Where Have MEDALS GONE?

A bottle of Thasos 2005 Moscatel de Setúbal caught my eye at a recent get-together of my local wine-tasting group. It wasn’t the label that grabbed me; it was two stickers denoting “Silver Medals,” one from the 2009 Decanter World Wine Awards, one from the 2009 International Wine & Spirit Competition. It struck me that stickers like these have become about as rare as unicorns in American wine shops. Sure enough, that particular bottle had been purchased in Spain.

I might have forgotten all about that sticker-sporting Moscatel had I not received, days later, a press release announcing the Ultimate Beverage Challenge, a brand-new U.S.-based venture that proclaimed—through its combo of impeccable methodology and superior judges—to be

As the wine market continues to expand, medals, once a mass-market staple, provide a POS alternative to the point system.  

BY W. R. TISH
the end-all of competitions, not only for wine, but also spirits and even cocktails. My reaction was “Huh! Who actually cares about the medals these days?”

So I spent a few weeks broaching the topic with a variety of producers, importers, marketers, retailers, distributors, PR pros, judges, critics, bloggers and consumers. I learned that yes, medals have lost some luster, particularly due to the rise of the 100-point scale and an inevitable sense of dilution based on sheer volume (bronze medals, not unlike 85-point ratings, elicit more shrugs than wows).

But this is no time to dismiss medals as 20th century relics. They still, for the most part, signify merit, and for members of the wine trade, they can still be impactful tools. The trick is that the passive approach—so long symbolized by stickies—just ain’t what it used to be. In today’s broader, more complex wine market, making use of medals has become a more proactive, strategic enterprise. Indeed, the value of medals seems to have shifted from macro (national) relevance to micro, where acclaim generated by sundry competitions can still be applied effectively, but in specific contexts. Today’s vintners and merchants are using these accolades more tactically.

Here is a look at some evolutionary aspects of the wine-medal sweepstakes, as well as specific ways that medals still work for wines, and can still work for the trade and consumers alike:

“National” is So Last Century
Classically speaking, the impact of medals—like any awards—rests in the power of third-party endorsement, and there is no limit, theoretically, on the scope of this power. It’s a win-win-win situation: producers win when their product is singled out for praise; consumers win because this praise creates a shortcut to wine worth buying; and everyone who has a hand in selling that particular wine wins as well. This formula worked so well for wine that in the mid 1990s there was actually a paperback book published annually listing the medal-winning wines from nine California judgments.

Kendall-Jackson got a lot of mileage out of being “America’s most-awarded winery.” Jim Caudill, who became the PR director for K-J in 1995, recalls that at the time, it was not uncommon for top awards to have national impact; Benziger, Bonterra and Hanna are a few other brands he recalls getting a big bump in sales as a direct result of competition awards. Today, notes Caudill, the entire wine arena has changed: “The amount of information available to the average consumer has dramatically increased, accessible across an ever increasing array of platforms and channels.” Combined with the volume and variety of wines being distributed across the country, medals have simply become a smaller part of the big picture of wine in America.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many competitions that still thrive are doing so based on regional roots. Some are tied in to annual fairs, which makes sense—agricultural fairs have a long tradition of awarding medals to farm and food products, from pigs to pies, so judging wines was a natural extension. At the same time, regional judgments (including those not connected to fairs) have maintained strong local followings even as the national wine landscape has shifted toward ratings.

Napa-based consultant John Corcoran of Think Wine Marketing also believes the days of medals having national reach are in our rearview mirror. He believes that medals’ ability to drive sales circa 2010 is limited to markets where distribution is already established. He adds that “the effect of competitions now tend to be localized,” with sales bumps for medal winners concentrated in the two to three weeks after they are announced. Prime examples include results from the Dallas Morning News and San Francisco Chronicle judgments. Post-competition promotions are sometimes tied into specific retail outlets, e.g., Bottle Barn featuring gold medalists from the Sonoma Harvest Fair and Sacramento-based Nugget Markets featuring winners from the California State Fair.

In addition, many of the established competitions stage public tastings to showcase the winners, adding real-life fuel to local-market buzz. Bottom line for wine merchants: Know the competitions in your local market and take advantage of them. Even if you do not add inventory based on medals, chances are good that you already sell some, and flagging them with signage can help tap into hometown spirit.

Judgment Day: a Reality Check
Opinions as to the merit of wine-competition results tend to fall into two camps: People who judge wine tend to defend competitions (particularly the ones they participate in) and people who have not judged, tend to dismiss them. Those giving thumbs up, such as veteran judge Rebecca Chapa, a San Francisco-based educator
and consultant at Tannin Management, believe that panels are great, especially at identifying wines for regular wine drinkers. “I feel like critics tend to lean in a certain direction in terms of wine style,” says Chapa. “When you have a mixed panel of folks from all ends of the industry you find that there is a much greater balance in terms of what wins, and I think that those wines are much more likely to be consumer-friendly.”

Blogger Kevin Glowacki—of atlantawineguy.com as well as holder of an Advanced Certificate from the WSET and a former retail buyer—summarizes some of the rationale in the thumbs-down camp: “Without knowing all the wines that were tasted, how can I judge the merit of the medal? I don’t ever see tasting notes. When I read reviews, I read the notes. Score to me is more of a general guide to quality than medals.” Extreme anti-medal-ists are also apt to cite research by Robert Hodgson published in the 2009 Journal of Wine Economics that exposed statistical inconsistency based on common wines in multiple competitions.

So, which side should the retailer take? The wine’s side. Inconsistency among judges (critics, too) is a natural result of human nature. But so what? Another truism of human nature is that people look for “winners,” and that is what exactly medal-earning wines are. My advice for wine merchants: steer clear of shop talk of how judgings work (aside from the idea of the wines being tasted “blind” and by panels, non-geeks could not care less about methodology, format, scoring, panel composition, pacing, volume and variety of samples judged). But do give the winning wines a chance to impress you—and perhaps your customers.

Results are as close as your computer, and medal results are pretty quick to scan. See how your inventory matches up with some of the big daddies, like San Francisco International (sfwinecomp.com); Los Angeles International (fairplex.com); California State Fair (thebestcaliforniawine.com); Dallas Morning News (dallaswinecompetition.com); Riverside International Wine Competition (riversidewinecompetition.com); or the Critics Challenge (criticschallenge.com). Maybe something you see becomes a point of distinction, worthy of in-store signage or mentioning in an email newsletter. If nothing else, it will give you a chance to see what is qualifying as cream that rises to the top at large blind judgings.

Heavy Medal?

Realistically, two realms where medals still matter a great deal are of little interest to retailers: tasting rooms and direct-to-consumer wine clubs. It’s just common sense. In both of those contexts, a consumer is in a position to buy specific products, and the medals provide an important point of distinction. Now, forget about the tasting rooms and wine clubs, but keep the common sense. Here are several other contexts where medals can matter (and where they don’t):

- Medal-winning wines under $10 are gold, even if the medal received is not.
peal of bang-for-buck, stickers are still a key POS tool for both the Barefoot table wines and bubblies. Of course, Charles Shaw (aka “Two Buck Chuck”) is another budget-priced brand that has gained prestige via medaling; it garnered national publicity after being named top Chardonnay (besting 350 others) in the 2007 California State Fair Competition. Brian Loomis, a consultant to Bronco Wine Company, marketers of Charles Shaw among many California brands, says, “Personally, I think it’s gold or nothing, in terms of having real impact.” He adds, however, that medals are a favored tool of some of Bronco’s veteran sales people, and that winners at the San Francisco Chronicle competition are especially welcome because they come out early in the calendar year, when not much else is going on.

Do not expect to see reserve-level and single-vineyard win many (if any) medals. It makes sense: wineries often have less inventory of high-end stuff; plus, given their prices, anything but best-of-show results can be perceived as a disappointment. Robert Larsen, director of public relations at Sonoma-based Rodney Strong Vineyards, adds that high-end wines “are sought after by numbers watchers, not medal counters.” In the same vein, do not expect to see medals promoted on websites of wineries with broad portfolios; it just does not look good to have lower-priced wines out-medaling pricier ones.

**Trust in Wines that Triumph**

They go by many names (Double-Gold, Platinum, Sweepstakes This, Chairman’s That...), but the top-dog wines in any large competition usually go through multiple tasting sessions before being crowned. Consider Dry Creek Vineyard’s 2006 Meritage “The Mariner,” which took home Best of Class at the 2010 Critics Challenge. Interestingly, the winery’s 2006 Cabernet won a platinum in the same event. As both wines emerged from multiple layers of judgment, common sense says the above-gold honors are not fluke.

**Don’t Ignore the Underdogs**

Dan Berger, a veteran journalist as well as judge, is a big believer in blind judgings yielding surprises worth shouting about. In fact, he thinks that the relative lack of high-end and usual-suspect wines makes competitions an ideal proving ground for lesser-known grapes and wineries alike. Berger feels that certain types of wine—e.g. Chenin Blanc, Colombard and claret-style Zinfandel, hybrids—face more prejudice from critics than they do at judgings. (Don’t get him started about the $10.29 Torrey Ridge NV Finger Lakes Diamond that won the Chairman’s Award at this year’s Riverside competition.) Success at a major judging is a ticket to legitimacy for underdogs, and like budget-priced winners, such unheralded winners make good candidates for POS promotion.

Know a judge? Ask him or her, and you will hear tales of pure discovery. Remember that wine judges do this because they love the experience, they believe in the dynamics of blind tasting. When wines jump out and grab an entire panel, judges remember. So it’s not a bad idea to check in with your judging peers for the inside scoop that goes beyond what any list of medals can provide.

**What’s Next...**

Given the dozens of wine competitions happening annually, it seems obvious that even though medals have taken a backseat to ratings, judgings are going to remain a part of the industry that deserve the attention of merchants aiming to stay on top of the wine scene. Looking ahead, my hunch is that the trend toward the importance of regionality in competitions’ market influence might be setting the stage for specialized competitions to gain traction.

One to keep an eye on is the Consumer Wine Awards at Lodi (consumerwineawards.com), which may have turned a corner with its third annual judging in 2010. This event is run like other competitions in that wines are grouped in peer flights and judged by panels, but panelists in this case are avid wine consumers (90 in all). Perhaps even more important, the event is run by a group that includes Tim Hanni, MW, and one of their goals is to shake up the very notion of wine judging. The methodology—tied in to some serious sensory research—emphasizes how much judges like a wine, as opposed to how they think a wine should taste. Hanni asserts, “We are leveraging recent scientific discoveries in human sensory perception and finding ways for both consumers and the wine industry to win. Our intention to introduce new methods may result in greater consumption among consumers who drink wine frequently but are baffled by the immense selections, conflicting reviews and simply an industry that they still find overwhelming.”

Wine Competition Management, based in Santa Rosa, CA, is another player to watch. The firm creates “market-specific” wine competitions, according to founder and managing director Lea Pierce, “rather than the ‘put a blue ribbon on that heifer’ cattle call events that are based on the state fair tradition.” Her first venture, the National Women’s Wine Competition (launched 2007) used only women as judges. This year they added an Organic & Biodynamic judging (with green pioneer Paul Dolan as honorary chairman).
and the “NextGen” competition, which used only Millenial wine professionals (aged 21-35) as judges. Next year they plan to add a judging whose panels will consist strictly of wine buyers. The thoroughly mod approach carries through to promotion; each competition has its own website and iPhone app, not to mention a strong presence on Facebook and Twitter.

**Staying Relevant**

Maybe what judgings need to stay relevant is not so much a makeover, but some purposeful tweaking. In addition to running several regional California competitions, San Diego-based writer and judging veteran Robert Whitley has added three separate events whose point of distinction is the type of professional judges: winemakers, journalists and sommeliers. (Interestingly, Chateau Ste. Michelle Dry Riesling earned top honors in both the 2010 Critics Challenge [the seventh annual edition] and the inaugural 2009 Sommelier Challenge.) These specialized events provide added value for entrants in the form of extensive editorial support at Whitley’s website wнеревюонline.com; and winning wines in the Sommelier Challenge are posted with the names of the awarding sommeliers, for a dash of transparency unique among major competitions.

And then there is the case of the Ultimate Beverage Challenge, a three-pronged venture spearheaded by well-known journalist Paul Pacult, which may turn out to be the Ultimate Marketing Challenge. The inaugural judgings—all conducted earlier this year, with results posted online at ultimate-beverage.com—delivered top honors in both the 2010 Critics Challenge [the seventh annual edition] and the inaugural 2009 Sommelier Challenge.) These specialized events provide added value for entrants in the form of extensive editorial support at Whitley’s website wнеревюонline.com; and winning wines in the Sommelier Challenge are posted with the names of the awarding sommeliers, for a dash of transparency unique among major competitions.

Wine, notably European table wines, were clearly under-represented (there were 20 Zinfandels, and that was one of the largest categories; four sherries were entered, all from Gonzales-Byass).

One hundred and thirteen of the 500 entries scored over 90 in the judges’ aggregated ratings; only a handful scored under 80. A lot of wines were in the middle, raising the question: How will sub-90-point winners fare in an age when 88 points and bronze alike come across to many as meh? Awards of “Very Good Recommendation” (wines rated 85-89) and “Enjoyable/Commendable” (76-84) are quite a mouthful (or stickerful), and may make people nostalgic for the Olym-