**Lausanne 2024 Abstract Submission**

**Title**
Suckling on Suckling: A Review of James Suckling's MasterClass

**I want to submit an abstract for:**
Conference Presentation

**Corresponding Author**
Robin Goldstein

**E-Mail Corresponding Author**
robin.s.goldstein@gmail.com

**Affiliation**
UC Davis

**Keywords**
James Suckling, Wine Spectator, wine criticism, 100-point scale, ratings, wine education, expert opinion

**Research Question**
What does James Suckling's MasterClass teach viewers, and what are the implications for understanding the current state of the wine market and the roles of expert opinion and education?

**Methods**
Critical review based on close reading and analysis of the scripts and reels of all 11 video episodes in the series.

**Results**
Suckling's theory of wine appreciation: Wine quality is objective and quantifiable. The purpose of wine education is to help people learn to sort wines in order of their objective quality.

**Abstract**
“Flavor, aroma, and structure—Learn from wine master James Suckling as he teaches you to appreciate the stories in every bottle.” ~MasterClass.com

Above is the capsule description on the landing page for the MasterClass of wine critic James Suckling, formerly of Wine Spectator, now of JamesSuckling.com. In this paper, I offer a critical review of the work, drawing larger conclusions about the current state of wine media, wine criticism, and expert opinion in the wine world in the context of changing markets and generational spending power.

I recognize that it is unusual for a self-help video series to merit a critical review and unusual for a researcher to present a review at a conference. But I believe that in Suckling’s case, both are warranted.

MasterClass is a subscription-based video platform that provides streaming first-person instructional videos from famous experts in a variety of fields (e.g. Alice Waters on cooking, David Sedaris on storytelling). The experts sit in front of the camera and give lessons on their craft in a series of episodes that run from 5 to 20 minutes each.

Suckling’s MasterClass, categorized under “Food, Home & Lifestyle,” consists of 11 episodes, a total of two hours and 22 minutes in length. Further down on the landing page is a fuller description:

“Called one of the ‘world’s most powerful wine critics,’ James Suckling has tasted more than 200,000 wines over..."
the past 40 years. In his wine tasting MasterClass, James tours legendary Tuscan vineyards and teaches you to explore the stories, history, and people behind every bottle. Deepen your knowledge of the properties in each sip, cultivate your passion, and choose, order, and pair wines with confidence.” –MasterClass.com

“There’s so much about wine that you need to know,” begins Episode 1 of the MasterClass. Suckling promises the viewer “a few tips: how to swirl the glass, what to say at dinner...One of my biggest hopes...is that you’re going to walk away and go to your wine shop and you’re going to talk the talk with the wine merchant...you’re going to feel confident.”

Confidence is a recurring theme throughout Suckling’s MasterClass, and a relevant one for a wine class aimed at the general public: consumers often report feeling bewildered by wine stores, wine lists, and wine words. But what kind of confidence is Suckling referring to? Confidence in selecting a wine that you like? A wine that the merchant likes? A wine that critics like?

Suckling answers this clearly: it’s confidence in your ability to detect objective quality. Your mission with every wine you taste, he explains, is to ask: “What’s the overall quality...the total quality of the wine?...That’s what I want you to understand, is the quality of the wine that you’re drinking.”

Toward this end, Suckling begins with an interesting aside on the origins of the famous 100-point system, whose invention is generally credited to Robert Parker. “What you may not know,” explains Suckling, “is that the point system actually came from school, from elementary school. In high school, scores 90 to 100 meant A, 80 to 89 B, 70 to 79 C, and onwards down. It’s an easy way for you to understand quality...and even easier you can just say A, B, C, D. Basically if it’s under a B, I wouldn’t even bother—life’s too short to drink bad wine, you know the saying.”

Suckling’s cheat sheet to the 100-point scale begins, reasonably enough, as follows: “90 to 100: that means an excellent wine. 90 to 94: I want to drink that glass right away.”

When Suckling hits 95, however, things take an anti-social turn—“95 to 99: I want to drink the bottle on my own...”—then we burrow into the dark depths of the author’s self as husband and friend—“...my wife’s out, my friends are out...it’s amazing”)—and finally his love life—“100, I fell in love with the bottle...I smelled the wine, I tasted it, it was emotional. It, like, touched my soul, my heart....like a 1978 Domaine Romanée Conti La Tache in Burgundy, that’s always 100 points.”

Lest this process sound difficult to duplicate at home, Suckling assures the viewer that “using the 100-point scale is not a science. It’s not impossible to learn. In fact, you can use it now. I give up to 15 points for color, up to 25 points for aroma, another 25 points for structure of the wine...and finally 35 points for the overall quality of the wine. In my tasting notes, I’ll have the scores 13+23+23+33 and that tells me that it’s an outstanding wine.”

Viewed as a whole, Suckling’s MasterClass paints a broad landscape of the traditional wine critic’s world, from the rituals of swirling and spitting to the lifestyles of aging European wine aristocrats like the Antinori family, whose Tuscan vineyards are Suckling’s hallowed ground. Along the way, he consistently defends his position that the sensory qualities of wine are objective, and that the purpose of wine education is to learn to differentiate the objectively great wines from the objectively decent ones.

This appeal to objectivity, in a sense, simplifies the project of wine education: it is merely the task of learning the correct rank-order of all the world’s wine regions, styles, producers, vintages, sugar levels, and so on. You acquire the information and sensory tools that you need to compare any two wines in the world and be able to tell which one is better and which one worse.

In this sense Suckling’s position is democratic, in a way, like that of Ratatouille’s August Gusteau, who proclaims that “anyone can cook.” But it takes hard work, of course. Drinking wine is easy. Suckling reminds us that appreciating it is the hard part. But he graciously suggests that anyone can learn his method, that anyone—or at least anyone with enough time to practice and money to buy La Tache—can learn to identify reliably which wines are great according to James Suckling.
In this review, which I hope to submit to the Proceedings issue of the JWE that accompanies this conference, I summarize, critique, rate, and assign numerical scores to each of the 11 episodes of James Suckling’s MasterClass, and provide tasting notes for each.

The conference presentation version of this paper has the value-added benefit of conveying all the substantive points of Suckling’s MasterClass in approximately 12 minutes, thus saving attendees 2 hours and 8 minutes of their time as well as the $10 per month subscription fee.

The presentation will include 30-second video clips from each episode, followed by my tasting notes and scores using Suckling’s 100-point scale: 15 points for color, 25 points for aroma, 25 points for structure, and 35 points for overall quality.

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