

Individual Success at AWO

By Don Panakapka (AWO News # 47)

As a follow up to my previous article, as mentioned, I would do an article on “individual success at AWO”. It should be noted that although this article aims to provide guidelines for success at AWO for those who wish to become AWO individual champion and/or place in the top 5 or 6 individuals, it also applies to winemakers who “specialize” in one or more classes.

To become individual winemaker of the year at AWO it requires a tremendous amount of time, investment, patience and dedication to the hobby. As such, not many winemakers are prepared to commit to this task. However here are some guidelines to follow to be more successful:

Build a library of quality wines in your cellar:

Without quality wines there is not much hope of receiving a medal, let alone a gold medal at AWO. Hence, in good years (such as 2007) bulk up on most wines as they will rise to the top of the quality scale and will last for years before they “peak”. Your objective would seemingly to be to have most of your wines peak in 2-4 years and during that time you will have the greatest chance of success. Good wines can be entered year after year until they begin to fall off in quality. The more classes you can cover with quality wines the better the chance of success at AWO. So, a cellar of quality wines is a huge step towards success at AWO

Cover all of the wine classes (if you can):

A good winemaker should be able to acquire at least a medal in 70% to 80% of the wines that he/she enters into AWO. Thus, if you have 10 wines going forward and your fellow competitors have 15 or more wines going forward it's not hard to calculate who will come out ahead. Many winemakers do not enjoy making some of the “odd” classes such as sherries, aperitifs, social wines etc., but think of it this way “ why not make as good a sample of each class as you can and keep improving on those classes each year (even improving the same wine you entered the year before e.g. aperitifs). Once you have made a good wine in these classes they will almost last indefinitely and you should be able to score medals with them year after year.

Some classes, of course have to be made more often and possibly each year. Examples of these are the classes social, dessert, and possibly rose.

With attempts at all classes each year you will move up the scale of quality and success.

Preparation for club and AWO competition:

Most winemakers start too late in preparing their wines for competition.

Here are some guidelines to follow:

➤ **When to start:**

I generally start in the Christmas holiday preparing the fortified wines such as port, aperitifs and sherries. Since fortified wines (and wines that require sweetness modification) take longer to “marry” it is important to start months ahead of any competition.

➤ **Prepare only one class per day/night:**

This is important as you will lose the ability to taste after a few samples (especially fortified wines) if you try to do more than one class, especially if you have many choices for each class.

➤ **Use all wines that might fit a class:**

Take out all wines from your cellar that might fit a particular class and stand them upright at room temperature and leave for a day (allows sediment to fall, off noses to dissipate, and temperature to approximate judging temperature). Then the next day sample each wine and determine which wine(s) would be best for that class (the worst possible way of entering is to pull a bottle off the shelf and enter it as is, as possible faults/sediment/malolactic could be in that bottle)

➤ **Blending is the key:**

A wine that may seem the best you have will very likely be slightly better (from a silver to a gold??) with blending. Experiment with different blends but stay within the parameters of the class description. I have often entered a single wine and that same wine with a slight blend and have always come out better with the blended wine

➤ **If possible enter at least 2-3 wines in each class at the club level:**

I know that this is a tall order BUT the reasoning here is that a judge may not be particularly fond of one of your wines but may like another that you entered into that class. You need at least a silver to get to the Ontario's and once it is there you will likely do well. But if you don't get there in a particular class you have eliminated a possible medal at AWO

➤ **Read the class descriptions carefully and use your imagination:**

Staying within the parameters of each class there are a multitude of possibilities for interesting and successful unique wines. A prime example of this is the “social” class where fruits and grapes are used to make a “social” wine

➤ **Make 3 identical wines for each entry you have:**

Reasoning here is that if you qualify out of your club to AWO and then qualify from AWO to AWC you will need 3 identical bottles. Often winemakers do not have more than one entry and when they make up the second and/or the third entry the wine is not the same as the original. P.S. if you don't go on to a higher level of competition, then simply drink your fine wine with your spouse

➤ **Refrigerating entries:**

Have you ever made a blend and/or modified sweetness in a wine only to have it fermenting during your club competition? My experience is that with the chemical differences in each wine, when I blended them (especially whites) they tend to give off CO₂ for a few days. So, if I bottled them immediately then that CO₂ will be present when they are being judged. Hence, disqualification of that entry. The possibility of a malo and/or re-fermentation is there as well but your refrigeration will tell the story. So, a solution that has been successful for me is to put a tapered cork loosely in the blended wine and put it in the fridge until the competition. Checking it periodically you will likely note that the wine has become stable at which time a “real” cork can be inserted. Note that this procedure is not necessary for red wines although they should be at least left overnight with a tapered cork before permanent corking.

➤ **Balance your wines prior to entry:**

Balance is the key in successful winemaking (ask any wine judge). If the wine is too flat dissolve small amounts of citric acid in a small amount of the wine and add in small amounts until the acid balance is there (note that acid should be dissolved and stirred in completely and left overnight before any more additions to prevent over-acidification). Tannin addition is out of the question at this point but non-fermentable sugar can be used to “take the edge off an acidic finish”. Finally, use your family members (usually your spouse) to get feedback on balance. Some people have better sensory taste than others and so 2 tasters are better than one.

➤ **Have the most experienced winetaster in your club taste all of your wines prior to preparation:**

As they may give you valuable hints as to which wines are the best to enter and how they might be blended.

Happy winemaking,

Don Panagapka