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Plus: Affordable California Chardonnay and more,
in this week's Drinking with Esther newsletter

By Esther Mobley, May 23, 2019



*Robert M. Parker Jr. has retired from the Wine Advocate.
Photo: Patrick Bernard / AFP/GettyImages*

I'm grateful to Robert Parker.

The recent announcement that wine critic Parker would retire from the Wine Advocate, the publication he founded in Maryland in 1978, came as little surprise. Parker had stepped down from his editor-in-chief role seven years ago and sold a large interest in the company to investors in Singapore;

Michelin, the empire of tires and restaurant guides, now owns at least 40 percent. It's been clear over the last few years that Parker's voice has taken a backseat to those of his successors, especially current editor-in-chief Lisa Perotti-Brown.

Continued on next page

Still, Parker's formal retirement seems like a fitting occasion to reflect on his legacy. It's a legacy so enormous and complicated that it's been turned into its own noun: "Parkerization," used by the critic's critics pejoratively. Parker was so powerful, the cliché goes, that he singlehandedly homogenized the world of wine, as wineries learned to pander to his palate in order to earn favorable reviews. Because Parker loved wines that were opulent, rich, high in alcohol eventually wines from Bordeaux to the Barossa all began to taste the same.

"Parkerization" is a simplistic narrative that doesn't do justice to the full story of Parker, or of wine over the last four decades. When I had my first entry-level job at a wine magazine, I read Elin McCoy's biography of Parker, "The Emperor of Wine," and felt inspired by the idealism that led to the Wine Advocate's founding. I loved that Parker's hero wasn't any of the old-guard wine critics, many of whom wrote about wine in a register unintelligible to the average American.

Instead, Parker's hero was Ralph Nader, the great consumer advocate. That was why the Wine Advocate didn't accept advertising. He would always pay his own way. He would write about wine in a language that people could understand — and what a vivid, sensual language it was! ("Wine explodes, it bursts, it lingers," observed W. Blake Gray of Parker's tasting-note style in his recent tribute.) The 100-point scale was envisioned as the ultimate equalizer: Here was a system we all know intuitively, having been graded on it ourselves since kindergarten. If you didn't know what fine-grained tannins or a tawny rimmeant, surely you understood "95."

Today's Wine Advocate may not follow Parker's original ethical guidelines exactly (wines are no longer tasted blind, for example). The 100-point scale, despite its initial appeal, has developed its own set of problems, though many other publications, including Wine Spectator and Vinous, continue to use it. And even if "Parkerization" is an unhelpful cliché, there's no question in my mind that there's some truth in it — that Parker's preference for richer wines did exert undue influence on an era of winemaking.

But I think I probably wouldn't have a job if it weren't for Parker: if he hadn't turned the masses into wine drinkers. If he hadn't championed wines from California alongside the established greats from France. The wild pleasure he conveys in his tasting notes is contagious. I don't score wines, and I don't always share Parker's taste in wine, but I can only hope to evoke some of that energy in my own writing.

More and more, I see Parker as having existed perfectly for his time and place. He emerged at a time when the wine industry needed an advocate, and in a pre-Internet age when it was still possible for a single critic to have so much influence. He helped wine; wine helped him. If his stylistic preferences, which first became prominent with the ripe, indulgent wines of Bordeaux's 1982 vintage, eventually grew tiresome, that doesn't mean they weren't a meaningful response to wines in a different moment.

So thank you, Mr. Parker, and I hope you enjoy retirement.

Continued on next page



*Chris Kajani is the winemaker at Bouchaine Vineyards in Carneros
Photo: Gabrielle Lurie / Special to The Chronicle 2016*

What I'm drinking

I'm a sucker for delicious Chardonnay, but I'm frequently frustrated by how difficult it can be to find well-made California versions that are affordable. My new target is around \$30 — still a lot for a weeknight wine for many folks, I know, but this seems to be California Chardonnay's value sweet spot. One such wine is the **2017 Bouchaine Estate Carneros Chardonnay**, which sells for under \$30 at most retailers. It's a great study in acidity that resists richness, with a piercing line of crunchy apple and pear flavors cutting through the round, creamy enveloping mouthfeel. The best of both Chardonnay worlds.

What I'm reading

The wines from Southold Farm & Cellar, in Texas Hill County, have been gaining a lot of fans from outside their region. (They're distributed locally in the Bay Area, too.) I enjoyed Eric Asimov's story about this promising Texas winery in the New York Times.

What is the link between the proliferation of new, experimental wine styles and climate change? Jason Wilson dives into some of the many complicated questions here, in a piece for Heated, the new project from Medium and Mark Bittman.

Private labels aren't just for mainstream wineries anymore. Eater's Stefanie Tudor looks at the New York restaurants that are creating custom blends with natural wine producers.