Factors explaining differences in wine experts’ ratings: the case of gender, credentials and occupation

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Conference Presentation

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Keywords
Expert ratings, gender, credential, occupation

Research Question
The aim is to enhance comprehension of the factors explaining why experts may assign different scores to wines, with a focus on the personal characteristics of judges: gender, credential, occupation.

Methods
Using a dataset of 5395 wines judged in the 2022 International Wine and Spirits Competition, including 18,224 scores, we estimate a grade equation with wine fixed effects.

Results
Credentials do not matter, while on-trade buyers and female experts are more severe than other judges. Estimation results converge across wine styles and colors, with the exception of sparkling wines.

Abstract
The aim of this article is to enhance comprehension of the reasons why experts may assign different scores to the
same wines in identical tasting environments. This research focuses on the personal characteristics of judges, such as their gender, industry credentials, and occupation within the wine industry.

Wine tasting involves sensory analysis and complex cognitive processes of perception, conceptualisation, memory activation, imagination and communication (Parr, 2019). These processes are specific to each expert, depending on their own training, exposure to the product, culture and even childhood experiences (Chu & Downes, 2000). In other words, perceptual activity is biased because who we are and what we already know and have experienced influences what we perceive. More generally, among other factors, autobiographical memory plays an important role in sensory experience (Parr, 2019). Consequently, we expect that different experts following a similar process (i.e. visual, olfactory, and gustatory assessment) and evaluating the same wine in the same environment will not end up with a similar rating. Indeed, as noted by Lesschaeve (2007), there are different types of experts with different training, which include wine makers, wine sellers and wine writers. The purpose of this article is to contribute to the empirical literature on wine expertise by further analysing differences in expert evaluations. Existing research is based on experimental data, which allows for a controlled setting, but with specific wines chosen for the experiment, sometimes not aligned with the markets. Here, we conduct a field study based on a large set of original data to better understand the factors that may explain wine experts' ratings.

Using a dataset of 5395 wines judged in the 2022 International Wine and Spirits Competition, a UK-based awarding institution, we analyse 18,224 scores from different judges. We estimate a grade equation at the judge level to understand why a wine received different scores from judges. Each wine is assessed simultaneously by several judges. As such, our database has a typical panel structure, and we can include wine fixed effects. Hence, the right-hand side of our grade equation can focus on the judge characteristics: gender (man or woman), credential (no credential, master sommelier, Master of Wine) and occupation (off-trade buyer, on-trade buyer, airline buyer, communicator, consultant, educator).The grade equation is estimated on the full dataset and on several subsets of wine styles and colours.

With the exception of sparkling wines, all estimation results converge, regardless of the empirical specification and the dataset used to estimate the quality equation. Estimated coefficients are often significant at1%. The key findings are the following:
- Apart from sparkling wines, credentials do not matter, as there is no significant difference between the scores given by experts with no credentials and those given by experts with the title of Master Sommelier or Master of Wine.
- There are variations in the grading of wines based on the type of buyer or judge. On-trade buyers and consultants tend to be more severe than off-trade buyers. Conversely, airline buyers, communicators, and educators tend to give higher grades than off-trade buyers.
- Additionally, female judges consistently give lower grades, with a penalty ranging from -0.113 points for red wines to -0.250 points for sparkling wines.

In terms of implications, our findings suggest that consumers need to learn whose expert matches their own tastes. A similar reasoning can be made on the producer side, who have to better understand where to submit their wines for judging. The experts or awarding body should be related to where they expect their wines to be distributed or sold. On the awarding institution side, to address potential biases in the scoring of wines, one solution is to diversify the judging panel. Additionally, providing training to female judges to raise awareness about stereotypes could also be beneficial.

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