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Inside Baseball

Getting the scoop on how to read your local wine store

By Francis Fecteau

Wine consumers are suckers. As a wine broker, some of the things I do are deliberately aimed at your weaknesses. I know that if a shelf tag says \$4 off, if there's a critter on the bottle label, if the label is pink or cute or there's a shelf talker that reads 90 points or better—then you are likely to overlook a vastly superior wine sitting right next to it. I shouldn't be telling these secrets, but I'll resort to almost anything to sell you wine. It's an exercise in retail deception. But with a few tips, you can make the most of your drinking dollars and sidestep my filthy broker tricks. Let's call it a little inside baseball for the drinker. I am just trying to teach you to "read the pitch."

First things first: Don't buy wine at the same store you buy your spirits or box wine. Standard retail stores are loaded with commercial, industrially produced wine. With a standard fixed markup in Utah, much of what is sold in supermarkets in other states is subject to artificial price manipulation here—deliberately overinflated so that the producer can roll back the price for an illusion of a discount, which is where the price should have been in the first place.

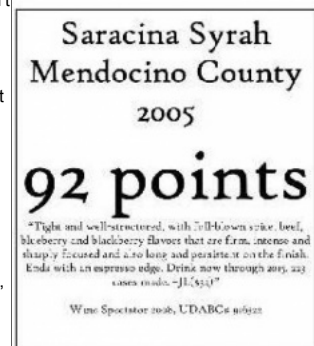
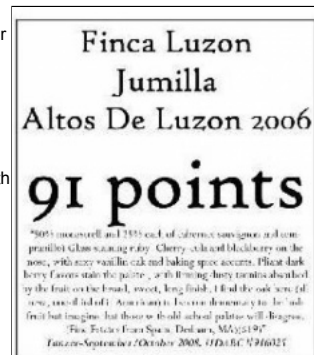
If you have the presence of mind to shop at one of Utah's wine stores, there are scores of additional challenges, perhaps the trickiest aspect of which is decoding the little white card that hangs near the wine. Interpreted properly, these little cards can point you to terrific wines.

In retail parlance, these are called "shelf talkers." On them, brokers are required to quote press sources directly; we can't modify or embroider or do anything to draw undue attention to the wine. It's "just the facts, ma'am." So, it's useful to know how to interpret those facts or use the information we present.

Keep in mind my first priority as a broker is to get your attention with shelf talkers and, invariably, the best way to do that is to locate a really high score. I don't really care what the publication is. It could be *Bob's Wine Rag* from Exit 138 in Piscataway, N.J., for all I care. I am just looking for a very high number. It's a deliberate play on your affection for numerical validation, but numbers don't tell the whole tale.

Wine publications vary widely in rating reliability. The notes of some magazines are written by groups of editors; among these are *Wine Spectator*, *Wine Enthusiast* and *Wine & Spirits*. Others are written by specific individuals; these include *Restaurant Wine*, *Wine Advocate* (Robert Parker) and *International Wine Cellar* (Stephen Tanzer). Those written by individuals are far more reliable—the language is much more specific, those editor-written notes, far more vague. Thus, the notes written by a single person give you a far more reliable and concrete baseline reference. Specific language is far more helpful in painting a picture for your palate.

These notes can also guide you to value. Brokers are required to include the suggested national retail price on shelf talkers. By comparing the national price with the Utah shelf price, it's easy to find a plethora of terrific deals lurking on Utah shelves. Good news: Utah is loaded with them thanks to the efforts of Brett Clifford, UDABC Wine Buyer, along with the Utah Small Winery Exemption, a progressive Utah wine-purchasing loophole (yes, I used progressive and Utah in the same sentence regarding alcohol). The Small Winery Exemption results in small family-owned wineries being marked-up less, resulting in prices for those wines that are among the lowest in the country.



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