

Tbilisi 2022 Abstract Submission

Title

How to make a wine shine like a cult vintage?
Pour a drop of manipulation into it

I want to submit an abstract for:

Conference Presentation

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Keywords

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Research Question

Is it possible to exploit cognitive biases so that a trained but inexperienced taster prefers one wine to several other absolutely identical wines?

Methods

Three complementary experiments are carried out. Each time, five wines are tasted blind in a tasting laboratory by 24 to 34 (different) tasters. Responses are analyzed via statistical tools.

Results

Participants did not identify that they were tasting the same wine (up to three times in a row). But their evaluations varied substantially, and simple manipulation techniques substantially affected them.

Abstract

Research on wine tasting, evaluation and expertise has grown significantly over the past 20 years. This is due to the fact that wine offers a fascinating laboratory for studying questions whose scope often exceeds that of this noble beverage. It is indeed an experience good, with a strong cultural and aesthetic dimension. It is chemically and sensory complex, and comes in a variety of forms (grape variety/blends, style and aromatic profile, etc.).

Research on the topic reflects the multifaceted nature of wine as it spans fields as diverse as marketing, food and beverage sciences, chemistry, enology, and psychology (see Spence (2020) for a recent review). Storchmann (2012) even identifies this topic as among the three most relevant in wine economics.

Spence (2020) notes that “a wide variety of cognitive and perceptual factors [...] influence the wine-drinking experience.” This combination between a psychological (cognitive) and a mostly experienced-based (sensory) dimension implies that wine evaluation is a difficult exercise which requires an expertise that substantially differs as compared to other realms (Ashton, 2017). Thus, wine experts have become influential in the wine market (Masset et al. (2015), Cardebat & Livat (2016)). Yet recent studies suggest that these individuals do not necessarily have a better sensory/perceptual capacity than wine novices. They distinguish themselves primarily by their ability to express their feelings using their conceptual/semantic wine knowledge (Spence & Wang, 2019).

Rodrigues & Parr (2019) illustrate the role of culture in wine appreciation. This article shows, more generally, that the quality of a wine is not absolute, it depends on a frame of reference and the way the taster reacts to a variety of stimuli. Parr (2019) notes that “wine is as cerebral as it is sensual”. As a result, it is not surprising to see that tasters, whether novices or experts, are sensitive to a set of biases induced by the color of the wine, the weight of the bottle, or its price. Goldstein (2019) shows that providing information about price biases tasters’ evaluations. He identifies an asymmetric effect, with negative information (i.e., presenting the wine as cheap, nocebo effect) affecting more strongly the expectations and therefore the evaluation of tasters than positive information (placebo effect). This article complements the research of Plasmann et al. (2008) who show that price affects tasters’ ratings but also their pleasure (measured via activity in the cortex). Actually, even when intrinsic cues are available (through sensory experience), extrinsic cues (e.g., color, prices, or expert ratings) seem to remain the key drivers of quality evaluation (Veale & Quester, 2008).

Our study aims at examining whether the biases illustrated in the literature and, more importantly, the expectations of tasters can be exploited to manipulate them to make them like certain wines more than others. We proceed in two steps. First, we test the ability – or rather the inability – of participants to identify that several wines served to them are identical. Serving identical wines is essential to ensure that expressed preferences cannot be justified by actual differences in quality or style between wines. Next, we examine whether it is possible to direct tasters’ preferences (expressed via a rating and willingness-to-pay) towards particular wines by altering their expectations. To do so, we influence tasters’ expectations via extrinsic cues related to price, expert rating, and prestige of the wine (Ashton, 2017).

Our study benefits from an ideal setting. The data was collected over a four-year period in three different classes at a Hospitality Business School. This ensures that the students in each cohort did not have the opportunity to interact with their predecessors and therefore approached the experience in a neutral manner. In addition, all individuals took basic courses in wine tasting, enology, and wine service. The tastings took place in an oenology room that offers individual tasting booths. Data was collected via a standardized online form.

Three experiments were conducted. It should be noted that our studies deviate somewhat from the ideal put forward by Goldstein (2019) because they rely partially on deception. Depending on the experiment, deception is, as in Goldstein (2019), implicit – in the sense that participants drink the same wine several times without suspecting it, or explicit – in the sense that they are given deliberately wrong information. In any case, each tasting contains an element of manipulation. The first experiment consists of tasting five wines, but only three are actually different (two wines are served twice). All wines are served blind and no deception is involved in this settings. However after the first three wines having been served, some information about their ratings and prices is disseminated. This has, of course, an effect on tasters’ expectations. In order to further reinforce this effect, that is to manipulate participants, they are advised to judge the last two wines independently from the first three and to proceed as if no information about the quality and the price of the first wines had been shared with them. For the second experiment, five wines were served. Like in the previous experiment, two wines were served twice. In this case, however, half of the class received a glass of a specific wine, and the other half received a glass of another significantly more expensive and higher rated wine. We gave information about either rating or price (so half the class received the right information and half the wrong information). In this setting, deception occurs because half of the class receives incorrect information about the wine they are tasting. The third experiment follows a different framework as it involves two different white wines and one single red wine. The two whites are colored in red and

served first. Then the three identical red wines are served one after another, respectively from a carafe, a bottle of a 40-euro Ghemme, and a bottle of a 150-euro Barolo. This settings puts the experimenter at risk, given that participants might spot that the white wines have been colored and/or that the same wine is served several times. In order to reduce the risk and to try manipulate the preferences of the participants, the names of the three wines are revealed once they have been tasted and they are told that “the remaining two wines are fancy Italian wines and we hope they will enjoy them after this challenging exercise.”

The results are surprisingly clear-cut. Absolutely no one identified that some of the wines were identical in any of the three experiments. Moreover, in the first experiment, the last two wines, although identical to the previous ones, received much higher scores and were estimated as much more expensive. The result is all the more striking since the rating and price information given concerned the first three wines. In the second experiment, the two halves of the class expressed similar preferences even though they were drinking different wines (one half of the class was drinking a more expensive and higher rated wine). Finally in the third experiment, the favorite wine by far was the 150-euro Barolo, ahead of the red wine in the decanter. The middle wine, which was the same as the other two, received lower scores. This is certainly due to its label, which displayed a much more modest appellation, Ghemme.

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