

The Amateur WINEMAKER

Nothing more excellent or valuable than wine was ever granted by the gods to man. —Plato.

RECRUITING JUDGES

As Dr. R. A. Webb pointed out in a lecture at this year's National (reported fully in this issue) the problem of ensuring that we have enough really competent wine judges remains with us. Some years ago it was envisaged that we would need considerably to expand the ranks of accepted judges, and it was for this very purpose that the Guild of Judges was formed. In the last few years it has done valuable work by laying firm foundations, by drawing up a handbook and formulating an examination system which has been found to be both practical, successful and generally accepted as fair. The Guild has about doubled its strength as a result, and more judges are still being recruited, but the snag is that the expansion of the hobby has greatly exceeded expectations. The National, for instance, has mushroomed into a mighty wine show of 3,500 bottles, taking every available Guild Judge to cope with it. (So that virtually we are still in the same risky position as when the Guild was first formed, that of having no spare judges). And there are now many more Regional, Circle, and other shows demanding qualified judges as well. What is the solution? It would be fatal to drop standards; the only possible answer is that we must recruit, train and examine judges more quickly.

ONE WAY

This is the problem that Dr. Webb spotlights and during the discussion after his talk at Southport two useful suggestions were made. One was that candidates for the examination of the Guild of Judges should be allowed to gain practical experience before taking it by being allowed to "sit in" and taste the wines alongside a qualified judge at a few competitions before the examination date. Once the would-be judge had registered he or she would be given several such opportunities, and this would mean that the qualified judge could instruct the trainee, could pass on tips and information, and explain in detail the finer points of the judge's role. This, of course, is not possible or desirable during an examination. Another good idea was that at events like the National or the Summer School pre-judged classes be set up, so that tyro judges could try their prentice hand, and see how close they could get to the findings of the experts. Both these ideas have immense possibilities and would appear to be practical answers to the problem of how to tell a trainee judge just what to look for, and how to look for it, and we hope to see them given serious consideration by both National, Guild, Regions and Circles.

SOME THOUGHTS ON JUDGING

by Dr. R. A. Webb

More and more wine shows are being organised and they all require judges. Some sort of uniformity is expected in the assessments of judges. In most competitive shows, the flower, fruit and vegetable shows, handicraft shows, and photographic competitions guide lines are laid down to assist the judges in carrying out their tasks. Anyone interested can find out just how the points are awarded, for both exhibitors and spectators can see as much as the judge and appreciate his decision.

With wine shows this is not the case. Only the judge tastes the entries in a class, and there is no check on his decision. There is a further serious problem. A judge at a flower show can go on from class to class until he is tired, with no impairment in his judging ability. Having judged a class of potatoes does not make it impossible to judge a class of carrots. Not so with wines. Even though one studiously avoids swallowing the wine as far as possible, some of it gets absorbed, and alcohol is a narcotic and spoils one's judgement. The sense organs get fatigued very readily. Having judged a batch of 20 or 30 wines one needs a substantial break before attempting another batch. There are various devices for cleansing the palate and these are very valuable, but they are far from being the complete answer. The number of entries a judge can deal with in the time usually available is thus fairly small and 60 would be taken as a heavy morning's work. This means that in a show of the size of the National either more time must be allowed for judging, some sort of restriction must be placed on entries, or a larger number of judges must be found.

This paper was delivered by Dr. R. A. Webb at the Southport National Conference, and will interest all who have given thought to the problem of ensuring an adequate supply of judges in future.

At this year's National some 70 selected judges were each given the task of selecting the best wines from a batch of anything from 30 wines upwards. These are the people on whom the success of the competition depends. The supply of them is never enough. Something has to be done to increase the number of judges available. Can they be trained or taught? How does one find a wine judge? How can you tell whether or not anybody is a good judge of wines? Before we can answer any of these questions we must first ask ourselves what we expect of our judges. This seems easy. A good judge must be able to recognise a good wine when he meets one, and be able to identify faults when they occur. This doesn't sound too bad until one asks the simple question, "How does anybody know whether a wine is a good one or not?" Anybody can taste a batch of wines and pick out the one *they like best* but it doesn't mean that this is the best wine. Tastes vary

enormously, somebody else might make a different choice.

To become experienced in food and drink one has to partake; reading is not enough. You can't live on egg and chips and learn enough to judge Cordon Bleu cookery by reading. To become experienced in wines one has to taste or drink a large number of different wines. (This is not the same as drinking large amounts of a few wines!) But just tasting or drinking a large number of different wines is not sufficient in itself. To become an expert or a judge one has to be able to remember tastes; as somebody once put it, you need a palate with a memory. By tasting wines in a critical mood he who has a palate with a memory will be able to build up in his head a sort of card index of tasting impressions which will enable him to recall a wine, and be able to say "I have tasted this before," and possibly to say what it is. This makes it possible to compare wines and to say whether you like one better than another, but it still does not make it possible for you to say whether one wine is better than another.

What does it mean when someone says "This wine is better than that?" This is the main question, and I want all you judges, intending judges, and exhibitors to think about it carefully. It doesn't mean simply "I like this one better." It means "I think people who know about wines will in the majority of cases like it better."

I have discussed this matter at some length among my colleagues and wine drinking friends and can arrive at one criterion only which will decide the better of two wines. One wine is better than another if, available in commercial quantities, it commands a higher price.

No one can adequately describe a wine in words, for words are not adequate to convey impressions. You cannot describe green to a person who has not seen green, nor can you describe a wine to someone who has not tasted wine. The whole impression is a subjective one, and a very personal one. You can only discuss wines with people who have tasted wines and have some sort of recollections about them. The full impression is made up of dozens of factors which cannot be put into words. Some single outstanding feature might be made the subject of verbal comment, but words are usually quite inadequate.

From this you will see that it is not possible to teach people to appreciate wines. Appreciation can

be learnt, and of course much help can be given during learning, but it cannot be taught. Those who would like to be judges of wine have no other way of learning than tasting wines in large numbers, and also being told which are the better wines and which are the less good ones. One cannot expect to find this out for oneself except by chance. That may sound nonsense but it is quite true, for one can get used to almost anything which is not poisonous or harmful.

If you are going to judge wines and put them in some sort of order of merit you have to learn on wines which are already classified in some order of merit. Learners have to be provided with a selection of wines, in a graded order of merit, which they can taste and then arrive at their own ideas of why they are in that particular order. This is something which wine circles can do to help swell the pool of judges.

Two courses are open. If the circle has a number of experienced people who can get together and taste a group of, say, six or eight wines and arrange them in order of merit, a group of learners can then taste and discuss the wines with the experienced group. The only difficulty here is getting a group of experienced people, because it will be obvious that if the supposed experienced group makes a mistake they will perpetuate it in the learner group.

A much safer way is to use commercial wines which have already been graded, graded, that is, by price. It is easily possible within a group of similar wines to get a very wide quality range. From the cheapest at about 10 to 13 shillings a bottle prices can go up to £2 or more. Half a dozen bottles well spaced over this price range can easily be found in the Burgundies, the Clarets, the Chablis, Hocks, and almost any type you care to mention. You must of course make your group up from similar wines, don't mix red and white or Chablis and Hocks. And don't mix wines from different places. Spanish Chablis isn't the same kind of wine as French Chablis. And have as wide a price range as possible; until you have tasted the whole range of Burgundies from the cheapest to the best you don't know what quality in wine really is. Those of you whose circles do not go in for this sort of thing, or those of you who are not members of circles can do the same on your own, but naturally it costs more. I have made a practice since I became interested in wine judging of buying a case of wines in different price ranges. I get through four or five cases a year, all different. It is a very pleasant exercise.

After a few years one gets to know what is involved in quality in wine. Because amateur winemakers cannot sell their wines they cannot submit them to the judgement on the basis of price, and we shall always be dependent on the assessment of judges at shows like the National. For this reason we must do something to ensure that we can keep ourselves supplied with judges over the years.

There remains one big question which is important for all of us. How uniform are our judges? If different judges each judged a class independently of one another what is the probability that they would reach the same result? Naturally we like to think that all our judges would arrive at the same result, but I am afraid this is too much to hope for. Obviously a lot depends on the general standard of the class. If in a class of 30 wines the quality ranges from Chateau d'Yquem to sweetened vinegar the prospect of agreement between judges is very good.

If there is one really outstanding wine it will come first with most judges, but when you get a number of wines all of more or less the same quality the chance of agreement between judges is not very great. When, as often happens, half a dozen wines all practically indistinguishable it is a matter of chance which gets first prize and which gets any of the others. A different judge might have given a different result. This should be some consolation for those of you who did not get first prizes.

When I am judging a class I go through and allot marks in the ordinary way, but this is by no means the end. This is just the beginning. I am looking for wines which I think are worth tasting again. I hope in doing this to have selected about twice as many wines as there are awards to be made. The reason for not making my original markings the basis for the final order is that over the time interval taken for tasting say 30 wines one's palate changes quite appreciably. The assessment of any wine is influenced by what has gone before and the later wines are judged more harshly or more leniently according to whether the intermediate ones were good or poor. Having picked out a dozen or so for further attention these are dealt with and placed in order by taste. This time I am only comparing two wines, the one I have just tasted, and the one I am now tasting, and I pick the better of the two. I then compare the third with the second and so on. Naturally whenever I come across a wine which is better than the lowest in my order I have to try it all the way up until it meets a superior wine.

It still remains possible that other judges, even operating the same way, would arrive at a different result. On two occasions only over the years have I had the opportunity of judging a class independently of another judge of good reputation. On each occasion we picked the same first six. I don't mean we were in agreement over first, second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth, but that the six wines which filled my first six places also filled the other judge's first six places, but in different orders. I consider this agreement pretty good, but I would not expect it to happen always.

Whenever I have finished judging a class I am always somewhat apprehensive. I think: "If I had to do it again tomorrow would I get the same result?" Over the years there have been incidents which give one confidence. Once having finished my judging at the National someone came to me and said "You are very consistent. The wine you gave first prize to in the dry white class is the same wine you gave first prize to at the National Honey Show!" When all the bottles are identified with their exhibitors' names I always go round to see how many of my award winners have got awards in other classes. It is a source of satisfaction and relief to find the names on other cards. It suggests that we are all looking for the same things and are not being guided solely by personal preference. Nevertheless personal preference is involved to some extent and it is difficult to see how those who organise the panel of judges can do much to ensure uniformity amongst judges as long as one judge only judges each class. It would be nice to be able to allocate three judges to each class, working independently, and take the average result, but there appears to be no possible hope of this happening. It is up to every judge to do his best to maintain his standards at the highest possible level by tasting as wide a range of wines as possible, commercial as well as amateur.