

Written by Leonid Fadeev

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Behind the scenes of Decanter

April 29 – May 03, 2019, more than 280 wine experts from all over the world, including 70 Masters of Wine and 23 Master Sommeliers gathered in London (UK) to judge at the largest and the most influential wine contest, Decanter (Decanter World Wine Awards – DWWA 2019). The contest has been held annually since 2004, and it has become a tradition to invite the best wine experts of the globe to it. In January 2019 I also received an invitation to take part in this event as a judge, which was a great honor to me.

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This year over 16,500 wines (in comparison, 4,500 in 2004) from 57 countries of the world, including Russia were evaluated at the competition. The number of wines participating in the competition increases every year, which testifies to the interest and trust in the Decanter-DWWA competition on the part of both producers and consumers.

In this article I will share my impressions of this contest, among which the tasting of Russian wines, that I happened to evaluate on one of judging days.



Before the judging week came, every judge was delegated to evaluate a particular wine region. Some judges evaluated wines from different wine regions and countries every day and some of them evaluated wines from the same regions several days in a row. Some judges were on the same panel during the whole competition, others were on different panels every day.

The main judging week lasted 5 days. I was engaged in the process of judging for 2 days. On the first day, as a panel member, I evaluated 69 wines, which were, mostly, wines from Russia (Krasnodar region - 35 samples), Georgia, as well as Ukraine and Kazakhstan. On the second day, 81 wines were tasted, mainly from Turkey, Israel, as well as Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, and Lebanon.

As a rule, a panel consisted of four people: three judges and a panel-chair. Panels were international. On the first day the panel that I was a part of, had representatives from Australia, Great Britain, the USA, and Russia, on the second – Germany, Poland, Russia, and Turkey.

One of the main tasks of any wine contest is to evaluate wines objectively and impartially. In every tasting flight there were 11-12 wines. Flights were grouped by countries, regions and subregions, color, and style (for example, still dry white, demi-sec sparkling white). All wines were tasted “blind”, judges didn't have any information about the producer. The only information available was that of the origin, region, subregion, vintage, wine style, grape variety, alcohol level, ageing in oak (if applicable), and price range. None of the judges inquired about the origin of the grapes, which, in my opinion, made sense. By the way, one of silver medals at the competition was



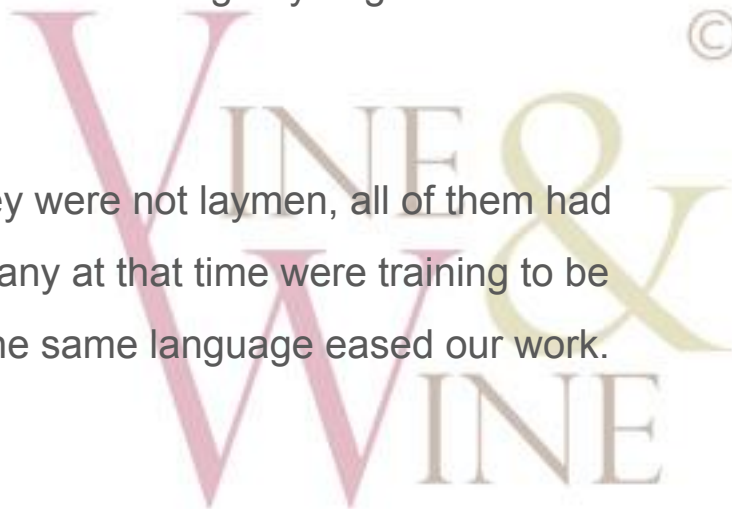
awarded to a wine (which also got 90 points) of the Russian producer JSC "Sparkling Wines" located in Saint-Petersburg, where grapes aren't grown due to severe weather conditions and wine in bulk is bought from Europe and New World countries. Any wine has the right to be evaluated and to get well-deserved points. We may say that JSC "Sparkling Wines" winemakers did it well, they can choose wine in bulk and work with it.

During the contest complete anonymity of wines is always observed, and only a month after the end of the judging week do the judges receive a report with the names of the wines they tasted and information on their producers.

The organization of the contest was amazing. A calm district of London near the river Thames was chosen as a venue for Decanter-DWWA. Spacious, light, and well-ventilated rooms ensured the comfortable work of the panels. Judges' working day started with a substantial breakfast, served at the contest venue, and instructions given by the event co-chairs Sarah Jane Evans MW, Andrew Jefford, and Michael Hill Smith MW. Their words really filled us with energy for the whole day of fruitful work.

Tasting day was divided into two parts. After the end of the first part, there was lunch, which like breakfast was organized at the venue of the contest. Then the second part of the tasting started. The tasting day began at 09:30 AM and ended at about 4 PM.

The contest staff is worth mentioning. They were not laymen, all of them had something to do with the world of wine, many at that time were training to be wine experts and sommeliers. Usage of the same language eased our work.



The staff performed their duties very scrupulously and carefully. Each panel had a personal assistant, who was responsible for replacing glasses, bottling wines, and assisting judges in resolving operational issues.

Each judge was provided with everything he/she needed for work, such as a list of wines, a pen, a tablet with a special app for assessing wines, a spittoon, drinking water, and plain crackers.



I would like to say a few words about glasses for tasting. They were provided by Riedel company. At least once a day they were replaced, after the end of the first half of the day or as often as required if red wines tasting gave way to white or sweet wines tasting or vice versa, and on the judge`s request.



The evaluation of wines was performed in the following way. Firstly, judges tasted all wines and put personal ratings without discussing them with the panel members. Points were given in a free form on a 100-point scale. In other words, judges rated wines from their experience rather than with the help of an app which would use a special formula. This method of evaluation did not cause me any difficulties, as it was the same 100-point scale applied by the International Organization of Vine and Wine, as I use to rate wines in my daily activities and the range of which I am well acquainted with. After giving the points the judge had to write a short comment on the tasted wine. In the end, all the comments were grouped and tasting notes were made up to be later published on the official web page of Decanter.com. The electronic program for wine evaluation of DecanterDWVA contest averaged the points given by all the judges. After the evaluation of the entire tasting set had been made and the comments had been written, the panel members discussed the results, changing them in case they aroused a discussion, the panel-chair gave a final score, and the system automatically awarded a medal when the wine entered the medal range. There was no minimum or maximum of medals awarded: any wine could become a medalist.



The wine evaluation system looked in the following way:

Medals	Scores	Rating	Descriptions
Gold	97-100	Exceptional	A great, exceptional and profound wine
Gold	95-96	Outstanding	An excellent wine of great complexity and character
Silver	90-94	Highly recommended	A very accomplished wine, with impressive complexity
Bronze	86-89	Recommended	A well-made, straightforward and enjoyable wine

The wine approved but not included in the medal standings:

Scores	Rating	Description
83-85	Commended	An acceptable, simple wine with limited personality

All gold medalists were tasted for the second time by the regional chairs and cochairs of the contest for further approval. If the gold medal was debated over, the wine was sent to the initial panel for a new discussion





I can declare with full responsibility that in the panels I was a member of the judges' grades coincided in almost 90% of cases. If there were any arguments and disagreements, we always came to a consensus. Truth is born in a dispute!

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The process of evaluating wines was pretty fast, like in any wine contest – 2-3 minutes for each sample. This time is enough to assess a wine. Some wine experts criticize wine contests, reasoning that it's impossible to evaluate a wine and understand its whole potential within 2-3 minutes. I consider it possible and the higher the quality of the wine is, the less time you need to evaluate it. It takes approximately the same time (2 minutes) to evaluate a wine at the tasting done in the Masters of Wine style. As a rule, delays in tasting and wine description occur with second-rate wines or with faulty wines. If there were any faults, one more sample of the same wine was requested.

Judges were recommended to take into account the retail value (price category) of the wine when scoring. The range of price categories looked as follows: entry level – up to £7.99, mid-range – £8-£14.99, premium – £15-£29.99, superpremium — £30-£59.99, boutique/icon — over £60. For example, a wine with a gold medal in a price category of up to £15 could have failed to get a gold medal if the price had been higher, let's say £15.99-£29.99. Whether it is right or not remains to be an issue for discussion. My opinion is that at such contests the quality of wine is evaluated and its retail price should not influence the final grade, as it is a matter of the cost of wine production and marketing.

At the end of the judging week, all gold medalists undergo one more tasting procedure by regional chairs and contest co-chairs to decide whether to award them with platinum medals (97-100 points) or not. There is no limit for platinum medals. As a result, winners are awarded platinum medals and wines in the price category of up to £15 are awarded with the Best Value



Platinum medal.

The highest point of the Decanter-DWWA contest was tasting platinum medalists by the co-chairs and selecting the “Top 50 DWWA Best in Show” wines.

As I have already written above, among all other wines I evaluated 35 Russian wines. In total, 33 Russian wines were awarded medals at the Decanter-DWWA contest in 2019. Unfortunately, there was no gold, only 4 silver and 29 bronze medals. 21 wines received 83-85 points. On the whole, we can see the same tendency as in the [Russian Wines Competition](#) 2018.

On my judging list there were the following wines from wineries representing Krasnodar region:

- Abrau-Durso
- Chateau Tamagne (Kuban-Vino)
- Fanagoria
- Lefkadia
- Sauk-Dere
- Sikory
- Usadba Divnomorskoye
- Vinodelnya Yubileynaya

The judging results of the panel I was a member of are summarized in convenient tables, according to the wines of producers:



ABRAU-DURSO

Wine, Vintage	Medal	Score	Colour, Style	Approximate retail price, rub.
Riesling, 2017	Bronze	86	White, still, dry	1450
Chardonnay, 2017	Bronze	86	White, still, dry	1100
Victor Dravigny Demi-Sec, 2015	-	85	White, sparkling, demi-sec	900
Cabernet Sauvignon, 2017	-	84	Red, still, dry	1250

CHATEAU TAMAGNE (KUBAN-VINO)

Wine, Vintage	Medal	Score	Colour, Style	Approximate retail price, rub.
Saperavi, 2018	Silver	90	Red, still, dry	400
Muscat DemiSec, 2018	Bronze	87	White, sparkling, demi-sec	400
Krasnostop, 2018	Bronze	86	Rosé, sparkling, demi-sec	400
Reserve Krasnostop, 2014	-	84	Red, still, dry	700
Reserve Riesling, 2016	-	82	White, still, dry	650

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FANAGORIA

Wine, Vintage	Medal	Score	Colour, Style	Approximate retail price, rub.
100 Shades of Red Saperavi, 2016	-	85	Red, still, dry	1700
Cru Lermont Chardonnay, 2016	-	83	White, still, dry	650

LEFKADIA

Wine, Vintage	Medal	Score	Colour, Style	Approximate retail price, rub
Lefkadia Reserve, 2013	Bronze	87	Red, still, dry	3500
Likuria Reserve Merlot, 2015	Bronze	86	Red, still, dry	900
Lefkadia Reserve, 2016	Bronze	86	White, still, dry	2100
Likuria, 2016	-	85	Red, still, dry	550
Likuria Rkatsiteli, 2017	-	85	White, still, dry	1000
Likuria Riesling, 2015	-	84	White, still, dry	800
Likuria Mtsvane, 2017	-	83	White, still, dry	1000

SAUK-DERE

Wine, Vintage	Medal	Score	Colour, Style	Approximate retail price, rub.
Reserve, 2016	-	83	White, still, dry	500

SIKORY

Wine, Vintage	Medal	Score	Colour, Style	Approximate retail price, rub.
Sauvignon Blanc, 2017	Bronze	86	White, still, dry	1600
Family Reserve Riesling, 2017	Bronze	86	White, still, dry	2700
Chardonnay, 2017	Bronze	86	White, still, dry	1300
Family Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, 2015	-	83	Red, still, dry	2700

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USADBA DIVNOMORSKOE

Wine, Vintage	Medal	Score	Colour, Style	Approximate retail price, rub.
Syrah, 2016	Silver	91	Red, still, dry	2200
Merlot, 2015	Bronze	88	Red, still, dry	2200
Cabernet Sauvignon, 2015	Bronze	88	Red, still, dry	2200
East Hill Blend, 2016	Bronze	88	White, still, dry	2200
Pinot Blanc, 2016	Bronze	87	White, still, dry	2200
Chardonnay, 2016, 2016	Bronze	87	White, still, dry	2200
Merlot, 2014	Bronze	86	Red, still, dry	2200
West Hill Blend, 2015	Bronze	86	Red, still, dry	2200
Riesling, 2016	-	85	White, still, dry	2200
Traminer, 2016	-	85	White, still, dry	2200

VINODELNYA YUBILEYNAYA

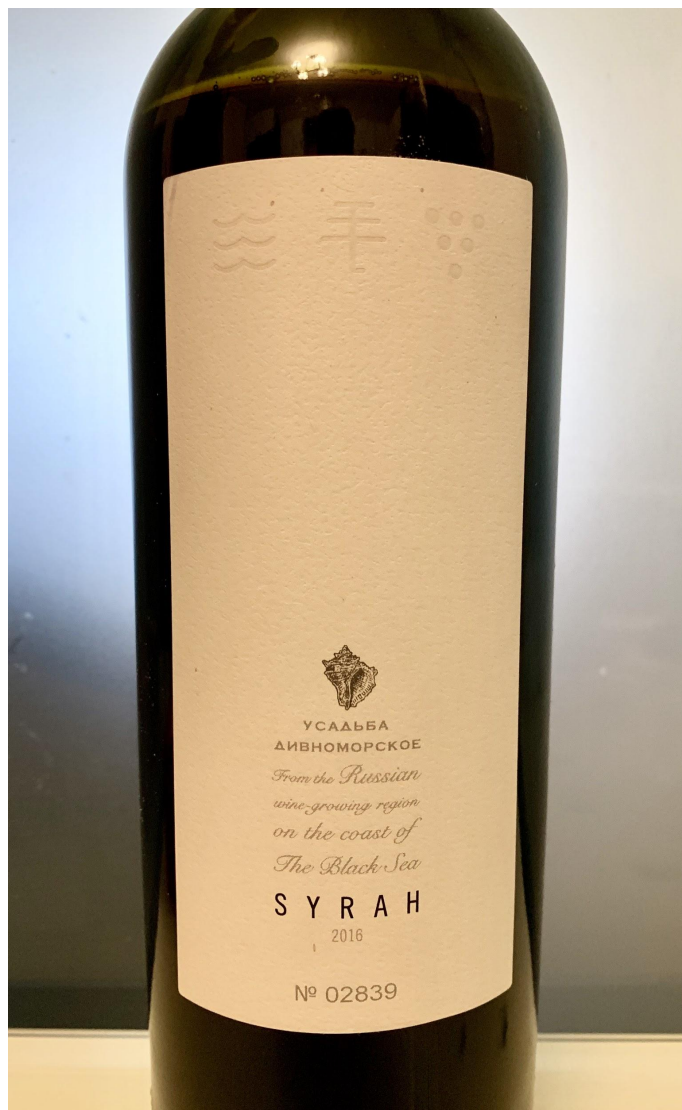
Wine, Vintage	Medal	Score	Colour, Style	Approximate retail price, rub
Autochthon Citron Tsyurupinskiy, 2017	Bonze	87	White, still, dry	450
Autochthon Viorica, 2017	-	85	White, still, dry	450

In general, the results of Russian wines are quite good. Red wines impressed judges most of all. White wines, as often as not, didn't have enough acidity which resulted from the high solar activity and the hot climate of the region.

While evaluating wines we paid attention to each wine's specific qualities, varietal characteristics, purity, fruit concentration, balance, the harmony of its components, complexity, and the way a winemaker dealt with oak. If oak disguised fruitiness, the wine got deprived of certain advantages. I consider that the main rule of working with oak is that it should not dominate, on the contrary, it should be properly integrated, be harmonic, add some complexity and notes of piquancy to the wine. Some kinds of grapes don't need oak at all, among which are Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc.

A great impression was made by Usadba Divnomorskoye wines, especially Syrah 2016, which received a silver medal and 91 points on merit: a pleasant nose of violets, prune, spices, and blackberry, a well-integrated aroma of oak add some complexity to this wine, nice fruit intensity on the palate, structure, and a potential with further ageing.

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The team of this producer is on the right path and as they say in sports, they should try a bit harder and precious gold will be theirs.

Kuban-Vino winery again pleased us with a silver medal, like a year ago at the Russian Wines Competition. This time 90 points and silver was received by their Chateau Tamagne Saperavi 2018 in a very attractive and affordable price segment – 400 rubles in retail. This wine has an interesting aroma of red berries, toast, raisins and barbecue sauce; it is juicy and fruity on the palate with balanced tannins, enjoyable and able to surprise the experienced wine connoisseur.





The aim of any wine contest is to guide consumers towards wines which are truly of high quality. The more prestigious the wine contest with its qualified wine experts is, the more reliable the assessment and awarded medals are. Producers should participate in such contests to get professional and objective evaluation of their product, to understand the trends of the modern wine market and to realize the prospects for the production development. I hope to see even more contestants from Russia next year, to taste gold medalists among the wines of those producers who bear in mind the judges' comments of the Decanter World Wine Awards 2019.

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My sincere congratulations to all the medalists and wishes for further success!

**LEONID FADEEV, Weinakademiker, DipWSET, WorldSom Magister
Sommelier, Executive Director of Cote Rocheuse.**

* You can find a full list of medalists clicking on the link below:

http://awards.decanter.com/DWWA/2019?WineCountry=&Award=&Colour=&Style=&_ga=2.92867613.1881779094.1561893486-211972516.1550325168

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