

Guidelines on the composition of competition judging panels

Note for SA Olive Members

INTRODUCTION

SA Olive runs an annual olive oil competition for its members, the SA Olive Awards. Participating oils are assessed and scored by a panel of judges and Gold, Silver or Bronze medals awarded against scores achieved.

Following a decision made in 2017, the SA Olive Awards judging panels have consisted only of independent tasters, i.e., there have been no producers¹ among the judges, unless their oils had not been entered in the competition.

Recently some members of the tasting panel and Directors of SA Olive have requested that the independence criterion for eligibility to the competition judging panel be revisited.

Members will be asked to vote at the 2023 AGM on whether producers can be part of a judging panel and, if so, under which conditions.

This note attempts to provide Members with sufficient context to make an informed decision, and to illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of alternative approaches.

BACKGROUND

What is the role of a competition judge?

As a member of a competition panel, a judge is expected to assess and score each olive oil against three 'dimensions' - aroma, flavour and complexity – and provide descriptors on the nose and palate that do justice to each oil. This is far more complex than the scoring against the three positive attributes – fruity, bitter and pungent – that is typical of the CTC tastings. Sometimes, oils with borderline scores are re-tasted blindly, often at the end of a long day or early at the start of another, and they need to be given the best chance of a fair assessment. No oil should be penalized by the order or the time of the day in which it is tasted. This requires exceptional focus and dedication. A competition judge needs to be respectful of the opinion of others, be patient, polite, unassuming and accept the guidance of the Panel Leader. Above everything, a judge must be unbiased.

How are EVOOS assessed in the SA Olive Awards (SAOA)?

All entries into the SAOA are prepared and assessed in a way that protects their anonymity and prevents bias. The SAOA Competition Judging Procedure states the following:

- *All entries will be anonymised according to a coding system known only to the organiser.*
- *All oils shall be received, stored and handled completely out of sight of the judges at all times.*
- *The procedure for assessing the organoleptic characteristics of extra virgin olive oils and classifying oils based on such characteristics follows the method determined by the International Olive Council (IOC).*
- *During the judging, all samples will be covered and numbered to conceal any possible identification.*

¹ Producers includes the producers' immediate family, their consultants and advisors (paid or not).

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- *Should a judge enter the preparation room where samples may be visible, he/she shall immediately be removed from further judging for the competition.*
- *No person who has knowledge of the identity of any entry shall be permitted to pass judgement on any entry in the competition.*

How are SAOA judges selected?

Local judges for the SA Olive Awards are shortlisted and ranked against a set of criteria, of which independence is one. If entrant-producers became eligible as judges, they would need to meet selection criteria and score higher than colleagues in order to be appointed.

Independent and unrelated	Attendance record	Scoring performance	Years of tasting experience	Tasting qualifications	Latest test performance (>50%)	Experience as judge
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International judges are identified, vetted and invited directly by the SA Olive judging panel convener. This includes international Panel Leaders.

All judges (local and international) that are appointed to the SA Olive Awards judging panel are required to sign an indemnity form which states among other things:

- 1. Neither myself, nor my immediate family or company owned or controlled by me will enter / has entered the competition;*
- 2. I do not have any interest in a company that will enter / has entered;*
- 3. I don't supply the majority of oil to a company that will enter / has entered that specific oil or a blend thereof;*
- 4. I have not advised any of the entrants on olive oil production, quality or blending;*
- 5. I have disclosed any potential conflicts of interest to the Panel Leader.*

Why is the median used?

According to the IOC method, the statistical median of all individual judges' scores is used as the final score. The median is the value corresponding to the midpoint of a frequency distribution of values. For example, given five values 57, 70, 71, 88, 99, the average is 77 (i.e. the sum of the values divided by five), whereas the median is 71 (the middle number). If the number of values is even, then the median is the average of the two middle numbers.

Unlike the average, the median ensures that no outliers may influence the final value. This means that a biased judge scoring an oil very high or very low would not be able to influence the final score for that oil.

How do others do it?

The Olives New Zealand Awards have a strict rule that judges cannot enter the competition: "No Judge will be permitted to enter oils that they have produced in the NZ Awards". Olives NZ see this rule as critical to maintaining the integrity of their competition. Members must choose either to enter or to judge, they are not permitted to do both. Judges must also declare any conflict of interest. For example, a judge who started doing blending for an entrant has not been used since.

The Australian International Olive Oil Awards follow the principle that judges may also be entrants, however they are never able to judge their own entries nor influence another judge tasked with doing so. All judges must sign a conflict of interest and full disclosure policy before they can join the competition panel.

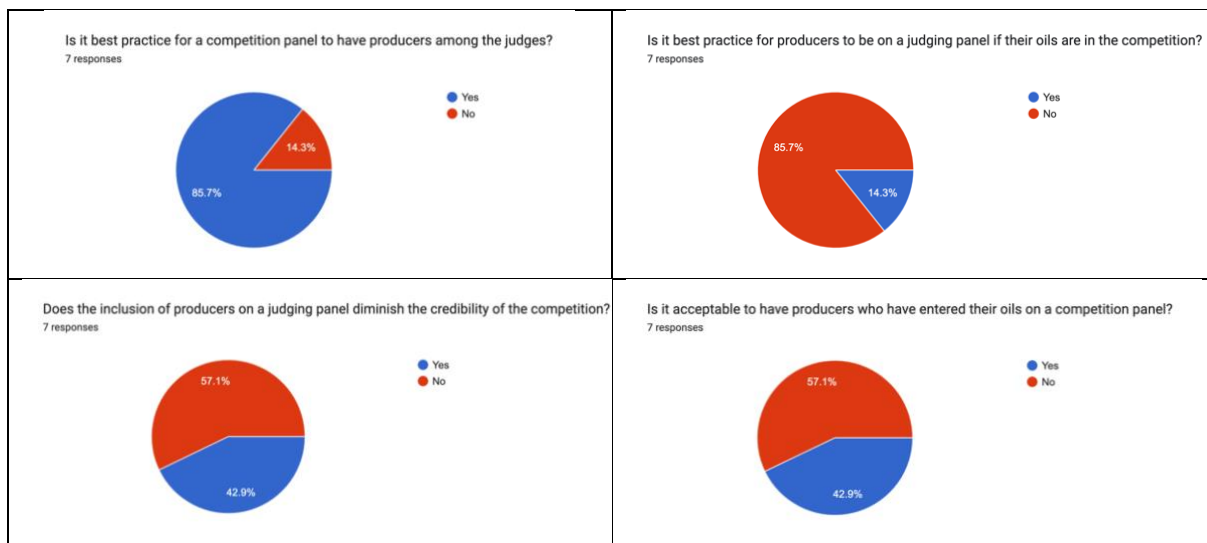
World’s Best Olive Oils is silent on the matter of entrant-producers as judges, however they rate all competitions against the rules of the Mario Solinas Quality Awards which uses a panel of international, totally independent judges.

While having a panel of independent judges is always preferable, one must consider the local context, size and aspirations of the industry, as well as the differences between international and local competitions.

What did the experts have to say?

A poll conducted among international experts in 2022 revealed that:

- It is best practice to invite foreign tasters to join a competition judging panel;
- It makes more sense if oils from around the world - rather than regional - are judged;
- Is it best practice for a competition panel to have producers among the judges;
- The more varied the tasters’ backgrounds, the more valuable the final assessment;
- It is acceptable, but not best practice, to have producers on a judging panels whose oils are in the competition;
- The inclusion of producers in a judging panel does not diminish the credibility of a competition;
- If producers are in a competition panel, there should be complete transparency;
- If producers are on a judging panel, their scores for their own oils should be ignored.



Summary of pros and cons

Arguments in favour of and against entrant-judges in a competition are summarised below.

PROS	CONS
Larger pool of tasters to select from Experienced tasters among producers Direct oil-making experience Blind tasting ensures anonymity of oils Median averts individual bias	Industry not mature enough Perceptions of interference Results may be challenged Competition credibility Integrity may be compromised

SA OLIVE COMPETITION JUDGING PANEL

Recommended rules

Based on the information gathered, the SA Olive Board of Directors (BoD) has recommended that the following rules be voted into use by Members:

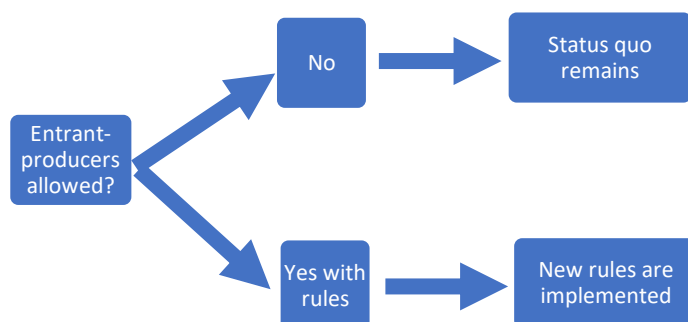
1. The SA Olive convener will aim to constitute a judging panel with a minimum of six members.
2. The convener will aim to include at least two international judges in the competition panel. Fewer may be accepted subject to approval by the BoD.
3. The convener will always attempt to constitute a competent judging panel without entrant-producers, subject to the minimum number being achieved.
4. If a competent judging panel cannot be constituted without involving entrant-producers, then the following conditions will apply:
 - The convener will present a motivation for including entrant-producers for BoD's approval;
 - Entrant-producers will be selected on the basis of the agreed performance and experience criteria;
 - All conflicts of interest for entrant-producers will be disclosed in detail and acknowledged by the BoD;
 - Entrant-producer scores for their own oils will be discarded.
5. The rules for the Absa Top 10 judging will be reviewed and approved at a later stage.

Voting required

SA Olive Members will be required to vote on the inclusion of entrant-producers in the SA Olive Awards judging panel:

- Voting No will maintain the status quo, i.e. no entrant-producers will be allowed.
- Voting Yes will imply acceptance of the rules above as recommended by the BoD.

A schematic of the voting is shown below.



Vittoria Jooste
SA Olive CEO
2 March 2023