the area where the judges will do the tasting and evaluation. Protocol dictates that the wine to be judged is delivered to the judges in a tasting glass and identified only by varietal and a four-digit code. The judges are now set up for a "blind tasting."

So now the scene is fixed. For the next two days the judges will taste and evaluate wine with several goals to be achieved. They are to determine which wines will be awarded medals, and from there, which wines will be moved up the ladder until finally, one is chosen as "Best of Show." What is the order of progression? The order is: no medal, a silver medal, a gold medal, a double gold medal, and from the double gold medal winners a "Best of Show" Award is given to one red and one white wine. I know who the winners are, but I am bound to secrecy and would be subject to execution if I revealed that knowledge before the appropriate time.

There is a secondary implication for the wines that fall into the Double Gold Category. These

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are the wines that will be featured at the Public Tasting that takes place on the last day of the Wine and Food Festival. To be sure there will be hundreds of other wines, but that extra special promotion is given to the Double Gold Finalists when then vendors set up their tasting tents on the last day of the festival.

A few words about the judges. It appears that the judging of the wines is in good hands as the 28 judges that worked this year are, at the very minimum, formally certified sommeliers. In addition, each judge works in the wine industry FULL TIME in some capacity – as a wine store owner, a wine educator, an employee of a wine distributor, etc. etc. I can personally attest to the passion these folks have for wine, from the vineyard all the way to the tasting or dining table. When they were judging the wines, many spirited debates took place, all in the interest of “getting it right.”

This year the judges were asked to evaluate 420 wine submissions. That may seem like a lot of wine, and it is. However, when you consider that 28 judges are going to evaluate 420 wines over a two-day period, the problem appears to be somewhat diminished. You may ask, “How does a judge maintain the sharpness in his olfactory senses?” I did, and the answer was quite revealing. I was first asked to remember that the judges are all wine professionals, and as such, they taste wine quite often. In other words, their PALATES are exercised. They know what to look for. Secondly, when tasting so much wine in a concentrated period of time, there is a great deal of spitting, considerable consumption of crackers and water, some coffee, and maybe a high acid white wine . . . anything to cleanse the palate and keep the senses sharp. Each judge has his or her own judging secrets.

WINESPEAK

For those of us here in Beaufort County, the Hilton Head Island Wine & Food Festival is the unofficial event that starts our wine year. The dates are March 7- 13. Charleston has its Wine & Food Festival March 2-6. So as you can see, the mighty grape gets a lot of exposure here in March. The festivals are a success, as they have been repeated yearly for quite some time. Savannah holds its festival in November, just in time to feature wines for the holidays. Are these festivals expensive to attend? The simple answer is yes; however, consider that the price of admission to most events includes a charitable donation to a scholarship fund. Enjoy!

For more information about the Hilton Head Wine & Food Festival, visit www.hiltonheadwineandfood.com

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