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# Performing a quality agreement:

## how taste sciences contributed to wine marketing

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**Abstract :** How can consumers be enabled to 'know the difference' about the wines quality? And what can be done to ensure that such action is not interpreted as a strategy of distinction serving social or commercial interests? An interpretation of this nature would ruin the difference that producers and marketers try to establish and perpetuate, and through which they attempt to stabilize their relations with consumers. If that difference were merely a social construction or, even worse, an economic strategy, it would not withstand the accusation of serving particular interests.

This is, in a nutshell, the question raised by the qualitative differentiation of wines proposed as a solution to recurrent crises of over- and under-production in the wine market throughout the centuries. Through the accusations, denunciations and suspicions of the actors involved, this article describes the long sequence of solutions that have been applied for the past hundred years to this problem of maintaining the existence of qualitative differentiation of wines.

Thanks to the endless efforts of wine market professionals, a complex differentiation frame was achieved that fostered the development of a market of hundred of thousands of wine brands.

**Mots clefs:** pragmatic analysis; qualification; wine; markets; taste

## Introduction

After the phylloxera crisis that destroyed many vineyards in the late nineteenth century, and during which producers sold and consumers bought all sorts of drinks called 'wine', a large number of measures were taken to protect consumers from unscrupulous sellers and vice-versa. The play of supply and demand seemed incapable of stabilizing the existence of a market. Consumers were not choosing good wines and producers were selling bad ones, which seemed to maintain the multiple crises. To break this vicious circle the administration, along with private and institutional actors, created a series of 'signs of quality' to enable consumers and producers to know the difference between wines and to have that difference recognized.

As Gilbert Garrier notes (Garrier, 1995), for a long time the different crises or dysfunctions in the wine market pointed to *the quality of wine* as both a cause and a remedy. From the

nineteenth century more and more initiatives<sup>1</sup> were taken in this respect, especially with successive classifications of Bordeaux wines (Markham, 1999), the gradual establishment of AOC<sup>2</sup>, and the multiplication of brands. While it was normal for fraud and bad quality to be penalized by the market, it was also unjust and dangerous for good wines to suffer on account of 'lemons'. By indicating quality, consumers would more easily identify good producers and facilitate the sale of their production. This would symmetrically avoid repeated disappointments among consumers that tended to cause the demand to collapse.

Qualification procedures have served as a highly effective mediation between buyers and sellers. Few people today see only an undifferentiated product called 'wine' on supermarket shelves, at wine fairs or on wine estates. The number of qualified wines has constantly increased, partly at the expense of 'low quality' wines. While on the one hand there has been a steep decline in wine production, of 0.5mhl per annum since the 1970s, the production of wines with an AOC or VDQS label has increased by 0.25mhl per annum. The price of table wine is constantly dropping and, despite wide fluctuations from year to year, the gap between these prices and those of AOC wines is huge (Bartoli et al., 1987). How was this spectacular result achieved? The quality signalization bore a great debate over quality and this article describes three phases of responses that can be distinguished since the birth of AOC in order to make the differences between the wines evermore visible or efficient. The aim is not to establish whether the on-going accusations are valid but rather on what grounds the actors made them and, where relevant, how others tried to counter them. Thus, it is an article not on the sociology or economics of taste but on pragmatics applied to the wine market. The three main sections of the article roughly correspond to the successive devices invented to enable drinkers to know the difference between wines, from the introduction of the notion of quality to the recent controversy on the absence of marketing in small wine enterprises.

The results presented here are based on interviews and on observation of producers, sellers, critics and users when they buy wine or prescribe a choice of wine. We draw on five types of data: text analysis, interviews, observations, participant observation, and 'breaches' (Garfinkel, 1967).

## 1. Signs ... of what?

In 1905, quality vineyards (Appellation d'Origine) were delimited by the administration. It founded its delimitations on the usual professional customs. But these first quality signs raised strong criticisms. As every producer had interest in belonging to a quality zone, these signs were said to be "political signs" and to reflect more the political efficiency of local authorities and interests than the effective quality of the wines.

In 1919, a new law intended to face the problem by turning towards independent judges, the tribunals. They had to state the contested cases left by the 1905 law, grounding not on quality itself, but on a set of pragmatic causes of quality: "the constant, fair and local practices". Yet, justice did not succeed in stating the good practices that made the quality wines.

In 1935 a new law instituted the AOC<sup>3</sup>, which included a professional expertise in the assessment of the quality. To be recognized as such, the quality of the wines had to proceed from natural and human factors and result in "particular characteristics" assessed by experts.

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<sup>1</sup> From the sixteenth century a decree by Felipe II regulated the conditions and places of production of quality wines in the Valladolid area (Spain).

<sup>2</sup> Act of 5 August 1908, Decree of 30 July 1935, inception of INAO in 1947. (INAO = *Institut National des Appellations d'Origine des Vins et Eaux-de-Vie*)

<sup>3</sup> AOC are often said to be efficient signs because they are state controlled or guaranteed. This is surely not true. The sign became recognized once professional experts joined the quality definition committees. But, as they are

Since AOC have met a nice success. Many consumers agreed with the clear-cut ranking of AOC, Bordeaux, Burgundy then Côtes du Rhône, etc. and saw AOC as a practical tools allowing them to make good choices without having to struggle with the difficult question of the wines quality. And for producers, labelled wines could pretend to higher prices. But next to this success, signs continued to raise strong criticisms too.

AOC were not enough precise. First their geographical delimitations were said to be somewhat arbitrary. Furthermore, they did not judge a result and only indicated a « potential » quality. So AOC were detailed: internal hierarchies and smaller delimitations were defined. In 1967, a yearly ex post tasting of the wines were added.

These improvements raised new criticisms explaining why some customers did not buy AOC wines, the labels had become too complex and with their increasing number, the AOC signs had lost their power of differentiation. How could the consumer choose between dozens of medals, vintages, connoisseurs' selections and classifications, not to mention hundreds of AOC?

For others, the problem of signs of quality was a question of accuracy, but of performativity. As consumers were not experts, they had to believe in the signs. And the success met by the AOC and the 1936 law creating the INAO, only showed their credulity. For producers, signs were so performative that it was enough to create them in order to sell. Recourse to signs of quality was therefore likened to an efficient marketing strategy. And the continuing creation of new AOC was constantly denounced as a commercial strategy without any objective grounds in the quality of wines.

Finally, the multiplication of signs of quality had thus allowed a finer differentiation of wines but had at the same time also fuelled doubts, suspicion and controversies on their ability to denote quality.

### **Countering the threat of misinterpretation of signs**

To remedy this shortcoming the actors in charge of signs of quality tried to consolidate the link between signs and quality. Some quality labels with a sound reputation, such as Bordeaux AOC, launched communication campaigns in which they reasserted their quality. Other producers favoured face-to-face relations on wine estates<sup>4</sup>, at wine fairs<sup>5</sup>, or at small local events organized by wholesalers or experts.

They also turned to scientific research, with the twofold aim of demonstrating the link between signs and quality, and hunting down signs of opportunistic behaviour. Many studies by INRA, in particular, tried to test this link by looking for a relation between the land, practices and signs of quality<sup>6</sup>, and a large number of pedological, agronomical, meteorological and human factors were recorded without ever managing to distinguish qualities nor reproduce hierarchies. All were pertinent factors, and none fitted as a stable and reproducible cause for quality.

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administratively defined, these signs are also different from the usual experts' signs such as the wines selections of the wine guides.

<sup>4</sup> Wine region tours have developed to the point of accounting for 20% of direct sales by producers (source: Emilie Vandecandelaere, INRA thesis). In 1997 the first edition of the tourist guide to France's wine estates was published (Couvreur et Gerbelle, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> The *Salon des Caves Particulières*, a well-known trade fair for individual cellars, was created in the early 1980s. Since then many others have been created, for instance the Grosly fair in Paris or wine fairs in areas of production.

<sup>6</sup> In the early 1990s six INRA laboratories were working on the link between signs of quality and the quality of wines.

This recourse to research was accompanied by an effort to define quality, reported in Emile Peynaud's book *Le gout du vin*. It led to a proliferation of proposals, some of which were positive:

- Quality is a concept that simply indicates a consumer's preference for a product, influenced by a fashion or propaganda.' (Larreau) [...] 'Quality is defined by the gratifying power it represents for the body [...]' (Debry)

- (Peynaud et Blouin, 1980) : p. 230

They nevertheless led to controversies. Is quality only physiological? If it is a consumer's preference, then who is the consumer? To avoid this type of debate, the meaning was broadened – to the point of becoming tautological:

- A lot has been written on quality, first to try to define it. The same idea is found with different authors: 'quality is noticed rather than defined' (Pisani); 'The quality of a wine is experienced rather than proved' (Poupon); The Americans and Italians express it in the same way [...]. A very simple and very clear, obvious, definition is the following: 'The quality of wine is all its qualities, that is, its properties that make it acceptable or desirable'.

- (Peynaud et Blouin, 1980) : p. 229-230

Quality did not allow itself to be trapped in a general definition, valid for all wines. Authors like B. Paumard tried to refine the definition by relating it to narrow categories of wines. But quality was soon watered down in multiple categories of wines:

- 'Wine expresses touches of Madeira, vermouth, walnut. Unprotected, that is, left in contact with the air before or after fermentation, the wine has become **oxidized**. [...]

- **You notice an oxidized smell**

- Negative on a wine of the latest vintage or a vine that is supposed to develop fresh fruit aromas
- Negative on a young terroir wine
- Negative on an evolved terroir wine
- Neutral on a very evolved terroir wine
- Negative on a high quality young oak-aged wine
- Neutral on a high quality evolved or very evolved oak-aged wine
- Neutral on a traditional wine with a tendency to become oxidized, such as yellow wine, natural sweet wines.

(Paumard et Millet, 2000): p. 74

Quality was also diluted in the conditions of consumption of wines, as described in *Le vin, mode d'emploi* by Hugh Johnson where the author explains how one should choose a wine:

- '... the occasion? A family meal, a business lunch or an evening party? The atmosphere? Do I feel extravagant? Do I want something original or something safe? Budget?'

(Johnson, 1985) : p. 93

And lastly it was spread in an endless list of contextual factors:

- 'We concluded that, at least for red wines, the air pressure had an effect on the taste: high pressure improves the taste and low pressure deteriorates it.'

(Ewing-Mulligan et McCarthy, 1997): p. 95

As for attempts to define wines in terms of their origin or production process, they simply multiplied the factors of quality and the characteristics of wines, and thus refined their classification without managing to rank them<sup>7</sup>.

The lack of a strong link between the sign and the quality of wines, fuelled the denunciation of the relevance of signs by liberal economic currents and especially the WTO. Signs were told to be hidden anticompetitive measures. The social sciences were consequently asked to try to evaluate this subjective or imaginary social content of quality<sup>8</sup> and many conferences were held on the subject (INRA, 1996) (2000), without ever managing to contain it.

Efforts to define and delimit quality invariably caused it to expand. Neither the quality nor the qualities of wines could unanimously be stated, coordinated or ranked. They always depended on the wine, the moment, the person, the theory, etc. Quality required multiple signs to be differentiated without being reduced; it also required multiple theories, points of view and methods, constantly updated and renewed.

### **Drinkers' adjustment: the evaluation of the signs credibility**

Although science was facing a difficult task, consumers continued to use the AOC, as the statistics show. They did not turn a deaf ear towards the signs criticisms. But they were better than nothing. And since the link between sign and quality did not seem to be able to be established and proved directly, consumers, with the help of market intermediaries, created or adjusted their procedures for choosing wines by including an evaluation of the signs credibility.

When the link between the sign and its referent was considered to be inevitably imperfect, it was necessary to stand back from signs and try to identify the real information. All the signs of quality, all the standards to which producers are subjected, created random boundaries that the 'natural' quality of things defied. The AOC border followed the outline of the vineyard only through human contingency; downgrading was the result of application of a general standard or a precautionary measure that was not always justified locally. The link could also be distended by fraud, in which case buyers were attentive to measures of control taken by independent third parties.

For the others, suspicion weighed on the intention itself, conveyed by the sign of quality. The particularities of wines were interpreted as instruments of manipulation of consumers, and were disqualified *a priori* as 'pure marketing strategies' intended solely to induce people to buy:

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<sup>7</sup> Even yield, which in France is a subject of some degree of unanimity, is no longer seen elsewhere as a factor of quality.

<sup>8</sup> From 1994 two cross-cutting research projects on the social construction of quality (Valceschini et Casabianca, 1996) and then on AOC (Béranger et Valceschini, 1999) tried to federate social science research on this theme around INRA. This research goes beyond the case of wine and focuses more generally on the quality sign.

- 'What do you think of this type of bottle? (I show him bottles with a shape different to the others, a so-called 'Bordeaux' shape):
- [...] a bottle like that that's distinguished by its label and its shape, automatically I don't even look at it. (Interview with amateur RL, p. 40)

The need to sell and to make a profit induced duplicity among sellers and producers who were quick to cheat their customers by misusing signs of quality:

- 'What happens with brands, with red wine [in particular] is that it declines a lot. There are brands that are great and when they attain a certain reputation, unfortunately they go down. [...]
- *Why do good brands always deteriorate?*
- 'Very well-known brands, promoted a lot. I believe that if there's a strong demand for a certain brand, it has to increase its production and sometimes that production exceeds the possibilities [of production]. So, we can assume that they mix wines or that they bring wine from another place or ... If there's a huge demand, we can assume that they can't maintain this level of quality. That's what I think, but I could be wrong. [...] I'm referring to brands that become fashionable.' (Interview with an amateur, RL, p. 36 & 83)

In order to assess the signs credibility, wine buyers could rely upon fame, as an indicator of unquestionably recognized liability. Or, as it could also signal a successful marketing strategy, they selected the wines with multiple quality signs such as medals, AOC, critics' recognition, estate bottled. Others adopted a risk-limiting strategy by limiting the price they paid for their wines, or bought only the wines they already new.

Wine professionals saw of these choice strategies as leading to bad choices. Furthermore their defence against the imperfections of the economy and the opportunistic manoeuvring of producers or sellers were seen as sustaining an overall suspicion over the quality wines:

- 'Ribera puts wines that have been tampered with into *crianzas*<sup>9</sup>. This is what must be denounced. Don't you agree? And everybody keep quiet because they don't want enemies.' (Interview 2 with amateur, LT, p.21)

For many professionals, this suspicion was only to the fact consumers were badly informed. So they tried to help the suspicious buyers make their choices by advising them.

### **Putting an end to suspicion: strengthening signs of credibility**

Critics, wine experts convinced that the identification of quality was the keystone for the quality wine market, tried to help consumers to distinguish between the true and the false, real quality and empty claims, selfish manoeuvres and honesty. Guidebooks and wine magazines, which proliferated in the 1980s, assessed brands, cellars, labels, cultivation and wine production techniques, etc. Journalist Guy Renvoisé even specialized in making inventories of fraud and multiple distortions in the wine market (Renvoisé, 1996) (Renvoisé, 2004).

Critics did not agree upon the quality of the wines. And as the number of critics grew, their claims to be the most reliable strengthened.

New arguments were added to their own assertions of impartiality ('the guidebook that tells the truth', *Guide Dussert Gerber*<sup>10</sup>). Most of them carefully avoided the question of defining

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<sup>9</sup> Wines with a short period of maturation in barrels.

<sup>10</sup> First edition in 1980.

quality. The continuous internal controversy<sup>11</sup> about quality made it impossible to find a collective agreement about it. And each definition attempt could be interpreted as signalling a “particular” taste of the critic and thus reduce his/her competence far-reaching effect.

They usually claimed their sound professional recognition. And these statements were often completed by the demonstration of their performativity. It was based on the fact that producers took their advices into account; or on the number of sales - as in the phrase 'over 350,000 copies sold' on the *Guide Dussert Gerber 92*<sup>12</sup>- or even on their impact on drinkers:

“ With twenty years of experience in tasting, José Peñín is current the most well-known creator of currents of opinion in the wine world, and the specialized journalist who's been around the longest.”

(Peñín, 1998) outside back cover) unchanged in subsequent editions.

But these arguments could also show simply a capacity to make oneself unavoidable or to persuade – which, as everyone knows, consists in making others believe rather than in sharing the truth:

- Parker is truly a calamity whose influence is colossal. This American has the huge shortcoming (quality?) of having no rival who has ever come anywhere near his inordinate fame. It is improbable and even shameful that a single man can have such a strong influence on the French wine industry, not only on prices but also on the aesthetics of wines that he pushes towards a form of standardized power and vulgarity. SCANDALOUS!!

- Furthermore, he has such an impact on the prices of the wines he likes that they become totally inaccessible, not only because of the insane demand that he generates but also due to the resulting speculation. His stupid scores of 100% are grotesque and merely illustrate this character's conceit. A typical example of someone to get rid of.

*Le grand Bob*<sup>13</sup>, February-March 1998)

Like other quality signs, critics were not unanimously seen as liable. Some wavered between journalists and professionals, others preferred more personal experts, while others opted for a more unanimous opinion, reputation. Drinkers who took note of the critics strived to distinguish between them and to assess their credibility. But the internal controversy among critics about quality appeared to support the denunciation of quality as being a social property: the competence of critics was suspected of being related only to their capacity to organize social networks. The lack of quality definition could also serve the accusation that critics interfered with the market<sup>14</sup>. So if the critics' efforts helped the credibility assessment of the quality signs, they did not end with suspicion; they even could foster the social interpretation of quality.

To maintain a market for quality wines, it was necessary to parry the accusation of sociologism that tended to show that the quality of wines was simply an illusion of the

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<sup>11</sup> The scores of the different guides are not all correlated (Ginsburgh, 1995) (Teil, 2004). For a description of the way in which the community of critics allows an evaluation – albeit a highly controversial one – of a general quality of wine, without any limitation, see (Teil, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> The 1994 edition mentions 'over 450,000' and that of 1990 nothing.

<sup>13</sup> This document contains the 45 answers to a questionnaire on Robert Parker proposed on an Internet site. We cited the harshest answer to the question 'What do you think of Robert Parker?', where every wine drinker is described as a victim of the position of strength occupied and exploited by Parker.

<sup>14</sup> “If public prices are real indicators of quality, which we have every reason to believe they are, then a little extremely simple econometrics is worth as much, or more, than the opinions of the most renowned experts”. (Ginsburgh, 1995): 240 (Ginsburgh et al., 1994).



producer, that wine prices were pure speculation, that critiques were useless, and that drinkers cared only about social distinction.

## 2. Getting rid of the signs

Despite market professionals' efforts, the signs efficiency remained limited. A new idea arose: getting rid of the signs by transforming wine drinkers into expert amateurs. So they would be able to appreciate quality by themselves without having to rely upon any quality sign:

- "While good wines refine the consumer's taste, consumers also help, through their well-advised choice, to enhance the quality of wines. Another mission is added to the multiple functions of oenology, that of making wine better known so that it can be better appreciated." ((Peynaud et Blouin, 1980) p. 235)

An injunction was made: consumers had to try to validate the claims of the quality of the wines they bought without relying on a third person. They were no longer to be 'drinkers of labels' who rely on signs; they had to acquire their own know-how needed to evaluate the quality of wines. The 'drinker of labels' was described as someone who derived satisfaction from the sign alone and not from the quality of the wine, the snob, the one who wanted to signify his or her social status through consumption, or to usurp that status by imitating others' consumption:

- The connoisseur
- Everybody has one in his or her family or among their friends. At the wine festival, the Langon fair, at Vinexpo or at Saint-Vincent bourguignonne, his behaviour is always the same: a quick look around and off to the prestigious appellations or the grand crus.
- From the word go his aristocratic taste buds scorn the 'little' St. Emilion, the 'little' Pommards. For him, a Médoc is beneath a Haut-Médoc which, by definition, could never rival a Pauillac. He is imperious: 'I'll only taste two or three, but the best!'
- He knows wine, the vintage he has in his glass. Sometimes his descriptive verbiage starts before the first sip. He orders you to appreciate it. What an excellent salesman he'd be in a supermarket!
- Promoting things that are already successful is his vocation. Make him taste one of your discoveries, a wine-lover's wine, and he'll condescend to finding a few merits but... but... 'it's like a Château X with less body' or 'like a Clos Y but more sour'. You'll never catch him off balance; he knows everything, at least everything that's considered sacred. He's the 'drinker of labels'. (Internet site 75cl.com).

Unlike these 'social' drinkers, 'real amateurs' had to cast aside signs and try to become competent by learning about ways of making wine, wine growing, local production traditions, and different types and tastes of wine by appreciating their diversity, originality, etc. In this way they would be able to verify claims as to the quality of wine. Buyers were no longer to delegate but rather to reinvest their position of free choice; they were to develop their own tasting capacity.

### The construction of proof

The promotion of the individual expertise faced nevertheless a stumbling block: how could one evaluate the tasters' expertise.

The quality of wines could often be tested very simply: by tasting them. Tasters' competence was not as easy to verify. It was impossible to compare a taster to a reference taster. The superiority of a particular taster could never be established. The taster's know-how could not be formalized or reduced to a theory or explicit method, the knowledge or good application of which may have been verifiable.

A simple test of gustative competence was the blind recognition test. This consisted in recognizing the identity of a wine, as indicated on the bottle, simply by tasting it and without any other signal. The taster's performance was translated into an ability – subject to confirmation – to recognize the identity of a wine in a way that corresponded to the ethic of the 'real amateur' or the 'good taster' who rejects 'signs of quality'.

From this ability to recognize, an ability to describe and then to evaluate was inferred. The ability to recognize implied that the good drinker was able to perceive the discriminating gustatory features of categories of wine, the name of their region of production, the type of vine, wine production methods, the wine growers or the vintages. They were therefore able to describe the taste of the wine. When differences of performance were clear, it was generally easy to link them to the ability or not to recognize and thus to describe.

The ability to describe was then translated into an ability to evaluate. This is not an automatic operation; it incorporates the particular characteristics of each taster in the form of 'individual tastes':

“Some wines from *Vitis Lambrusca* hybrid vines have an aroma that is called foxy. Through habit, these wines are eventually enjoyed by some wine drinkers.”

(Peynaud et Blouin, 1980) : p. 198

Eating habits were associated with 'tastes' or biases in the capacity to evaluate. Their identification helped to obtain a new inference that transformed the ability to recognize and to describe, into an ability to evaluate. Step by step the test thus covered a variety of competences and afforded drinkers with an evaluation tool, so that the issue of credibility was avoided. 'Real amateurs', those who did not want to be 'drinkers of labels', regularly subjected themselves to these tests in order to evaluate their competence – and that of others when the game was collective.

Professionals and drinkers thus responded to the threat of disconnection between the judges' credibility and the reliability of their judgements by a form of commercialization that encouraged everyone to become an expert able to verify his or her own competence. The differentiation of quality initially confined to signs and then to critics, was progressively extended to a broader set of drinkers.

Consumers were not the only ones to have recourse to these recognition blind tests: critics with their wine master examinations or 'trap' tasting, wine waiters with their contests, and scientists<sup>15</sup> have all used them to in an attempt to prove their expertise without the help of peers and reputation.

But once again, these new initiatives were only partly convincing. The blind test assessed an expert's capacity, but the same recognized capacity did not impede quality judgements disagreements, generating doubts about the virtues of the blind test. Its limited diffusion was interpreted in two ways that revived sociological criticisms. First, blind tasting was interpreted as the instrument of a real perception of quality. It was said that the taste

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<sup>15</sup> Tasters agreed to researchers' tests of competence designed to dispel doubts on their expertise (Morrot, 1999) (Chassin, 2000) Since the mid-1990s O. Ashenfelter has published many results of his tests on the website 'Liquid Assets'.

difference that could be seen between experts and 'laypersons'<sup>16</sup> paralleled with the correlation between market prices – taken as indicators of their preferences – and the presence of signs of quality, showed that laypersons had a socially influenced consumption (Combris et al., 1997). Sociological reasoning led to an almost contrasting conclusion: it was the experts with their ostentatious blind tasting techniques and their capacity to produce a legitimate taste who influenced social distinction the most. It is the second interpretation, the idea of a 'social norm' linking 'good wines' to 'good drinkers' that can be found in the most recent debate in the wine world today.

### 3. Getting rid of the experts

In the late 1980s the wine world expanded to new wine producing countries. New wines appeared, timidly, without signs of quality: Australian, Californian and Chilean cheap wines whose 'price-quality' ratio was generally recognized as being good by all experts. Although these wines initially had difficulty 'breaking into' a market where buyers were loyal to the national production, today they are seen as the new threaten for the French wines market. Whereas sales statistics on French quality wines are at a standstill, when it comes to new products they keep rising. Have French wines forgotten something?

Market experts recently answered they simply had forgotten the consumer! Until now the elite had defined good taste and the consumer had had no option but to conform to these rules of 'good taste':

- *At this stage our consumers are enslaved by wine. They have to comply with the rules to enter into the Holy of Holies or be thrown out into the darkness* (Attributed to J. Berthomeau 'author of a report on the future of the industry and initiator of a think tank Cap 2010', *Réussir Vigne, du vignoble au chai*, section 'faire du vin pour le vendre' ('make wine to sell') N°97 May 2004, p. 18)<sup>17</sup>.

This social taste had no reason to be imposed on all. Everyone had the right to have the tastes that pleased him or her. A new type of commercialization has been thus emerging: the adjustment of tastes between the product and the consumer that, for firms, required the use of marketing techniques:

- *From the beginning of modern history of wine in Australia, research, development and marketing have worked hand in hand. [...] It's no longer up to oenologists to decide, it's up to the consumer to say whether a wine should be micro-oxygenated or not, matured on a sediment or not.* (ibid.)

If French wines wanted to stand the new world competency, they would have to get rid of experts who reduced the French wine market to a social elite. But, what will the marketing techniques do? As in the upper situation, they will request consumers to know which wine quality they prefer, what's a good quality for a wine... The wine buyers who don't want to bother with quality taste will still look for signs and guarantees. The others will enter the process of quality definition, enlarging the amateurs' circle. The controversy about quality will surely reinforce, emphasizing the taste distortions due to the new market intermediary, the marketing, and the wine market will continue its permanent revolution.

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<sup>16</sup> This term referred to those buyers who based their choice on signs of quality.

<sup>17</sup> A similar but less detailed reasoning can be found in (Gaultier, 2002) or (Association Française des Eleveurs, 2002)

## Conclusion

An interesting fact with the wine critics is that they always saw reluctant consumers to convince. Whatever the reason, the wine qualification had always to be improved. In order to face the sociological criticism they provided new qualification processes where they tried to make the quality assessor ever more invisible in order to strengthen the quality statements.

Faced with these accusations that quality was simply a pretext, market professionals tried first to improve the signs themselves and their differentiation capacity. Then they answered the sociological critique by calling technical sciences for help. But quality appeared to be a sort of evolving concept and could never be definitively delimited. So no general stabilised characteristics could support a product differentiation and hierarchy. As social sciences also proved unable to delimit product and human influence on quality, the sociological critique continued, threatening the identification of quality, the keystone of the wine market.

Sciences could not provide a definite answer about the grounds of quality. Yet consumers still relied upon quality to make their choices and used an indirect enquiry about the signs credibility. Many wine professionals tried to help the wine drinkers in their quality enquiry in order to sustain the wine quality differentiation. They provided them with ever more information about quality and signs credibility. But this help continued fostering the sociological critique: their advices were interpreted as socially constructed and thus without any link with wine. As it seemed impossible to definitively prevent the misinterpretations of the quality signs, critics and market intermediaries asked wine drinkers not to use them and to acquire the necessary expertise to become able to recognize quality by themselves. But this new initiative appeared unable to stop the social accusation as the tests adopted to evaluate the wine drinkers expertise were seen as practical signs of social differentiation.

Besides critics also improved the existent procedures. So the wine market now appears as the city of Troy, like a complex and more or less historically multilayered market where all the qualification procedures still carry on altogether. This twirling qualification resulted an increasing enrolment of professionals<sup>18</sup> and of drinkers in the quality definition debate followed by a radical instabilisation of the wine quality which has become the result of a growing set of evermore ephemeral and disputed statements.

Finally, these market intermediaries have performed a wine differentiation in the sense that their action can be related to the fact that many people were seeing wine as pertaining to a universe of organized differences although it could be difficult to know these differences. In this sense, they have framed a differentiation, or a calculation in Callon and Muniesa's sense (Callon et Muniesa, 2003), that sustains a market with hundreds of thousands of yearly new marketed brands.

Nevertheless, all wine buyers do not see these differences as pertinent. The differences can be seen as too complicated and some people try to escape choice and not only thanks to delegation. We interviewed a wine lover who thought he had – as everybody in his mind – a totally idiosyncratic taste, so no information could help him. He drunk wine daily and chose his wines at random, without paying attention to prices and enjoyed not only the wine, but overall his capacity to analyze the wine qualities. So quality was not for him a set of wine differences, but a marvellous taste exercise. There was no differentiating frame around the wines that would have allowed for a differentiation, either classification or ranking. Differences arose from consumption and he would only exceptionally repeat a same wine.

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<sup>18</sup> These wine professionals were first administrators, members of professional organisations, brokers, oenologists and producers, later sommeliers, wine lovers, retailers, journalists and market specialists.

The few times he did it were occasions for him to concentrate on the differences a same wine was able to show in different drinking occasions. So for him there were only differences and no differentiation, nor calculation. He nevertheless spent lots of money on wines.

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**Performing a quality agreement:  
how taste sciences contributed to wine marketing**

Communication to 4S-EASST Conference, Paris, Ecole des Mines, 26 - 28 august 2004  
Session 10: *On social and consumer sciences shaping market(-ing) practice*

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# 1900-1935: A remedy to wine crisis: the *quality sign*

- Consumers failed to recognize the good wines
  - ➡ They had to be *informed* about quality (as a product description and ranking).
- Independent intermediaries for quality definition/delimitation
  - ➡ 1905: An administrative information sign (AO)
  - ➡ 1919: A legislative statement for the AO
  - ➡ 1935: Professional expertise joins the legislative and administrative procedure (AOC) in the INAO



# Quality signs raising 2 criticisms (1900-70)

- The contestation of their *capacity of signalling*

There is a difference among the wines

☞ “They are arbitrary”

☞ “They signal a potential, not an actual quality”

☞ More signs, more precise  
☞ Wine concours/medals  
1967: tasting added to AOC

- “Signs are *performative*”

There is *no difference behind* the signs.

☞ “Labelling is enough to produce an (illusion of) difference.”

☞ “Consumers have to believe in signs and cannot verify”

☞ “Signs are human (social, economical...) strategies.”

☞ The sign tracks  
• a product difference  
(• not a human action)

**The “sociological criticism” threatened the quality wine market;  
it had to be dismissed**

# Settling the quality differences: Sciences as a resource (1970-90)

## Technical sciences

The investigation of the product  
characteristics

A proliferation of influence factors, but  
no stable cause for quality

## Professional sciences

A better definition of quality

An impossible delimitation of quality

## Social sciences

The delimitation of the social  
dimension of quality

“Wine and signs are social, cultural,  
ritual, imaginary, symbolic...”

**Sociological criticism, a persistent threaten**

# Consumers and critics

## Looking for guarantees

### Consumers

Experts know better than I do

➡ Every sign is better than I

In search of the *good* information

➡ The most famous sign

➡ Low-cost wines (risk)

➡ The intersection of many signs

➡ A *credibility* enquiry

➡ “An endless search”

### Wines market professionals

➡ AOC might be biased quality signs

➡ Consumers make bad choices

➡ A need for more and better information

### New market intermediaries

Critics' credibility claims

➡ The good methodological choice

➡ Professional recognition

➡ “Over 250 000 ex. Sold”

➡ “A social differentiation procedure”

Signs fostered the sociological criticism

# Getting rid of the signs (1990)

- ✉ To remove the external sources of information
- ✉ To help for a direct relationship between product and drinker

**A denunciation of the “label drinkers” by the “real amateurs”:**

- ✉ You have to rely on yourself to recognize quality

« Expertise is a social distinction procedure »

**An expertise behest:**

- ✉ You have to become an expert (enology courses...)

**A test for the drinkers evaluation:**

- ✉ The blind test

« Blind test is a social distinction practice »

**Avoidance of sign still reinforced the sociological criticism**

# Getting rid of the experts (2003)

What limits French wine market extension is not quality  
But its confinement to elite drinkers' taste.

□ Open quality to **every body's taste**.

□ Help **marketing techniques** to enter the wine cellar

So wine producers can adapt their wines to the consumers' tastes.

Involving new wine drinkers in the quality debate

**And... sociological criticism will (surely) persist**

# Performing wine differentiation

Improving the quality signalization

Improving the existent procedures

Signs as information source (IS) → Better signs



Experts as IS → Better experts



Drinkers' expertise as IS → More educated drinkers



« Ordinary » drinker as IS → Better « marketed demand »



?

Making the intermediaries invisible

Qty signalisation



Critique evaluation



Taste education



Mass marketing



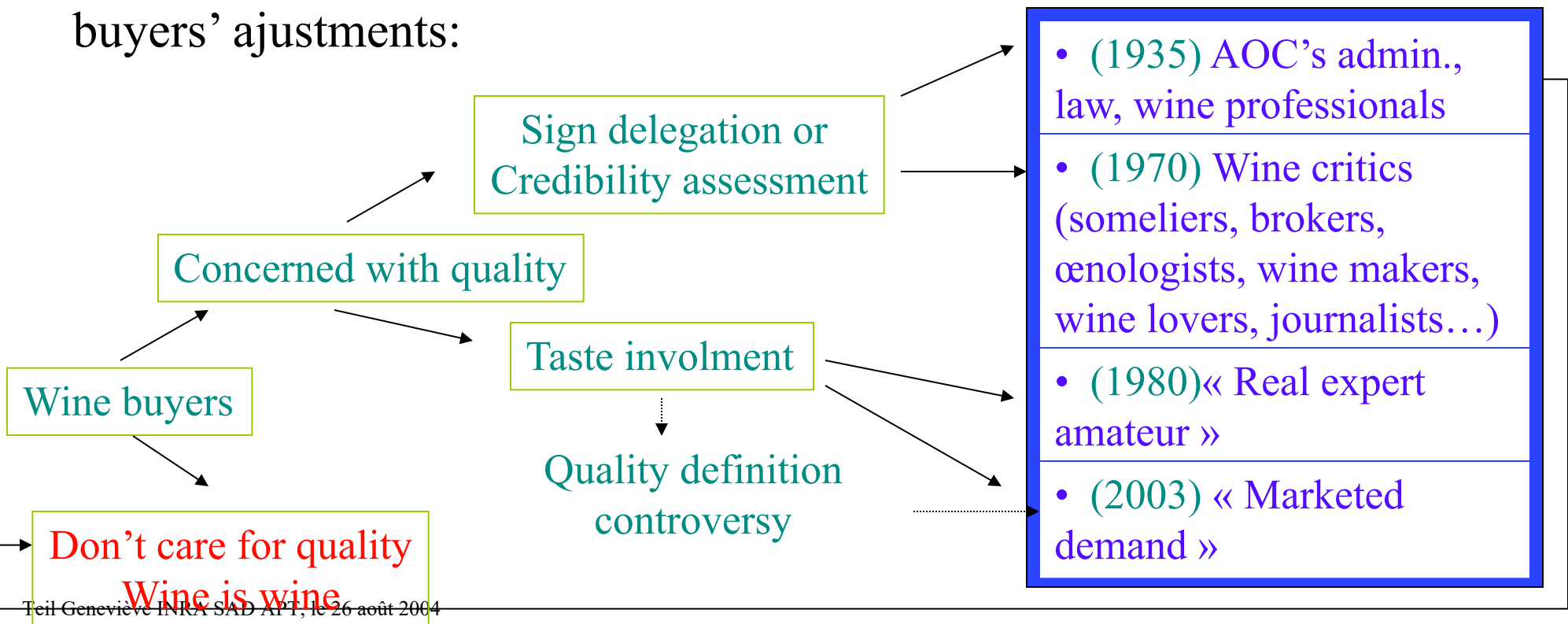
A growing debate about quality

A growing involvement of drinkers in the quality question

A complex qualification process

# A multilayered market

- The « non transparent » market intermediary problem of wine quality
- A complex multilayered market : several quality assessors and wine buyers' adjustments:



# A Proof

- No direct test possible
  - No “good taster” reference, no uncontroversial established hierarchy
- No test of knowledge
  - Evaluation is not reducible to a formal knowledge
- An series of inferences, the blind test:
  - The capacity to « recognize »:
    - = to infer from taste uncontroversed characteristics of identification (name, origin, process, grapes, vintage, etc.)
  - Recognition -> description -> evaluation  
identification of individual tastes