Title
Tasting the Arts: Pseudo-Synesthesia in Wine Tasting and Visual Art Perception

I want to submit an abstract for:
Conference Presentation

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Keywords
wine psychology; art; wine tasting; synesthesia ; crossmodal correspondences

Research Question
Our objectives are to determine whether wine tasters may associate a wine to a painting, and to examine what might explain this association

Methods
text analysis, semantic analysis, AI

Results
Preliminary results show that almost 60% of participants identify two paintings (out of eleven) as being particularly well associated with their experience of the wine tasted.

Abstract
Drinking wine is a simple yet complex act. Bringing the glass to your mouth, taking a sip, then swallowing it is not a major difficulty. But savoring a wine is far more complex. The perception of a wine depends on many factors.
Contrary to what one might intuitively think, assessing the quality of a wine depends not only on the product itself, but at least as much (if not more) on the context and the person tasting it. Wine tasting is an exercise that relies on several senses: visual first, then olfactory, gustatory, even tactile; and also on various cognitive mechanisms (Parr, 2019).

When we taste a wine, these interactions between several senses and the brain result in highly complex sensations, which are therefore difficult to express. A wine taster’s description of a wine is necessarily much simpler. It is therefore common for tasters to use intersensory metaphors to concisely express their feelings. So, for example, tasters often resort to anthropomorphism and use gendered terms (Masset, et al., 2024). Presenting a wine as feminine expresses a perception of delicacy and sensuality in the wine, whereas a masculine wine will be more powerful and robust. Similarly, it has become increasingly common to characterize wines according to their perceived degree of minerality. This notion allows, or rather gives the impression of being able, to link a wine to a terroir, but chemically, minerality doesn’t exist – it’s not elements linked to the soil/minerals that can give a wine its perceived character (Parr, et al., 2018).

Within the brain itself, more or less mechanical associations between various stimuli take place. For example, the color of wine alters the sense of smell and taste (Spence, 2020). This kind of relationship between several senses, the fact that actual perception via one sense induces a feeling typically associated with another sense, is associated with the concept of synaesthesia. It should be noted, however, that synaesthesia refers to an automatic, stable mechanism and associations that are specific to each individual. One synaesthete will systematically make the same association between, say, a flavor and a shape. Another synaesthete may make radically different associations. Very few people have the ability to make these kinds of associations. Yet, in the context of wine, it’s very common to make associations between the senses, and these associations are often shared by a significant number of people. For this reason, Spence & Wang (2015) use the terminology of “crossmodal correspondences” to refer to “associations that the majority of us share between tastes, aromas, flavors, and mouthfeel characteristics”. In the present article, we use the terminology of Pseudo-synaesthesia.

Research into “wine psychology” has grown considerably in recent years (Spence, 2020). Indeed, wine offers a fascinating laboratory for tackling research questions that go beyond this noble beverage. This is due to its very nature: wine is an “experience good” with important aesthetic and cultural dimensions. It comes in a variety of forms and is both chemically and sensorially complex. Given the sophisticated perceptual mechanisms involved in wine tasting (Parr, 2019), a variety of elements specific to the wine tasted or the tasting context can modify tasters’ expectations and their perception of the wines tasted (see, e.g., Masset & Raub (2023) who show how simple manipulations can alter tasters’ expectations and evaluations). Numerous studies have investigated the effect that auditory stimuli can have on the perception of a wine’s aromas and taste (see, e.g., Morrot et al. (2001)). In the context of the present study, research into associations between wine and music is particularly relevant, for two reasons. On the one hand, music and wine can come in a wide variety of forms and provoke complex stimuli. This distinguishes such research from most studies on crossmodal correspondences, which focus on simple stimuli and are therefore limited in scope. On the other hand, this research shows that music affects wine perception. Spence & Wang (2015) offer a review of the literature on the subject (see also Spence (2020) for a more general review of crossmodal correspondences with music and a discussion of the role of emotions). A dedicated term has even been proposed to refer to them, Oenosthesia (Burzynska, 2018). These correspondences can be explained in various ways, the most plausible being semantic: using a similar lexicon to describe different sensations may lead to their association (Spence, 2018).

In this paper, we study through a multisensory experience the interactions between tasting a wine and the association tasters make between that wine and a painting. Concretely, we first serve a wine, ask participants to express their feelings about the wine, then present them with 11 paintings and ask them to choose the one that best matches the wine tasted. At the end, they have to justify their choice of painting. The wine served is always the same, Ambre 2007 from Christophe Abbet (Valais, Switzerland). This wine is chosen for two main reasons: it’s an outstanding, complex wine (93 points from the Wine Advocate - the leading publication on wine). Moreover, the producer has a particular artistic sensibility. He’s not a synaesthete himself, but he likes to play with metaphors. Our objectives are (i) to determine whether an association occurs non-randomly; (ii) to examine what might explain this association. It should be noted that the order of actions during the experiment is such that we are studying the effect of wine perception on artwork perception. Our approach thus differs from existing research studying the effect of stimuli on wine perception.

The original features and contributions of this research are multi-faceted. Firstly, the literature suggests that the same crossmodal correspondences are often shared by a significant proportion of the population. A priori, we might therefore expect the statement related to objective (i) to be supported by the data. But art is a personal and
complex thing, perhaps even more so than wine. In other words, we analyze whether crossmodal correspondences appear at a particularly high level of complexity and abstraction. This may explain why the “pairing of modalities [i.e., wine and art] appears less frequently than does the music-wine combination” (Spence & Wang, 2015). Secondly, we use unique data, which enable distinctive analyses. We have collected more than 500 responses over a five-year period, enabling us to study associations not only in cross-section but also in time-series, taking into account environmental factors (season, weather, etc.). Moreover, the participants are all first-year students in an undergraduate program at a European hospitality school. They thus all have limited experience of wine (due to their young age), but a basic knowledge of tasting (through a compulsory introductory course in oenology). On the other hand, they differ in their cultural background: over 100 nationalities make up the student body. Rodrigues & Parr (2019) show that the taster’s cultural background has an impact on wine appreciation. Finally, the questionnaire leaves the tasters a great deal of freedom (all questions are open-ended) so that they can express themselves as naturally as possible. These specific features stand out from the existing literature, which relies on a limited number of respondents expressing themselves at a single point in time, and on highly structured questions (e.g., semantic differential assessment).

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