



## Who is Robert Parker Jr?

By Pancho Campo MW

Unless you are a wine professional or a serious aficionado, you have probably not heard of Robert Parker. If you are, however, in the wine business, you will probably know that Parker and his rating system are the most important points of reference around the world for buying, importing and trading with wine. This former lawyer at Capitol Hill has become one of the most powerful and influential people in the wine sector. There is no other industry where only one critic has so much power and influence. Like most critics, he is loved by many, respected by most but also heavily criticized. Nevertheless, what is undeniable, everyone knows who Robert Parker is in the wine industry.

Robert Parker Jr. lives in the town of Parkton, Maryland, not far from Baltimore from where he tastes wines from every main wine-producing region and publishes his newsletter known as The Wine Advocate. Parker's interest in wine began while at law school. He travelled to France to visit Joan, his girlfriend and now his wife. Being on a very tight budget while visiting Strasbourg, he realized that wine was cheaper than a Coke or a coffee, and that is how he first tried a glass of wine. He fell in love with it and soon it became his passion.

After a couple of years of studying and tasting wine from around the globe he realized that, at least in the US, there was no ranking or classification that would help the consumer understand if a wine had more or less quality. He also noticed that many American consumers were confused when purchasing wine because they didn't have a point of reference. Also, he was spending so much money in purchasing wines that his wife threatened him with a divorce if he continued. This prompted him to create the first "independent consumer guide" as he likes to call his publication, The Wine Advocate. He also developed a rating system based on scores, in the same way that any American school or college grades students, from 0 to 100 points. Bob's goal was to get enough subscribers to The Wine Advocate so he could retire as a lawyer and spend most of his time tasting, rating and writing about wines.

It was the 1982 vintage that gave Robert Parker a breakthrough in his career and would change his life forever. Every year in March, critics, writers and gurus from around the globe gather in Bordeaux for the "en primeur" tasting. During this week, wines are tasted from the barrel and critics evaluate the quality of the harvest that will be released the following year. Based on their comments and ratings the wines will be priced by the negociants of Bordeaux. We must remember that the great châteaux from Bordeaux are the wines used as a point of reference for auctions and trading of fine wines. That year most critics did not rate the wines very highly, including Robert Finnegan who, at the time was the most respected and followed wine writer. Only a young American critic named Robert Parker believed that 1982 was a great vintage, rich, concentrated and of great wines. As time passed, the 1982 wines went on to prove that Parker had been right and all the others wrong. This was the birth of who has later been called "The Emperor of Wine".

The Wine Advocate became very popular and a point of reference for many professionals and consumers. It reached a high enough number of subscriptions that allowed him to retire as an attorney and dedicate his life to wine tasting. He is considered the number one expert in Bordeaux wines and his ratings have changed the business of wine in this classic region. Such has been the impact of Parker for the Bordeaux wine industry that on March 29, 1999, President Jacques Chirac signed a decree authorizing Robert M. Parker, Jr. to be a Chevalier dans l'Ordre de la Légion d'Honneur. He was decorated directly by President Jacques Chirac at a ceremony at the Elysée Palace on June 22, 1999. Robert M. Parker, Jr. is the only wine writer/critic in history to have been given the highest Presidential Honors by two French presidents and an Italian President.



The Wine Advocate has today over 55.000 subscriptions from 37 countries. He has published 13 books and his website [www.erobertparker.com](http://www.erobertparker.com) is the World's most visited wine web. Robert Parker has become one of the top five most influential and powerful personalities of the industry according to most wine magazines. His ratings can almost guarantee a total sell out of a wine if he gives it more than 95 points. Winemakers around the world impatiently wait for the release of his points every year. They know that a good score could help them tremendously to sell their wines to buyers from all over the world. Today Parker himself has specialized in wines from Bordeaux, the Rhone and the United States. His team of collaborators is responsible for tasting the wines from the rest of the world and rate them on his behalf, always under the umbrella of The Wine Advocate.

Like most influential people he has many detractors who consider that he is contributing to promote a very one-dimensional style of wines, which are high in alcohol, tannic, oaky and extremely "big". They claim that because of his tremendous influence, most winemakers are focused in producing "Parker wines" in order to please Bob and obtain the highest possible ratings. Regardless of what one might think of Robert Parker, it is undeniable as a wine professional, that he is a point of reference and that the world of wine has changed because of the influence he exerts on peoples opinion.

Robert Parker will travel to Spain in November 2009 to attend a conference of world leaders of the wine industry. Bob and 30 other experts will gather at Winefuture-Rioja `09 to analyse the challenges that the wine industry is facing such as the global economical crisis, climate change, consumptions trends, etc. Robert Parker will also conduct a tasting and a conference, which will focus on the challenges and opportunities for the wine industry in a near future. Visit [www.winefuture.es](http://www.winefuture.es).

The following is the interview that Robert Parker Jr. answered to Pancho Campo on August 7th, 2009.

**1. Why are you looking to attend and speak at the Winefuture `09 conference?**

I certainly feel it is an honour and a privilege to be asked to attend the 2009 Winefuture Conference. Furthermore, I have not been to Spain in a long time, and I look forward to seeing how the country has changed. On my previous visits (1970, 1971, and 1972), there were no highways!

**2. Winefuture `09 has managed to attract the most influential wine leaders from all over the World such as Mel Dick, Jancis Robinson, Don. St. Pierre, Oz Clarke, Robert Joseph, etc. What do you think will be the contribution of these leaders at the conference?**

It is an impressive list of wine-world personalities, and each one of them brings an enormous depth of experience as well as a valuable perspective.

**3. What do you see as the big global challenges facing the wine industry?**

There are a number of global challenges to the wine industry. The fluctuations of currency are certainly a major problem, as is the proliferation of wine regions. The effect of this is that production has outstripped demand and consumer awareness. Educating wine consumers and ensuring effective distribution of wine throughout the civilized world has always been a challenge, and continues to be a significant one today.

**4. Do you believe that there will be a before and an after for the wine industry once the World overcomes the current crisis?**

It is difficult to know how long the current crisis will endure. It is certainly the deepest anyone alive has experienced, and the global impact is not to be diminished. Overall, the wine industry has fared reasonably well. At this point, I had expected far more consolidations, bankruptcies, and related misfortunes than what we have seen to date. So, I suspect the industry is in a good position to thrive once the current crisis has run its course.



**5. What kind of role do you think you can play in?**

I am a wine critic, and while I do not review as many wines as I did a decade ago, the entire team that now works for the Wine Advocate has one overwhelming goal – to provide meaningful as well as unbiased and independent information for wine consumers, especially with respect to the diversity and quality of wines from the different viticultural regions throughout the world. We strive to educate the consumer regarding different wine styles and what each region does best.

**6. Your influence often goes before you..but what do you see as your ultimate role in the sector?**

Worldwide influence is personally gratifying, but in my case, it is often greatly exaggerated, and creates its own set of problems with people believing in some sort of mythical omnipotence not based on reality

**7. Which do you think has been your most important contribution to the global wine industry?**

Bringing integrity, credibility, and a democratic view to the wine world is what I think has been my most important contribution to the global wine industry. Judging wines for what they are, without respect to price, pedigree, branding, or prestige has great significance to me and my other writers. It is something about which I am exceptionally proud.

**8. Challenges facing wine media/wine writers?**

Fewer and fewer wine writers are able to make a successful living today as the print media is dying. We have seen a proliferation of bloggers, much of which is useless noise. However, there are some good blogging sites, so I am not denigrating all of them. As in the wine industry, it appears there has been a consolidation of power in the hands of a few wine writers, and that is never a good thing.

**9. You will be conducting a Grand Tasting during Winefuture. Why have you chosen Grenache to be the topic of such tasting?**

I have chosen Grenache because I think it is one of the most challenging grape varieties in the world. It is far more difficult to produce fine wine from Grenache than from Pinot Noir (which is often considered the most troublesome of the major red grape varieties). Moreover, my tasting in Spain of Grenache, or Garnacha as you call it, is indeed a first, and a rare look at some of the finest Grenache-based wines throughout the world. I believe this will be a great opportunity to look at some diverse styles from different areas, and the singular nature of the tasting will be far rarer than anything that could have been done with Pinot Noir or Bordeaux varieties.

**10. Why do you think wine consumption is decreasing drastically in think European wine producing countries?**

It seems clear that the European governments have taken a strong anti-alcohol position, which has swept wine under the umbrella of these restrictive rules. At the same time, I think the younger generation has found wine too intimidating and/or expensive, and thus has chosen other alcoholic beverages, further decreasing wine sales. However, we do see wine consumption in the USA as well as Asia increasing, so perhaps that compensates for the downturn in Europe. It is a sad irony that European countries, renowned the world over for their wine culture as well as sophistication, are seeing a dramatic fall in the consumption of wine.

**11. Spain leads today's gastronomy and it has become probably the most fashionable with Ferran Adria, Arzak or Jose Andres among many other celebrity chefs. If food and wine are supposed to go together, why Spanish wines do not have the same success?**

I think it takes time for wine consumers to fully understand the depth and diversity of the Spanish qualitative wine revolution. The culinary giants in Spain have attracted enormous publicity, and so have certain Spanish wineries. However, for many wine consumers, Spanish wines do not possess chicness/prestige and are too new to be considered world-class wines. All of this contradicts the country's history, and the fact that many Spanish wines are made from very old vines, and from viticultural areas that have existed for hundreds of years.



**12. Other wine writers you respect and like to read their work?**

It is difficult to say because I have read and learned from so many wine writers. However, several deceased luminaries stand out largely because of their contributions to my wine knowledge long before I became a wine critic. These include Alexis Lichine, Edmund Penning-Roswell, Harry Waugh, Sheldon Wasserman, and André Simon.

**13. Wine drinking and wine making trends? What do you see as the wine styles of the future?**

Wine making trends have followed the proliferation of major viticultural areas throughout the world, offering consumers an increasingly broad range of styles and wines. The recapturing of indigenous varieties in both Spain and Italy that were often sold off to cooperatives will certainly continue, assuming the world economy rebounds. There is no doubt that the power in the wine world will shift more and more toward Asia, led by Hong Kong and such emerging wine consuming giants as South Korea and China. The New World wines will continue to have to prove their ability against those from Europe that have hundreds of years and tradition and history on their side. But, modern day consumers, especially those in the Americas and Asia, are willing to try wines as long as they are of high quality. Hopefully, with educational efforts on the part of the wine media, the competition for both high quality wines and high quality values will continue at an accelerated pace, giving the consumer better and better wines in a multitude of styles as well as price points.

**14. Which countries do you think will be the winners and losers going forward – and why?**

It is obviously easier for Old World countries with impressive histories, old vines, and well-established vineyards to present an image of quality. Newly arriving viticultural areas, such as South America, South Africa, and Australia, have to work harder to educate wine consumers about what they are doing. Of course, the media plays a role in this, but I do believe the winners will be those countries and wine producers that effectively promote their wines, providing interactive internet services that give up to date information and profiles of what they are doing, and do not depend on the media for attention. They have to create it themselves by spending time in different countries and doing educational tastings throughout the world.

**15. Parts of the world you would like to know more about – where you would like to visit/discover more about their wines?**

There has never been enough time to learn as much as I would like to know about all different sorts of wines, even in areas I cover extensively. Each year there is a new vintage, and it's like a student going back to school. As I get closer to the end of my career, my only regret is that there is not enough time left to learn as much as I desire.

**16. Who do you admire in the wine industry? be it winemakers–producers–individuals.**

There are too many people to name, but those I admire the most are wine producers of great individuality and vision, and who recognize that 80-90 percent of their wines' quality comes from their viticultural work and the vineyard. This admiration is not specific to any country, but is for the world's best producers, many of whom I profiled in my book "The World's Greatest Wine Estates." Just about any of the 150+ producers who were profiled are those that I admire enormously.

**17. You have been decorated by the Presidents of France and Italy. Would you like to meet King Juan Carlos during your visit to Spain? He happens to be a great wine enthusiast.**

It was very humbling to be decorated by two separate presidents of France and one of Italy, and it would be an extraordinary honour to meet King Juan Carlos of Spain. I have been incredibly blessed with the honours I have received, and never take it for granted. To meet King Juan Carlos would be the thrill of a lifetime.



**18. Favourite restaurant?**

I have many favourite restaurants, as my waistline can attest, but, much as with wine, I tend to prefer uncomplicated cuisine based on the finest, freshest ingredients and cooked with a minimum of external influences, other than salt, pepper, and garlic. For that reason, I tend to prefer simple restaurants that specialize in preparations driven by rotisserie, grilling, and roasting. I also enjoy great seafood served in its unmanipulated glory.

**19. Food and wine match?**

There are so many great wine and food match-ups, more than most people tend to think, so I don't really have a favourite. As I have always said, the most important component of a great meal is the proper choice of the people with whom you are eating. Once that is done, the food and wine tend to seem much better, no matter what you eat or drink.

**20. Best place for a drink and a sunset...**

I would have to say Maui, one of the Hawaiian Islands, is the most beautiful place to watch a sunset that I have ever experienced.

**21. You have never been to Spain before. What are you looking forward to visit and enjoy during your stay?**

I spent two months in the summers of 1970 and 1971 with my bride driving around every part of Spain, and saw almost every major tourist attraction at that time. Of course, back then, there were no highways in Spain, but we had a fabulous time on both trips. I have not been back to Spain since 1972, so I am thrilled to return.

**22. If you have any outstanding ambitions...career wise and also personally.**

I know it sounds simple, even trite, but I have been very fortunate to achieve things that were beyond my wildest dreams, both personally and career-wise. But I think as a wine critic of 30+ years, I strive each year to get better at what I do. Trying to guarantee a level of unmatched professionalism in my field is essentially my goal.

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