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Do you like or do you love wines?

Geneviève TEIL INRA SADAPT

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Abstract: What makes the difference between a "usual" wine drinker and a wine lover? An empirical analysis shows that they assess wine quality differently. The first ground his judgement on a thorough reliability enquiry of all the quality claims, signals and reputation, in which wine taste appears to be of little relevance as a source of information. The second relies on a detailed taste enquiry about the taste of the wine and his own taste in which the question of confidence is deemed irrelevant. This empirical symmetry between the two induced us to examine the reasons for their being treated differently by sociology of taste studies.

Résumé français : Quelle est la différence entre un buveur de vin "ordinaire" et un amateur de vins ? L'analyse empirique montre que les deux jugent différemment la qualité d'un vin. Le premier s'appuie sur une enquête détaillée portant sur la confiance qui peut être faite aux différentes allégations, signes et réputations de qualité et où le goût du produit s'avère une source d'information peu adéquate. Le second s'appuie sur une enquête détaillée portant sur le goût du vin et son propre goût pour le vin où la précédente question de la confiance est mise hors sujet. Cette symétrie empirique entre les deux conduit à s'interroger sur les raisons d'un traitement différent des deux par la sociologie du goût.

Keywords: Wine, quality, perception, sociology of taste, trust.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the way two different kinds of drinkers, the “usual” wine drinker and the wine lover, judge the quality of a wine¹.

Wine is special in that wine quality evaluation relies on taste. In this it differs from other goods or even foodstuffs. Wine does not have problems of hygiene or food safety, and very few of contamination... But that which makes this product special will help us focus on taste perception.

The wine-drinker

Pedro is about 50 years old and has some 30 years of wine-drinking practice. He is a daily wine drinker. He says, half-jokingly, that he and his wife are two wine addicts who need to control their consumption.

Although he constantly stated that wine was very important for him, he showed while talking about wines quality, little interest in the taste: they were either good or bad or drinkable. Pedro is no monomaniac wine drinker who invariably drinks the same wine and thus does not need a rich vocabulary to talk about taste. Changing is important. In his own words,

“ The consumer likes to change and sometimes to take risks: let’s try! ”
(Pedro, p. 37)

For him, the price of wine sets his buying limit: being a daily drinker, he says he cannot spend too much on a bottle. Nevertheless, his strict and low price threshold included a selection of 35 wines at his favourite supermarket. So we asked him how he chose the wines he drank.

The art of choosing a wine

His choice is based on a reliability enquiry by which he assesses its quality. This enquiry scans several domains, from economics to tradition.

The quality enquiry

A firm marketing a wine, has an obvious commercial interest in selling it. But seeking to satisfy its economic goals does not necessarily match the buyer’s interests. So Pedro seeks to thwart the firm’s hidden strategies that might prejudice his own interest.

Price is not a reliable quality signal, because the brand has an “obvious” interest in selling at higher prices. So Pedro only uses the price signal as a means of controlling his expenses².

Then he thoroughly checks the wine’s reputation. An established brand may misuse its reputation. This is why, as he says, “well-known brands can only degenerate”. The reason is that once the reputation established, they seek to maximise their benefits by increasing their production through fraudulent purchase of large quantities of wine from other PDOs (Protected Denominations of Origin) or through legal purchase of grapes or wine from other

¹ This paper is based on an empirical study of the Spanish quality wine market, which we undertook five years ago and which lasted over three years. Although our description of “usual” wine-drinkers is chiefly based on the statements of one respondent, Pedro, who was one of our main sources of information, we have also used interviews with other “usual” wine drinkers.

² For him, a daily wine should not cost more than 300 Ptas, a gift wine more than 600 Ptas, etc.

winegrowers in the same area. There may therefore be a difference between the expected and actual quality of the wine. The indication “from our own vineyards” may be seen as a “good information” if the wine is really produced in a limited quantity, i.e. if the wine is exhausted long before the new vintage. In the same way, the indication of the vintage is considered important because it limits the quantities of a specific wine.

For him, not all firms are greedy, but when faced with a large demand, they might respond by producing larger quantities that do not always have the same quality level.

The marketing techniques used to boost sales generate suspicion: for instance, the use of a distinctive mark in order to relate various products to a brand whose prestige is only due to one of them, is suspect of reputation abuse.

PDOs are seen as fairly reliable quality signals when they formally acknowledge long-established quality. They are less reliable indications in the case of recent or large-scale PDOs.

Each PDO corresponds to a specific traditional style of wine which, especially in the case of Riojas, is expressed by a specific traditional labelling style. The use of distinctive labels in order to draw the buyer’s attention may be seen as welcome in the case of rosé and white wines, but unacceptable for red ones. On asking Pedro if he liked cognac-type bottles for wine, he answered:

- The special bottles? For any wine but a red one. For a white or a rosé, it means freedom. It’s aimed at giving a special brand mark, in order to distinguish the product from a distance. It’s one technique among others to draw the customer’s attention. But for red wines I don’t like it [...] because red wine is a serious thing. (He laughs.) So if a bottle wanders from the norm then, automatically, I’ll never even look at it. (Pedro, p. 40)

Red wine is a serious thing because you have to consider the quality of the product when you buy it. While it is not necessarily the case for a white one.

Fantasy is unwelcome in red wines whether in the bottle style or in the labelling. Tradition is the reference. And the printing on the label of ancient wine competition medals is seen as establishing the historical dimension of a long-established quality wine³, although they honour *past* quality.

In the absence of any other information, Pedro relies on his own particular taste.

“A new wine is being advertised: El Marino [...] with no PDO. “The Mediterranean wine”. What do we know? I tried it and ... well... not bad.” (Pedro, p. 40)

³ In the same idea, some indications open contradictory evaluations, the size of the bottle that could be considered as a general style standard of presentation for a wine is subject to diverse interpretations. A smaller bottle confers greater value to the content. But the change from the 1 litre to the 75 cl bottle was a con trick, same price and a quarter less wine!

The meta enquiry

The knowledge he uses to assess the reliability of the quality claims displayed on the bottle is gathered from various sources: friends, acquaintances, daily newspapers, etc. and discussed at length with various people. And Pedro knows well who is reliable and who isn't, who knows about wines and who does not, which sources are reliable and which are not.

He dismisses the experts' sources such as the technical information (processing, type of grapes ...) given on the back label, or the wine critics' reports, as being unverifiable⁴.

On the contrary the medals obtained at wine competitions are well considered as not involving any technical and unverifiable description and resulting from a kind of "democratic comparison".

An expert in quality

In brief, this wine drinker is an interesting character: quality is not immediate for him⁵. His choice is the result of a full and detailed process of analysis of the confidence he, as a particular drinker, has in the quality signals showed by a specific wine. From this standpoint, Pedro is a kind of expert in quality judgement. Any kind of information other than technical is considered, tested and discussed by confronting it with other sources and then translated into reliable quality signals to choose his wines.

The reduced place of taste

One source of information only is less discussed: his own perception of the taste of wine. For Pedro, each person has his own personal taste, so confronting tastes does not tell a lot about wine quality. Taste therefore has a modest and limited place in his elaboration of a quality judgement. And although he showed an good ability to describe the taste of a wine, he did not rely on this information to decide whether a wine was good or not⁶.

Attempting to change his habits

We tried to influence his taste and make him adopt a new wine, a Toro, through repeated tastings. As long as he considered that we were ignorant about wines and only trying to get information from him, we did not succeed in changing his buying habits. Although in the tasting sessions he appreciated the Toro very much, and knew of its low price, he did not buy it.

Yet when he began viewing us as a reliable source of information on wines, he changed his mind. After four months of working with him he started saying that thanks to us, he knew

⁴ He only buys from supermarkets and carefully avoids specialised shops. He fears the persuasion powers of the wine seller. They are not considered as too technical; they would make him overstep his budget.

⁵ For the monomaniac buyer, the regular buyer of a definite mark, quality is on the contrary immediate.

⁶ The facts showed here agree with many cognitive science experiments which show the predominance of confidence on information about wine quality over the result of perception. This predominance is correlated by cognitive experiments where the so called quality signals such as the label determine the judgement of quality even when there is a discrepancy with the taste perception (Morrot, 1999). But we are not accounting for the influence that preconceived knowledge may have on taste perception. We argue that first, taste is an information source among others, and second, that taste information is more difficult to debate about, so it has a lesser place in the quality judgement construction.

now that there existed one pleasant wine among the Toros he used to consider as much too full bodied. But, he persisted in not buying it.

Nevertheless, after 7 months⁷, his evaluation of his taste perception appeared to change. At the end of our wine meetings, I asked him whether he had observed any change in his relation with wine. He answered:

" - I don't like the wine more than I did before. I like it just the same. But I have more information. [...] The range of wine tastes is wider. I know there are many wines and aftertastes that provide interesting sensations.

- *I never provided you any information...*
- No, I got the information by myself. It isn't technical information; it's based on the number of different wines I tried. I learned to savour it [...]. Before, a wine was "gulp" (he makes the gesture of downing a glass of wine): « well, it's good ». Now, the point is « why is it good, why don't I like it? » I learned to know what my tastes are. Before I liked a wine and that was all. Now I know which kind of wines I like, which kind of wines I don't like. » (Pedro, P. 58)

What seems to have occurred in Pedro's case is that he learned to give a greater place to taste in his evaluation of the wines he was drinking. This may be the first result of his concentration on his sensation. The change that occurred with Pedro may stop there. But it could also continue with an ever growing "equipment" of his sensations as the case of the wine lover shows.

The wine lover

Opening the place of taste...

The wine lover differs from Pedro in the relation he has with wine. For the wine lover drinking and tasting are not immediate, (as it was for Pedro - «gulp...!»). It is a practice aimed at producing the widest possible « contact » between the drinker and the wine.

Increasing the intensity and surface of taste perception

The enhanced perception is first an increased intensity of sensation. The wine lover learns to concentrate on the different facets that compose the taste of a wine: smell and "properly" named taste. He uses appropriately shaped glasses and pays great attention to the wine temperature, both of which heighten perception (Fisher, 1999)⁸ (This, 1999). He increases his

⁷ Before the end of our joint work, we complied with his request to show him a method to describe smells. We are not sure this method of describing the smells made him change his perception. He appeared rather worried by its complication.

⁸ See the dossier spécial of *L'amateur de Bordeaux* on glasses.

wine consumption⁹. His taste memory may be increased as a result, and thus his perception. He uses comparative tastings, which sharpen the perception of differences between wines.

He becomes curious¹⁰, and ready to try any kind of unknown wine, thus widening his wine taste-range. In order to continually test further unknown and different wines, former barriers such as money, foreign origin, even taste, may break down. As a result, he becomes capable of overcoming aversions¹¹.

He blind-tastes together wines already known to him and unknown wines bought out of curiosity, in order to reduce his “preconceived opinions” on wine taste - what one wine lover called the “magic thinking” - and so enhances the place of his own taste in his perception.

The fairly intense tasting activity of the wine lover leads to weariness that stimulates his curiosity. By widening his range of possible tastes linked to the accumulation of taste experiences and information about wines, his judgement grows more complex: new criteria emerge such as rareness. This induces a shift in his judgement from immediate perceived pleasure to a complex evaluation of the interesting character of the wine.

The meta enquiry : the taste question

For the wine lover, the main effect of practising these techniques is an enhanced sharpness of his taste sense and a change in the tastes he perceives. This leads him to raise the taste question, that is to asking himself questions about wine taste and his own taste as a wine lover¹².

At the same time, through the use of the perception techniques, taste, whether of the wine itself or of the wine lover, seems to transcend all boundaries. The possible range of tastes of a wine is immense, so are the preferences of the wine lover: almost every wine is interest-worthy, even for its defects. The “taste question” does not create the taste of the wine lover in the sense of fixing it within boundaries. Any new perception will raise the “taste question”, with the result that the wine lover’s taste constantly changes.

An expert in loving wines

The wine lovers becomes an expert in loving wines : he learns from his own perception how to manage the “external factors”, the “magic thinking” which “influences” taste. One respondent said he was capable of such concentration that he was able to enjoy the “real” taste of the wine in almost any situation (FB). Another was very skilful at managing the “good perception” enhancing capacity of the “external factors” in order to magnify the pleasure of his guests (GM).

⁹ The wine lover drinks more frequently than he used to and replaces all possible beverages by wine. The removing of any kind of alcoholic beverage but wine from the appetiser drinks is quite frequent.

¹⁰ the “most important quality for a wine-lover”, a wine lover told us.

¹¹ For instance to the strangeness of the so-called “yellow wines” or Jerez to non-regular drinkers.

¹²The wine lover shows great concern for both aspects of the taste question. But he does not deal with both at the same time. Each carries its own techniques of questioning. Blind tasting - with its own known and controlled drawbacks such as the strong influence one wine may have on the perception of its neighbour - for instance, is a technique aimed at comparing wines and defining preferences. On the other hand, collective tasting for instance, whether blind or not, is aimed at defining the “real taste” of a wine through the diversity of the tasters.

The reduced place of other sources of information

This wine perception practice brings about another major change, i.e. loss of confidence in the many information sources on wine quality (wine critics, quality-signals, reputation, etc.). The wine lover decides whether a wine is good only if he has repeatedly tested it in various conditions.

The only source of information he pays attention to is his own taste.

Finally, the wine lover also is an interesting character: for him taste perception is not immediate. In order to answer it, he calls on a range of techniques that create an intense and extensive contact between the wine and him. The result of this new contact with the wine is an immense change in his tastes¹³.

Conclusion

Empirical conclusions

We have not said that all wine drinkers were like Pedro. There are wine drinkers for the which the judgement of quality is « evident » : all wines are nothing but wine although with different labels and they may choose the cheapest or buy always the same.

We neither said that all wine lovers were like the few people, this description lays on. Most of the wine lovers mix a great attention to the wine critics with a great attention to their taste.

Our interest for these two cases is that they have both an extreme position that make easier the analysis¹⁴.

Two different kinds of “experts” in producing judgements

Pedro, the former wine-drinker was an expert in analysing the reliability of all different information-sources on the quality of the wines; and his immediate taste perception of wine drinker was not a debatable source of information. The wine-lover dismissed quite any information source but his own taste and had become an expert in knowing through its own taste whether he likes or not a definite wine. This three-related-facets-work, asking the taste of the product, and that of the taster and the adequate conditions of tasting, could be designated by the French word « dégustation », where the « dé » outlines the result of the process and the « tion », the conditions of the process. Both the wine-drinker and the wine-lover are “experts” in measuring the quality of a wine. They only differ by the procedure they use.

They both focus on a defined information in order to make their judgement¹⁵. Both consider that the judgement is not “evident”, “immediate”... and ask what is to be judged, how will it be judged and when you are sure enough¹⁶.

¹³ However, the wine lover is not a wine critic: Although the whole wine critique writings is the main purveyor of pleasure techniques for the wine lover, the critics’ work is focused on the evaluation of the “real” taste of wines. The production of confidence in the judgement they publish is based on the comparability of these judgements. As this search for comparability and generality of taste evaluation is, on the contrary, not a major concern of the wine lover, this differentiates him from the wine critics.

¹⁴ The more frequent wine-lover-character who mixes the critics judgements with its taste make the observation and the analysis much more difficult.

Finally, there may be a nice symmetry between the usual wine-drinker and the wine-lover who probably manage comparable amounts of information. But Pedro although being a “heavy” drinker and having a lot of interest in the wine is not a wine-lover. The difference of contact they have with the wine make them two drinkers absolutely incomparable.

Theoretical conclusion

Although the wine drinker and wine lover show a symmetric ability to each assess one specific kind of information, the conclusions drawn from observing their practices are often not quite so symmetric.

In his use of different and sophisticated tasting practices the wine lover appears as a snob with socially distinctive tastes using socially distinctive taste practices. Why then is the “usual” drinker not correspondingly considered as a snob with distinctive information practices?

One reason for such discrimination may be that the unreliability of human sources of information is a well-known fact and a valid hypothesis whereas the reliability of taste perception, i.e. of an objective source of information, is not the concern of sociology. This means that in our case, sociology of taste would only be concerned with people with immediate taste, in other words, not deeply involved in loving practices: a startling preconceived hypothesis.

There may be another reason to explain this dissymmetry of viewpoint: in order to be sensible to the effects of the wine-loving-practices, you have to get a wine-lover. Unless you don't feel the difference, you always will interpret the wine-lover as being a purely social and distinctive construct. But whatever the wine-loving-ability you may acquire, you will never be able to say what is going on when a definite wine-lover loves his wines.

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¹⁵ The former wine-drinker based his judgement on the evaluation of the reliability of the useful warrants of quality. Pedro used to say that « the taste of the wine does not always matter ». For a wine-drinker, it's just the opposite: the taste is the only point. And this focus on the taste puts into question not only the taste of the wine and the taste of the wine-lover, but also the conditions and techniques of tasting. The closer and closer contact with the wine *produces* the adequate conditions of production in de Certeau's sense (de Certeau, 1975).

¹⁶ The production of the judgement supposes that the judgement procedure is stabilised: I am sure enough of my judgement. But any new information of perception may ask again the entire judgement procedure.