



A Thousand Points of Wine

How Sojourn plays the points game

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Craig Haserot sometimes resembles a highly successful software salesman, leaking incomprehensible clauses of HTML through his pores, launching whole sentences of Javascript into conversations only initiates understand, framing intricate ideas in Visual Basic that are neither visual nor basic.

Which is not surprising since Craig Haserot once was a highly successful software salesman and still speaks in what sometimes sounds like secret code, although what he's selling now is not software but wine, and his new vocabulary runs toward soil types, acidity, row-spacing and quality-to-price ratios.

Which might be annoying, except that what he is making is really, really,

good wine.

How good is really, really, really good?

Would you believe 1,094 points?

OK, that's not for one wine, it's for 12. But do the math and you arrive at an average of more than 91 points for every new release of Sojourn wine in 2011. That's like batting .910, it's like missing fewer than one pitch out of every 10 and hitting all the rest for extra bases.

Sounds impressive, but it raises the question: Does it matter? Do points really count? Who gives them and who cares?

In Sojourn's case the points aren't plucked from some obscure wine geek blog, like "Ted & Alice's Summer Favorites."

Haserot, who has studied the point game carefully, explains: "Rating points come from between 5 and 10 total people who drink significant numbers of wine on a consistent basis. There are 2 at the top of the food chain, and then there are some folks in the next tier. The 2 folks at the top are Robert Parker and the *Wine Spectator* (which is actually a magazine and tastes more than 15,000 wines a year). And with respect to the rating of wines, they are the two 800-pound gorillas in the corner."

Sojourn's thousand points of wine came entirely from Robert Parker and the *Wine Spectator*, with some additionally impressive points from the *Pinot Report*. Which leads Haserot to casually add in a gem of understatement, "We have been very fortunate to receive some nice scores from both of those outfits."

Nice?

Parker judged all 12 Sojourn releases for 2011 and gave them a cumulative average of 91.16 points. The top Parker rating was 93 points for Sojourn's 2009 Gap's Crown Vineyard Pinot Noir.

Wine Spectator judged 11 of the wines and gave two 94s, with a cumulative average of 91.63.

And the *Pinot Report*, which judged only five wines, gave a high rating of 97 points for Sojourn's 2009 Sangiacomo Vineyard Pinot Noir, with a cumulative average of 94.60.

Those are the kinds of numbers you can take to the bank, and Sojourn does,

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having grown over a decade into a highly profitable winery “project,” as Haserot likes to call it. But it’s not the numbers that Haserot credits with Sojourn’s success.

He and partner/winemaker Erich Bradley concocted a business plan before the first case was sold that looks, in retrospect, brilliant.

“Scores are nice to have, they’re certainly nice to have versus not having scores or not having nice scores, but really, the relationships that we’ve created with our customers are what defines our winery and this is what has made us successful.”

Good relationships, of course, presuppose great wine, and great wine presupposes great grapes.”

“You can’t make a great steak unless you start with a great piece of meat,” says Haserot. “It’s extremely difficult if not impossible to go the other way.”

But how do you get great meat if you don’t have a ranch?

“From the start, we decided not to take the hyper-expensive step of owning vineyards, and that gives us the opportunity to go out and find the absolutely best fruit possible.”

Haserot was lucky to have a relationship with iconic vineyard owner Mike Sangiacomo who, in 2004, “very generously” sold Sojourn four tons of pinot noir grapes from what may be his best vineyard.

“With those grapes and that wine, we got 92 points from *Wine Spectator* on our first pinot. That started to put us on the radar screen.”

And for Sojourn, the gods kept smiling. “Right after we sourced the first fruit from the Sangiacomo family, *Sideways* came out. The movie put an unbelievable amount of pressure on the pinot space.”

As a result there were pinot shortages, says Haserot, over the next four years. Which wasn’t a bad thing for Sojourn. “The more acclaim our wines received, the more pinot growers were eager to sell grapes to us. Then, in 2009, the recession gave us unbelievable opportunities to get into vineyards we thought we were never going to get into, because there were wineries that were challenged selling the stocks of wine they already had. So we sourced some outstanding fruit, we got some good scores.”

Even with great grapes from great vineyards, you need a great winemaker/vineyard manager to put the right stuff in the bottle at the right time, and that’s Erich Bradley.

“We write vineyard management plans for every vineyard, every harvest,” says Haserot, who joins Bradley in the vineyards micromanaging the fruit. “We like to farm like a golf course. If the fruit comes

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into the winery as a 9.5-plus, it makes it that much easier for Erich to make excellent wines.”

As committed as they are to enological perfection, Haserot insists making great wine isn’t the biggest challenge. Selling it is the challenge. Which brings us back to

the business plan, which involves a clever blend of Christmas card lists, e-commerce, wine geeks, word-of-mouth viral marketing and help from Miss Smartypants.

From the gate, Sojourn wasn’t going to do distributors. Selling straight to the consumer is much more profitable.

The company’s first wine, a 2001 cabernet, was sold using, “our Christmas card list and our parents’ Christmas card list, maybe 300 names.”

The list is now up to 11,000, and it goes to a lot of wine geeks who take pride in discovering the next big thing—like a palette of 90+ Parker-point pinots.

Then there is Miss Smartypants—Craig’s wife, Ellen—who has a Stanford MBA, is at least as smart as he is, and consults on key strategic decisions.

And while Craig considers Sojourn “an e-commerce company with a tasting room,” that tasting room sells a lot of wine too, albeit in the relaxed, refined milieu of the Sojourn salon, in sessions that last 45 minutes to an hour while covering six very, very, very good wines in depth.

Do all that, and insist on running your company “in permanent start-up mode,” and you have the Sojourn secret to success and the formula for playing the Points Game. 5

