

WINE

Mystery of the \$75 Château de Beaucastel

By ERIC PFANNER

PARIS — While browsing through a Paris wine shop before Christmas, my eyes fell on an old favorite: Château de Beaucastel, one of the most celebrated red wines of Châteauneuf-du-Pape in the Rhône Valley of France.

It was the 1998 vintage, widely considered one of the best of recent decades for Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Yet something didn't seem quite right. "Sale, 30 percent off," the sign read. "€59.95."

Now, I know that €60, or about \$76, might seem like a lot to pay for a bottle of wine, but for '98 Beaucastel it is a steal. The brand new 2009 vintage of Beaucastel goes for around €60; for the same price, this retailer was offering the chance to uncork a mature (or close to it) example of one of the great wines of France. I have seen the 1998 elsewhere for more than €100.

What had happened? I asked the shopkeeper. Had he mixed up his Beaucastel vintages? Had he stored the wine badly? No, he assured me. The reason for the markdown, he said, was that the Perrin family, the owners of Beaucastel, were friendly with the proprietors of the store and had kindly provided an allotment of the old vintage. The wine had been stored impeccably in Beaucastel's own cellars. "Open it an hour before drinking it, decant it, and let yourself be transported," he said.

I transported a bottle home and placed it in the cellar, next to my '07, '06, '05, '04, and '01 Beaucastels, in the spot recently vacated, sadly, by my last bottle from a case of '94s. And then I got to thinking: Might there have been other reasons for the price cut?

So I Googled "1998 Beaucastel" and came across another possible explanation. Since I had last checked, Robert Parker, the influential American wine critic, had lowered his score for the wine to 92 points out of 100, from 96 points. 1998 Beaucastel had suffered the equivalent of a Moody's downgrade.

I have no intention of second-guessing Mr. Parker, who has been tasting, and championing, the wines of Châteauneuf-du-Pape for decades. But the change in his score for the 1998 Beaucastel highlights the challenges of encapsulating something as complex, subtle and capricious as a fine wine in a single number.

Few issues in wine criticism generate as much debate as the question of scoring, with the 100-point scale, popularized by Mr. Parker, often serving as the lightning rod. Some European wine critics, for example, scoff at the 100-point system, saying it is hyperbolic and artificially precise. Yet I'm not sure their preferred solution — usually, a 20-point scale — is any different or better.

That is because the 20-point scale is usually broken down into half-point increments, turning it into what is effectively a 40-point range. Mr. Parker's scale, meanwhile, actually covers only 50 points, because wines automatically get the first 50 points.

Other critics award one to 10 points, or one to five stars. An Italian publication, the Gambero Rosso wine guide, awards wines one to three "glasses." The British writer Hugh Johnson, tongue only slightly in cheek, has proposed these ratings: 1. Buy a glass. 2. Buy a bottle. 3. Buy the vineyard. The list goes on.

When hearing about the supposed superiority of one scoring system or another, I often think of Nigel Tufnel, the "Spinal Tap" guitarist, who claimed that his amplifiers were louder than others because they went to 11, rather than stopping at 10.

No, any effort to assign a number to a wine is problematic. Few wines demonstrate this more clearly than Beaucastel. This is a wine that demands time in the cellar. In its youth it can be tough; after a decade or more, the wine generally softens and opens up.

It was a bottle of the extraordinary 1990 vintage, brought to a dinner party by a friend some years ago, that made me experience true wine lust for the first time. After one taste of the '90, which wraps layers of velvety spices in a cloak of sweaty, animal musk, I fell hard.

I asked Marc Perrin of Château de Beaucastel about the fluctuations in the price and score of the '98. He said the estate holds back about 20,000 bottles from every vintage to sell a decade or more after the initial release.

“We don’t change our price because of critics’ reviews, but of course the market can do what it wants,” he said.

1998 was an unusual vintage for Beaucastel, he explained. It was a very warm summer, favoring the grenache variety, one of 13 authorized for use in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, all of which are included in Beaucastel.

The '98 contains an unusually high proportion of grenache, giving it a fleshier feel than some other vintages, which contain a larger amount of the sterner mourvèdre variety. As a result, the wine may have evolved faster than some other vintages, something that Mr. Parker noted when he issued his revised score.

“The 1998 is quite round for Beaucastel,” Mr. Perrin said. “Beaucastel in most vintages would probably be more square,” more edgy or sharp.

Paradoxically, 1998 Beaucastel is almost certainly a better wine now than it was in 2003, when Mr. Parker awarded it the higher score. Yet Mr. Perrin said he didn’t think the '98 would be fully mature for at least another half-dozen years — by which time Mr. Parker and other critics will have had ample time to revise their scores again.

“For me it’s still very, very young,” Mr. Perrin said. “I think this wine still has a huge, huge potential.”

What, then, is the point of giving the wine a score now? Some critics have suggested doing away with numerical ratings entirely and relying purely on written descriptions of wines. I’m not sure that is much better.

Consider two bottles of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. One is a great old vintage of Beaucastel, priced perhaps at more than €100. The other is a supermarket brand from a recent vintage, priced at €10.

Some critics might describe the bottles in a similar way: Each, for example, exhibits the trademark Châteauneuf-du-Pape aromas of dark fruit, leather and Provençal underbrush, called garrigue. Clearly, the first bottle is far superior. Based only on listing the flavors the taster identified, it would be difficult to discern any difference in quality.

I do find scores are helpful when enough controls are in place — for example, when assessing the wines of a specific vintage from a certain region.

But they have their limits. I don't care how many points a certain Chablis has gotten if I'm serving Chateaubriand for dinner. In that case, I'd opt for the Chateauneuf-du-Pape.

My newly acquired bottle of '98 Beaucastel ended up spending very little time in my cellar, for temptation got the better of me and I opened it over the holidays.

The verdict? As Mr. Parker and Mr. Perrin say, the wine does appear to be surprisingly forward for Beaucastel, at least when compared with other vintages in my cellar, like 2001. It's also delicious, with ample amounts of attractive cherry fruit to go along with the trademark Beaucastel garrigue.

Does that make it a 96-pointer or a 92-pointer? I don't really care. The important thing about scores and written notes alike is not to get too hung up on them. And keep your eyes peeled for '98 Beaucastel.