

It's late December and I'm on the website. The weekend of January 26 and 27, the Marriot Hotel on Hilton Head will host the judging of the wines that will be available for tasting at the 28th Annual Hilton Head Island Food and Wine Festival. The judging of the wines is closed to the public; however, the tasting of those same wines for the public will be available during the week of March 5 thru March 9. The formal name for the judging is "The International Wine Judging and Competition." It is the oldest judging on the east coast and wines from all over the United States and from other countries will be represented. The judging panel consists of local and regional wine judges from across the country. All are either Certified Wine Educators or Advance Sommeliers. Each judge has his/her biography on the website for the festival. (www.hiltonheadisland.org) It's an impressive list.

Soon thereafter, the phone rings and I answer it. I can't believe my luck! I've just been invited to "observe" the wine judging at the Marriot. Of course I accept. As an observer, I assume I am to sit quietly out of the way and avoid being a nuisance. I could not be more wrong.

The folks running the judging program go out of their way to make me feel welcome and I appreciate it. It certainly helps me get rid of any initial anxiety.

Let me say from the outset that the State of our Union is sound as far as wine in the Lowcountry is concerned. I have never witnessed a group of professionals more focused on their subject as the Wine Judges that I met on Saturday. Their task was overwhelming. You might think sampling 800 wines in a two day period would be paradise. Au contraire, mes amis. Nothing could be further from the truth. Each judge had to focus on the taste of the wine, then evaluate many additional characteristics such as aroma, balance, color, fruit, finish, how the wine would match with food, and many more. This all had to be accomplished in a minimum of time in order to keep the process in motion. I can assure every reader that the judges were fair, thorough, and a credit to their profession.

Let me try to recreate the setting. We were in the Sable Ballroom of the hotel. The room was divided in half by an enormous black drape. On one side of the drape was the storage area for all of the wines entered in the judging. The wines were arranged in perfect order, ready to be moved to the judging area when it was their turn. On the other side of the drape was the judging area with only five very large tables and six seats at each table. When the judges took their seats at the table, each had a list of the wines identifying the wines by NUMBER only. They knew the varietal of the wine and nothing more. This insured that the judging was BLIND and

impartial. From the six judges at each table, one was appointed to be the moderator. As the moderator, he/she had to judge the wine along with the other five, and also tabulate the results and lead any discussion that might take place. This is important, because it is at this point that the wines are awarded medals. (It is at this juncture that one realizes the awesome responsibility that a judge has; i.e. in this case to remain objective for two days, to award silver and gold medals to those wines that are deserving, and to find that one wine that will be awarded "Best-of-Show.")

This event has the potential to become a logistics nightmare. Moving the wines to be judged from the staging area to the judging floor has to run like a well-oiled machine. When one flight of wine has been judged, a complete removal of the used glassware has to take place to make room for the next flight of wine. This is accomplished by very experienced personnel. The judges never leave their seats, going on to the next wines in a seamless manner. What I witnessed on Saturday was an exercise in Logistics Nightmare Avoidance.

By the way, I would be remiss if I did not say "congratulations on a job well done!" to the five volunteers from the University of South Carolina, Beaufort. They did a 24-hour internship at the wine judging for credit towards their studies in Hospitality Management. Each volunteer participated in all phases of the judging competition.

WINESPEAK

The Annual Food and Wine Festival includes the judging in January, 17 restaurant events the first week of March called the Great Chefs of the South Wine Dinners, a Grand Tasting that features Premium Wines and a silent auction, and on the last day of the festival is the Wine and Food Festival and silent auction at The Coastal Discovery Museum at Honey Horn. The festival reflects the high regard this area has for the mighty grape. It would be impossible and impractical to attend all of the events, however I would try to attend at least one or two. If past history is any indication, you will find that all of the events are very popular. For more information, visit www.hiltonheadisland.org
Cheers.