



Critical shift? New reviewer named for Calif. wine

There's a new critic in town for California wines and oenophiles are buzzing about what that could mean.

Robert M. Parker Jr., the influential wine critic and founder of The Wine Advocate, recently announced he is handing off responsibility for California wines to his associate, Antonio Galloni.

Parker will continue to review the wines of Bordeaux and the Rhone Valley in France, and will also critique older vintages of those regions and California.

Though his tastes can't be summed up as just one style, Parker has long been associated with big, bold bottles, like the California "cult wines" that rose to prominence during the '90s — small production, high-end wines.

Getting a high score from someone like Parker is a boost to sales and there's been speculation that some winemakers have been making wines with Parker's tastes in mind, which could leave them scrambling with a new palate to please.

Others say it's more the case that California's sunny climate produced robust, ripe wines and Parker simply liked them.

"Was he following the story or leading the story? I choose to think he was following the story more than leading," says Jeff Smith, vintner/owner of Hourglass winery in the Napa Valley.

Galloni's challenge will be to find his own voice. He'll likely have a different perspective, but Smith is hoping Galloni will share at least one thing with his predecessor and "continue to write with the passion that Robert Parker wrote with."

In an email, Parker said he has been trying to get Galloni to work full-time in the wine world for several years and when he convinced him, "I thought his talents would be best used covering the two very diverse regions of California and Burgundy."

As for what the change could mean for California wines, it's hard to know, he said in an e-mail.

"Most of the wineries already have very diverse styles of wine, and while I covered California, I didn't sense any profound change in styles other than (a) more natural winemaking with less sulphur, less fining and filtration, and more organically farmed vineyards, (b) other significant changes involved the pursuit of more single vineyard sites with the pursuit of terroir, and picking slightly riper to get sweeter tannins."

To Robert Smiley, director of wine industry programs in the Graduate School of Management at the University of California, Davis, the secret to Parker's success is that his choices resonate with readers.

Whether Galloni will have the same kind of impact remains to be seen. "He's got a hill to climb, which is to establish a reputation equal to that of Parker, but I don't see any reason he can't do it," Smiley said.

Elias Fernandez, winemaker at Shafer Vineyards, highly praised by Parker, doesn't expect immediate change under Galloni. (Galloni currently handles Italian wine reviews for The Wine Advocate, which he will continue to do, along with Champagne, red and white Burgundies of the Cote d'Or and whites of Chablis.)

Shafer's 2002 Hillside Select cabernet sauvignon won a perfect 100 from Parker, which was gratifying, but chasing scores would be a mistake, Fernandez says.

"It comes back to haunt you because you're not maximizing what the terroir (the unique character of a vineyard) and the area gives you," he says.

Smith agrees.

High-end and small production, Hourglass won consistently high reviews from Parker starting with their first vintage released in 1997. "He's been a great voice and advocate of ours over the years," says Smith.

But reviews will only take you so far, he says.

"When we get the good reviews, we're excited about them. If we don't get them we continue making the wines in the style we think is appropriate for those specific vineyards that we're farming. As soon as you lose sight of your vision, bad things start happening."