

## Metal Medal Mettle

*(Number 57 in a series of opinionated articles about grapes and wine by John Smith)*

Awards, accolades, and medals — all of these are desired by winery owners around the world to publicize the greatness of the wines they produce. There is almost no winery that does not tout its accomplishments in the tasting room, its newsletter or the popular press, and nothing sounds as good as describing a wine to a potential buyer as a “gold medal winner.” But let’s talk for a minute about what’s really involved in obtaining these prized emblems of enological superiority and what they really mean, then spend a brief time with the phenomenon of the award and almost perfect score gained recently by a bottle of “two-buck Chuck” Charles Shaw Chardonnay at the State Fair Competition.

### **Enter Early, Enter Often**

First, an admission. I like winning medals as much as the next oppressed winery owner, and will freely acknowledge that we are proud of every award we’ve won. That said, it must also be admitted that if you enter enough wines in enough contests, you are almost certain to win medals. There are a couple of dozen county fairs in California each year where wines can be entered, many contests put on by newspapers, competitions in other states, and the granddaddy of them all, the California State Fair. Depending on the qualifications of the judges, the grandeur of the event and the entry requirements, every winery can eventually find a place where their wines will do well. Many wineries just starting out are anxious to display as many trophies as possible, and enter many of the available contests with every wine they produce. After some time, the need for glory fades (or the cost and effort to enter them all is overwhelmed by the daily requirement to make a living), and the number of entries is generally pared back to the venues that have been generous to each vintner.



### **Heavy Metal**

Before providing any more suggestions about how to obtain them, let’s talk for a minute about the awards themselves. Some competitions still provide actual cast pieces of metal, usually with ribbons attached that can be proudly hung over the neck of a display bottle, but more and more, the award is only a ribbon to festoon what one visitor to the winery described as the “I Love Me” wall in each tasting room. In most competitions, if an entered wine is judged to be “without flaws” it will be awarded the consolation prize, a bronze medal. If it’s not only sound but also good, it may be bumped up to a silver medal, and when a wine makes judges smile, it is a contender for a gold medal. If all the judges on a panel award the wine a gold, it is termed a

“double gold,” and these wines are usually included in the “sweepstakes” or “best of show” round of judging. At most competitions, this will include the best white wine, the best red wine, and possibly best dessert wine. Generally, one of these (about 90% of the time in this area, the “best red”) is selected as the “best of show” and receives a special purple ribbon, loving cup or other trophy to communicate the accomplishment to the world.

In the State Fair competition, for each wine variety where there are twenty or more entries, a “best varietal of the state” is awarded, and the best wine from each of the seventeen viticultural regions of the state can be awarded “best of region.” These are highly coveted awards, and given the magnitude of the competition (over 3,000 entries in 2007), generally reflect very fine wines. More on this later.

### **The Price of Glory**

The competitions are generally self-funded by the entry fees charged to the wineries who enter, but the cost varies dramatically. Judges for the major competitions are provided a minor “honorarium” of \$50 to \$100, but the smaller events are judged by volunteers who may or may not have much experience or formal training in wine.

Entry fees range from \$5 and a single bottle of each entered wine to \$45 and six bottles at the State Fair. Why would they need six bottles to judge a single wine, you ask? Well, there are many “volunteers” involved who check in the wines, prepare the wines for judging, code the entries so the judges are “blinded” to the winery names, then pour them for the judging, and these selfless souls are compensated with the bottles not used for the actual judging.

Some wineries have established firm prices for their wines, and no matter what awards they win, the price stays the same. Others are subject to a process described as “medal creep,” where each gold medal won by a wine bumps the price up another two dollars or so per bottle.

### **Shopping Around**

All gold medals are equal unless closely examined, and winery owners quickly learn which competitions are more likely to favor their particular style of wine. Those making light, fruity styles will prefer certain venues, while the heavy, tannic wines will do better in other areas. As mentioned, there are a few smaller fairs where the judges, rather than being seasoned professionals “on the circuit” are ordinary citizens, and a sweet rosé is likely to win the prized gold or even best of show. This will almost never happen in areas like El Dorado County, where bold red wines rule and the judges seek out the body and intense flavors contributed by the higher Foothill elevations. At the State Fair Competition, however, recent events have raised questions about what kind of wines should be judged best.

### **The Great Charles Shaw Award**

The system *can* be manipulated and when a “winery” like Charles Shaw, producer of the notorious “two-buck Chuck” wines that sell for \$1.99 at Trader Joe’s, wins “Best Chardonnay in California” with a near-perfect score of 98 points, it bears investigating. Charles Shaw used to be

a real winery in Napa, producing mostly Napa Gamay, but Charles departed and both the facility and name were bought in 1995 by Fred Franzia who owns Bronco Winery in Ceres, in the heart of the Central Valley. When the economy foundered in 2000, all the hopefuls who planted grapes or, worse yet, opened their own winery found it harder and harder to sell their grapes or wine, resulting in the Great Grape Glut that continues today.



In the late nineties, when wine was scarce, “bulk” wine (wine in barrels or tanks that has not yet been bottled) would often be sold to another winery for \$10 or more per gallon, but just a few years later, the glut brought prices down to only about \$1. Enter Fred Franzia, now equipped with a Napa address from the Charles Shaw facility (along with about 28 other labels on the bottles of his wines), who could now fill a 750-ml bottle with wine for about 20 cents. Add in the cost of the bottle, label, cork and capsule, and the cost to produce a bottle hovers right around one dollar. Selling the wine directly to an enterprising retailer like Trader Joe’s for something like \$1.50 per bottle in huge volumes (they currently produce about 50,000 cases a day) would allow the wine to end up on the shelves for \$1.99 per bottle, spawning the moniker “Two-buck Chuck.”



In addition to providing a place for all the excess wine to go, this gives Franzia's Bronco facility the chance to examine hundreds of tank-truck loads of wine every year, and if a particularly good batch came in, it could conceivably wind up in a small bottling that was entered in competitions. The entry form for the Chardonnay that won big this year listed the chardonnay's production at 50,000 gallons, which is about 21,000 cases. This sounds like a lot, but it's slightly less than four hours of production in the bottling room (Ed Moody, the Director of Winemaking for Bronco, thinks that a "lazy clerk" may have made the error, since the form should have indicated a much larger volume, but it might have been an "honest clerk" instead).

The bottom line of this possibly deceptive process is that, since over 300 million bottles of these wines have been sold to date, your chances of finding a bottle of the actual wine judged the Best Chardonnay in California (out of 351 entries of that variety) is about the same as winning the lottery. It's reassuring to know that up here in our area, where individual wine volumes are measured in hundreds of gallons or at most hundreds of cases, the gold-medal winning wine that gains notoriety and accolades is exactly the same wine you can taste and take home for dinner.