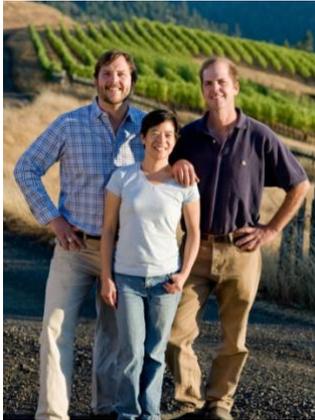


Now *That's* High Quality! - Andy Peay



High quality: An adjective that has become almost meaningless due to its misuse and overuse by marketers. But, we all have some sense what high quality means in almost every category whether it is a consumer good, a service, or an experience. Advertising campaigns attempt to define the features that promise high quality for a specific product, but time and direct experience determine whether a company is, indeed, making a high quality product. Or not. The emperor can only walk nude down the road so far until someone inevitably turns to the person next to him and says, “presumptuous for little old me to pass judgment on a person of such high regard, but I believe that man is naked and stark-raving mad.” And that is good news. A claim of high quality is easy to make but to achieve it takes time, vision, and extraordinary effort.

What is high quality? In a consumer good, it is often a combination of the quality of the base material and the level of craftsmanship used to shape it into a product. For a handbag, how rare and fine the material is and how it has been treated, cut, and sewn into a bag. In the design process there is a consideration for its functionality while shaping a form that appeals to human aesthetics. You can touch the leather, inspect the stitching, and admire the way the bag balances on your arm or shoulder. Not just anyone can make a Prada quality handbag. Those leather makers have been perfecting their craft for centuries. Same goes for the sewers and dyers. Of course, high-end knock-offs can get fairly close to the Prada bag but over half the value has nothing to do with the cost of material or manufacturing. So why the premium price? Prada has a reputation built over years of making singular bags that sustain exacting standards and as such a premium has accrued in the Prada bag over a bag of equivalent features. This is their brand equity premium. It took 100 years to build this reputation and it is very valuable. The consumer knows it will be a superior bag and is willing to spend “extra” as the investment has proven to meet their claims of high quality. All of the above is true for wine as well but due to the nature of wine - how it is packaged, sold and consumed - it can be more complicated and confusing for consumers to assess at the point of purchase if they are buying a high quality wine and, even after they have consumed a wine, whether it was high quality. Why? What is high quality in wine and why can it be tricky for consumers to tell when they have experienced it?



A quick aside here. I don't begrudge anyone the success they have achieved with a wine they make. It is a hard business often driven by people passionate for what they are doing regardless of their skill or level of experience. If folks like their wine, well, that is great for everyone involved. But I don't think this “open-mindedness” means we are not able to parse out what high quality means when it comes to wine and to understand why it can—in fact, must—take a long time for a wine to gain stature as a wine of high quality. So, okay, now that we have that established...

Quality in wine must first be associated with taste. Affects of alcohol – whether desirable or not - are all fairly equal across wines (alcohol ranges from 11-17% and the affect is the same as a percent of any alcohol by volume.) Of course, what tastes good is subjective and highly contentious. A lot of code swapping goes on as marketers jockey to define high quality in wine by associating certain flavors, winemaking techniques, and regions with good taste. This is necessary to some degree as you can't usually taste a wine before buying it. Even if you can, tasting good is only part of what often makes someone put a wine in the “high quality” category. With wine, especially a luxury good like higher end wine, we are dealing with fashion. Wine is not simply a beverage to many but can be a symbol of good

taste, sophistication, and personal achievement, oftentimes signaled by a high price. A high price can be a shorthand way of letting consumers know that this bottle is worth this much money or it would all be in a warehouse gathering dust. In fact, it may be, but that would be illogical so consumers assume that either there are a lot of fools out there or that they are dullards and more experienced and sophisticated wine drinkers think this is a high quality wine even if they personally do not “get it” and maybe they will if they drink more of it. Insecurity and trophy-ism aside, many flavors in wine do take some time and repeated exposure to appreciate (like with coffee, oysters, and modern art). Further, a wine may not taste very good when it is first sold but with time in the bottle may change character and blossom into something sublime. Think young Barolo. Or it may never taste good but you won’t know until 10 years down the road when you dare to open it (and even then, “was it my fault it didn’t taste good because I waited too long or not long enough or...?”) As a result, what someone says about a wine – and its potential - sometimes is more influential than what one tastes. “Why, yes, that blend absolutely tastes like a dirty, soiled horse stall soaked in cat pee. It received 98 points and costs \$100? Delicious.” So, in the end, you can rely on taste to some degree for determining quality in wine but it is not fool proof and can be highly influenced by external forces. So what other factors should we consider to assess high quality in wine?

I would begin with the base material, the grapes. I remember the first time my mother used the phrase, “you can’t make a silk purse from a sow’s ear.” She was dismissing a restaurant’s flavorless dish made from vegetables that came off a Cisco truck and I think it is useful here, too. To make high quality wine, your grapes simply must be good grapes. *We* believe there are certain farming practices one can (must?) employ to grow high quality grapes but again we are wandering into highly contentious and subjective territory. So, to clarify matters, I will focus on practices that are invisible to the consumer but require sacrifice and considerable cost revealing a winery’s commitment to high quality production.

At Peay, for example, we promise our vineyard employees full-time, year round work and, as a result, they have worked for us for a long time. Each year they accrue knowledge about the vineyard and Nick’s farming philosophy. Having full-time people in the vineyard plus Nick is very expensive and rare in our industry. We pay more per hour than almost anyone in the business and we pay for 12 months of work (even though they work only 11 months) and not just for the 6-9 month growing season like in the vast majority of vineyards. It makes it very difficult to remain profitable, especially in light of our low yields. But we retain our workers and they identify with their work. They work hard and with care and we think it translates into quality in the wines as they give extra attention to each vine. And the effect of their attention on quality takes years, decades, as we all learn more about what is working and what is not. If we made a great wine one vintage, what accounted for that? What did we learn from a tough vintage when all hell broke loose that will help us for the future? Every year we all think about what we can do to continue to move in the direction of making high quality wine? Like farming organically.

A decade or more ago, we increased farming costs a few thousand dollars per acre when we started to farm organically. The market wasn’t asking about organic grapes back then but we felt a vineyard in harmony with its surroundings was more likely to make balanced fruit and would allow our estate vineyard’s character to come through better in the wines. In addition to cost, it takes a lot more effort to farm organically. Nick spends over a month on his tractor driving at a snail’s pace down every row tilling weeds under the vines instead of spraying herbicide. He notices things. He thinks about the health of the shoots. Of *that* specific shoot. He chews on that thought for the next 8 hours. Then he calls Vanessa. They chew together and come up with a plan. Now, you well know we don’t adhere to biodynamic farming techniques but despite all our cantankerous musings on the subject, for



the same reasoning I think the intention and the effort it takes to farm bio-dynamically is a sign that the bio farmer is also focused on high quality grape growing. Of course, a bio adherent may be more focused on unproven quasi-science than wine, but the effort it takes to farm this way is substantial and telling. Contrast these farming approaches with a wine I saw recently that proudly claimed to do nothing in the vineyard, or was “untended.” Did it make high quality wine? I don’t know, I didn’t spend the money to taste it as I assumed it was low quality. It had to be. The vine evolved to grow and reproduce and does not really care about intensity or complexity of fruit expression that high quality wine possesses. Crop load and balance, sun exposure, nutrition, mildew pressure; all of these, and more, are things vineyard workers have sweated over for centuries in an effort to make higher quality fruit for winemaking. Untended!? I bet the winery says that grapes untended make wine by itself, too. That is, unless they make vinegar. In long, you must invest in your vineyard and your people to make quality grapes. It doesn’t just “happen.”

A second aspect of determining high quality in wine is to look at how, using the leather bag analogy, it is “cut, treated and sewn.” Here again people use very specific terminology to let you know the effort they are undertaking to create a high quality wine: hand harvested vs. machine harvested fruit; estate grown and bottled at the winery vs. custom crush winemaking at someone else’s winery; small vessel vs. large vat fermentation; and on and on. Many practices are not universally accepted as better than the alternative, though: Native vs. commercial yeast? Fermenting and aging in oak vs. stainless steel vs. concrete vs. eggs? Whole cluster vs. destemmed fruit? It is very easy to get caught in the muck of winemaking techniques driven by personal preference and subjective experience. So, let’s stick with the same idea of looking at the effort a winemaker expends to achieve their objective of high quality wine as opposed to specifically what they do in the winemaking.

Let’s look at fruit sourcing: Does a winery buy grapes or grow its own? It is a *lot* easier to buy grapes. You don’t have to wait four years for vines to produce and you can buy older vine grapes which often can have more character than young vine fruit. You don’t have to place as large a bet on your belief about a site’s potential for making high quality wine, either. That fruit doesn’t make tasty wine? Next! And you don’t have to learn how to be a farmer and manage another business. But there is a cost. Someone who purchases fruit doesn’t lose as badly as an estate winery if they are wrong about a site’s potential but neither do they succeed as greatly. The vineyard is not theirs. Working with a single piece of land for a lifetime—maybe lifetimes—you become attuned to the subtleties of the place. You are able to invest in the long term potential of the site and, like many relationships, that investment can reap greater rewards. With a non-estate vineyard, regardless of what a purchaser says about the grower doing what she wants, farming is not under the winery’s control. The winery’s philosophy for growing high quality fruit must meet the economic demands of the grower who needs to make a profit. Owning or having a very long term lease that includes paying for all farming costs ensures you can put your ideas of what makes high quality fruit into practice over decades. And, at a personal risk.

Sorting is another practice no one really discusses but can reveal a lot about a winery’s investment in high quality. Man, I wish we didn’t sort our fruit. Of course, we don’t pick obviously bad-looking fruit. But you would be amazed at what you catch when you spread the fruit out on a slow moving table. It takes us about an hour to sort a ton of fruit when it is “clean.” It has taken us an hour to sort a ¼ ton of fruit when it is not. This means we often work 18 hour days staring at a moving sorting belt picking off leaves, marred fruit, etc. That is expensive, time-consuming, and, frankly, mind-numbingly boring. I have friends who say blithely that they just tip the bin in the fermenter et voila! Or who speed the sorting belt up so fast they can’t even grab any bad fruit; it basically just spreads the fruit out so it can go



Okay, not all sorting is brutal

through a de-stemmer without clogging. Or, that “we sort in the vineyard” as picking bins are dumped rapidly into a larger bin. Pish. These people have personal lives during harvest. Heck, they may even get home before 10 p.m.

All of this extra care in the source of the fruit and in the care of the fruit and wine in the winery takes thought, effort, time, and money. Sacrifice. It is a sign that the person making those decisions thinks deeply about and prioritizes the pursuit of high quality wine. It may take a lifetime or longer to achieve the goal. Only through years of experience refining practices with an eye on closing in on the final 5% of perfection, will you end up achieving high quality. And, to some degree, whether the wine ends up appealing to the consumer depends on whether the winemaker is correct about what makes a high quality wine. We have a palate to make that final determination.

So, we can argue all day over style, vineyard and winery practices, and relative value. Heck, it might even be fun if we are pulling corks while we banter. But if you really want to know whether someone makes high quality wine, look at the thought, commitment, and effort they expend to fulfill their promise. I bet that will be a better indication of the quality of their wine than what they say they do in the winemaking. Talk is cheap, high quality wine rarely can be.

