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Sobering truths for wine buffs;

Eat my words

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The most effective way to improve the taste of a wine is to put a better label on the bottle. In the face of the impressive stack of science (see below) that exists to prove that depressing contention, it is amazing how much effort still goes into improving other parts of what you might call the wine-delivery experience.

Last year's neatest gadget - and one appears most years - was the Vinturi Aerator, a suppository-shaped plastic and rubber device that draws air into the wine as it is poured. It's a pretty reliable principle that airing a red wine will improve it - and I gave one to my father for Christmas. He was politely enthusiastic, remarking only that you might just as well make use of those ancient wine-improving gadgets, the funnel and decanter.

But such attitudes are an enemy to progress. So this year, Dad got the Centellino, a glass bubble on a tube that you plug into the opened bottle. It contains about a glass of wine: the act of pouring draws, you guessed it, air into the wine before it moves to the glass. When we blind-tested the Centellino with some fairly ordinary Côtes du Rhône, five out of six people round the table agreed that the forcibly aerated wine was different, and nicer.

You might be nervous subjecting a very good wine to such treatment, but these gadgets are useful if you haven't had time to open a wine and let it breathe, or if the bottle is a bit cold. The chief advantage of the Centellino over the Vinturi is that it looks like a piece of kit from an alchemist's laboratory.

The fact remains, though, that enjoyment of wine is less about the part of the brain that deals with taste than the bit of it that reads notices. Put a high price tag on a bottle of wine and people will like it more. Stating things like that annoys wine buffs no end, of course, but I can take little delight. It is depressingly easy to fool people over wine, and people seem to ask to be fooled. Every restaurateur knows that statistically 5 per cent or more of its bottles of wine will be off, in some way, but customers only ever send 1 per cent back. Economists and marketing scientists love to show how gullible the wine audience is, and a favourite experiment involves putting identical wine in bottles with different labels or price tags. Most people will be convinced that they are drinking different wines, and they will prefer the one whose bottle looks better. In one US study, some students were given MRI scans as they sipped: these showed that when they drank from a \$45 bottle of wine the pleasure centres of the brain became more active than when they drank the same wine from a \$5 bottle.

"Price is not just about inferences of quality, but it can actually affect real quality," said Baba Shiv, a professor of marketing at Stanford Business School, who co-authored the paper. You might challenge his use of "real" - but as a salesman's law it's something any estate agent or drug dealer would agree with.

What if you do the experiment from the other way round? A study carried out for the American Association of Wine Economists (yes, and they are very serious - see [wine-economics.org](http://wine-economics.org)) looked at the results of more than 6,000 blind tastings of wine, asking, "Does more expensive wine taste better?", and came up with what they said was a statistically robust conclusion: no.

"Individuals who are unaware of the price do not derive more enjoyment from more expensive wine." In fact, tasting blind, they tended - mildly - to prefer the less expensive wines.

For wine buffs, there is one consolation in the AAWE paper, which is that people trained in wine tasting do tend to get slightly more enjoyment from the expensive wines, when tasted blind. But the only thing you can really do with such depressing information is ignore it. A happier truth about wine is that the more you drink it, the more you enjoy it. So, this January, I have begun an intensive research programme to see just where the curve in that graph peaks.

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