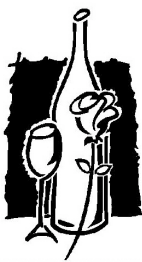


# Alex's Newsletter

## #26 March 2009



Rose Bay Drive In Liquor

### William's Crossing Pinot Noir 2007

**The region:** Macedon Ranges (Vic)

**The alcohol:** 13.5%

**The taste:** Rich red berries

**The price:** \$30 or 10% off in a dozen



In the September 2008 newsletter, I wrote about the Curly Flat Pinot Noir and how it's a biodynamic winery that is seen as one of our best boutique producers. I've seen many reviews for the 2005 and have had a sneak peak of the 2006 vintage which is looking spectacular as well. Definitely a worthy follow up.

Now, you wouldn't pick it from looking at the front label, but William's Crossing is made by the same team as Curly Flat. The only giveaway is on the back label in small writing. It's their second label and also gets fantastic reviews (which lead me to write about wine review systems, see over).

Now, second labels can serve a number of purposes. Sometimes they are created when the fruit from a particular vintage isn't quite up to scratch to put their normal label on it. Other times it's used for excess fruit in years with big crops. In either of these cases, the second label can sometimes be treated as a way of using wine that might otherwise be discarded and the result varies.

This isn't true for the William's Crossing label. The team treat it as a wine in its own right. If the fruit isn't good enough, they don't make the William's Crossing label.

It's not a shrinking violet... it has a nice fuller-bodied feel (for a Pinot). It's got the usual red berries, cherry, etc with a nice long finish. Ralph Kyte-Powell put it down for Wine of the Week in the Good Living, giving it 4.5 out of 5 stars.

They also make a Chardonnay under the William's Crossing label, which is also bloody good value.

## Wine Rating Systems

Wines are judged in quite a number of ways. You can describe what you taste in a wine, or what it does to the inside of your nose and mouth (eg the heat from alcohol), but humans aren't very good at describing what they taste... we recognise odours well, but actually putting a word to them isn't easy (it's the topic of my PhD).

So instead we've come up with qualitative ratings, such as giving it a score out of 100, 20, 10, 5, 25, or whatever number you feel like using.

Then to make it even more confusing, there are medals, trophies and other show awards (see my article on the Kaesler Avignon in the July 2008 Newsletter).

So how can we make sense of all of this? And why does one person rate a wine as 98 while another person rates it as 93? Does it matter?

### Points systems

When reading Ralph Kyte-Powell's article on the William's Crossing Pinot Noir, I was amazed that he was using a 5 point system, or rating a wine out of 5 stars, in contrast to Huon Hooke's reviews, who uses a 100 point system. To make matters worse, scores from one scale don't necessarily translate to another. Surely a score of 4 out of 5 stars is good, right? But if we put that into a 100 point scale, it's a score in the 80's, which is generally seen as a bad thing, particularly scores in the low 80's.

The 100 point scale is used by a number of prominent reviewers: Robert Parker Jr, James Halliday, Huon and others (including myself for

my own purposes, but I don't usually publish my ratings). Some retailers go for 10 point ratings, believing them to be easier for consumers to understand. I've even seen a simple "thumbs up, thumbs down" review system, similar to that in TV guides. Only problem was that it was by a retailer... do you really think that the majority of retailers are going to tell you a wine is crap and then expect you to buy it?

And then we hit the show circuit, where judges rate wines out of 20: 3 points for colour & condition, 7 points for nose, 10 points for flavour.

### Show medals and trophies

To give you an idea about just how big shows can be, the 2009 Sydney Royal Wine Show involved over 2,300 wines from 357 exhibitors. Up to 30 judges and associates rate different "classes" of wine, each tasting 130-150 wines per day... no wonder they spit.

Three judges taste each wine and give their own rating. And the judges will disagree on wines too. Wines are generally tasted blind, which means that you don't know which wine you're tasting, although you can often work out from the class that you're tasting, say, a riesling.

Gold medals are given to wines scoring 18.5 points or more, Silver for 17-18.4 and Bronze for 15.5-17. If this translates to a 100 point scale (which I'm pretty certain it doesn't), that means that a wine can receive a score in the 70's and receive a medal! So that means that a pretty poor wine by most standards can receive accolades... no wonder no one has any idea what all of these reviews mean!

I was at a tasting recently with a friend who was scoring some of the best Pinot Noirs in Australia with scores in the 15's and 16's, meaning she'd give them Bronze Medals. Her argument was that only a select few should get Gold Medals, while I argued that wines should be judged on their individual merit, regardless of what else is being shown at the same time.

Of course, as the tasting wore on, she liked the wines more and more so her reviews started hitting 17 or so. By her ratings, not one of the wines at the tasting would have received a Gold Medal.

So by now you should have realised that there are as many Gold, Silver and Bronze medals available as the judging panel requires. At the Sydney Royal Wine Show, 40% of wines judged received a medal. Now remember, there were 2,300 wines and 357 exhibitors, which means that some exhibitors might have only sent a few wines while others could have sent 20 or so, so some of the bigger companies are just throwing everything in the ring and seeing what washes out... more on this in a moment.

Trophies are awarded for "best in class" and there are numerous special award trophies too... so these are given out for first place. Some trophies are more prestigious than others, and wines can be entered into a number of classes, giving them a better chance.

Now, 5.5% of wines received a Gold, 9.5% received a Silver and 25.3% received Bronze. Clearly the medals aren't for first, second and third but are designed to put the wines into tiers. And yet, a wine that receives Gold at one show may not even receive a

Bronze at another. Clearly wine judging (and taste and smell perception in general) are very subjective.

So you hear these stories about a red wine that received a better review or was judged to be superior to Grange, or Margaux, or many other wines that are generally seen as the best in the world. These are overpublicised events and yet everyone rushes out to buy them as soon as possible... the phones at the shop run hot for the next few days after a review like that. I'm here to tell you not to pay too much attention to these things.

Recently, the McWilliam's Hanwood Estate Chardonnay was put into a blind tasting show overseas and came out trumps, winning a Gold medal and beating out some of the best in the world, including some of Australia's top drops. And then our phones went into meltdown, everyone wanted to buy a case or two of the stuff.

I spoke to the distributor for the wine and he was telling me that people who he hadn't done business with for years were calling him and ordering 20 cases... fortunately they were sitting on thousands of cases of the stuff.

Now the result was amazing because it was at a foreign wine show... I don't have details about which show and where, but shows vary in size and prestige. Some are viewed as more important than others.

So, here's a \$12 Australian white, given a Gold medal, by people who may have judged around 150 wines that day... you decide if it means anything. If nothing else, wine shows and reviews are great for publicity, but don't always tell you everything.

## Gibson Wines

**The region:** Barossa Valley (SA)

**Wilfreda:** \$35 or special on a dozen  
**Isabelle:** \$35 or special on a dozen

Contact me for special pricing.



### Mailing List

We are revamping our mailing list to bring you more offers, more tastings, more info about the wine world and the chance to win wine every month!

To join the mailing list, please send an e-mail to [sales@rosebayliquor.com.au](mailto:sales@rosebayliquor.com.au) or fill in a form in-store.

You will receive 2-3 e-mails per month and can opt out at any time. Join now for the chance to win!

Past newsletters are available online:  
[www.rosebayliquor.com.au](http://www.rosebayliquor.com.au)

Whenever you're in wine country and trying to work out where to go, ask the cellar door staff at a winery. They may ask you what kind of wines you like... give them a few examples and they'll point out other styles you may like.

I was in the Barossa and was told to head to Gibson wines. I'd heard a little bit about them, but hadn't them.

I'm glad I went. They're right up the North end of the Barossa, specialising in Shiraz and Grenache but growing a few other bits as well. The winemaker is Rob Gibson, who was chief viticulturalist at Penfolds for 20 years. If anyone knows the Barossa, it's him.

So their top shelf wines are pretty expensive, in the \$90's. They also do a Shiraz called "The Dirtman", which is Rob's nickname... also bloody good and I'm working on getting it in. But it's the blends that worked best for me.

**Wilfreda** is a red Rhône blend, so it's Shiraz, Grenache and Mourvedre... beautifully juicy and I've got a couple of customers addicted to it already. Nice medium body too, so it won't knock you around too much and your sinuses might just survive too.

**Isabelle** is a Bordeaux blend, mostly Merlot with a bit of Cab Sauv and Petit Verdot in there too. Lovely blackcurrant and anise nose (you'll want to sniff it for hours), again with a medium body rather than the big Barossa blockbusters we're used to.

Both are \$35 per bottle and worth every cent. However, if you want to mix up a dozen of them, I can get the price down to \$27.99 per bottle. Just get in touch with me to get this special pricing on these fantastic wines and thank me later.