

First, a warning: if you're not from the US, if you're female, or if you have good taste in entertainment, this scale will be gibberish at best and annoying at worst.

I created the Three Stooges Wine Rating System several years ago to attack what I perceived as a major flaw in the use of numbers (or stars or clusters) to indicate wine quality: these are scalar quantities, measures of just one dimension. How pitifully limited to describe the multidimensional experience of wine!

In rough outline, a wine can be assigned up to three Stooges – the more Stooges, the greater is the wine's impression on me. A wine's personality is expressed by the particular mix of Stooges employed.

The quality of **Moe-ness** in a rating denotes the rough, harsh qualities of tannin and acidity. A wine with lots of Moe pokes you in the palate, slaps your taste buds, snarls "Spread out!", demands "See that?" to your tongue before bopping it with a closed fist.

A wine with **Larry** is easygoing, simple, inoffensive, soft, just trying hard not to grate.

Wines of great character and special distinction fall into the **Curly** range. It takes something profound and complex to falsetto, "Oh, a wise guy!" It takes character to muse, "I'm trying ta think, but nuttin happens!". Only the deepest and most profound can howl, "Moe, Larry, the cheese!"

But, my friends, there is a dark side. Some wines, without being actively bad, are bland or clumsy, really more lame than awful. They're recognizably wine, but poor substitutes for the REAL experience. Such wines are **Shemps**.

Descending further, the truly bad wines of this world, the real swill would be **Joe Bessers**.

A wine that is particularly heinous in a novel manner is deemed a **Curly Joe DiRita**.

A wine that makes me throw up after smelling it might be a **Mousie Garner** or an **Emil Sitka**, but I haven't yet encountered such depths- and I've drunk wines from Morocco. There are also **lagniappes**, but I'll deal with these shortly.

Let's see how the system is applied:

I have in front of me (in my imagination) a barrel sample of a Ceretto Bricco Rocche from a great year. That's GOT to be a Triple Moe, assuming I can still say "Triple" with all the enamel etched off my teeth.

Ah, a very pleasant bistro-styled '95 syrah from McDowell. Not deep, but nice varietal character, good balance. It's anywhere from a Larry Curly to a Double Larry, depending on the proclivities of the taster.

A simple garlic and pasta dish for dinner tonight, with an excellent olive oil. I'll open a '95 Mondavi Coastal Cabernet. Straightforward, juicy fruit upfront, a streak of herb and olive, with good acidity and noticeable tannin. Not for long aging, but a year will smooth it out a bit. Or I could JUST as easily say "Moe Larry".

It's been a good day. Let's celebrate. A bottle of '85 Jamet Côte-Rôtie emerges and is rapidly opened and poured. This has everything you could want from syrah, stunningly expressive of its terroir. Aged to a perfect point, smooth, velvety, with an ever-shifting palette of aromas and flavors. Triple Curly.

A pizza in the bright Provencal sun, baked in an oak-burning oven, topped with local olives, onion confit, a mild cheese, and olive oil. A cold glass of a nameless but perfect local rose'. Triple Larry.

My drinking buddy JD comes by with a bottle wrapped in foil. "You've gotta guess on this one." It's red, I'll give it that, or was at one time. It's as oxidized and musty as Mother Theresa's lingerie drawer. Its age has allowed the TCA from the particle-board cork to properly integrate with the (and I use this term loosely) fruit. I guess, correctly, Royal Malgreb, Morocco's finest (no, he didn't have a clue JD). Joe Besser, for sure. "Don't ever dooooo that!"

One other defect in the unilinear ratings is the ceiling (though the British savant Michael Broadbent wisely used the occasional sixth star). What can you give a wine that's the best you've ever had after you've scored something else a 100? In my improved system, we can (on the very rare occasions where it's warranted) go beyond the Triple Curly.

For example, I'm dining at Le Pyramide. Michel Ogier strolls by and plops his '83 Côte-Rôtie in front of me. I swirl and sniff. The beautiful redhead sitting beside me coos into my ear, "If you put that glass down and we leave RIGHT NOW and go back to the hotel, I'll give you a ride you've never dreamed of!" I smile at her, condescendingly, knock back my first glass and scribble on my pad, "Triple Curly with an extra woo-woo-woo".

That's it. It's a system that has the virtue of expressing both personality and quality. It's a head-knock to droning discussion of point scores. It's a pie in the face to the pretensions of those that can truly believe that a 95-point wine is "better" in some platonic sense than an 85-point wine. It's a poke in the eye to the notion that tasters can reliably separate wines into 20 or 50 or 100 discrete levels of quality. It's a better way to communicate the wine experience.

Calling Dr. Howard, Dr. Fine, Dr. Howard!

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