Wine minerality: A social representation approach

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Minerality is a complex and mysterious wine descriptor. Its emergence in tastings and specialized reviews took place during the early nineties. Today, this term took over both specialized and popular press, becoming almost like a fad phenomenon. Although widely used, there is no clear sensory definition of minerality and therefore its origin (geological, oenological…) remains unknown. The aim of the present work was to explore the existence a social representation of wine minerality. A social representation, from a psychosocial approach is an organized collection of information, opinions, attitudes and beliefs about an object. In other words, is a form of knowledge socially developed and shared with practical designs and contributing to the construction of a reality common to a social group. This representation is organized by a central core surrounded by peripheral elements. For this purpose, we worked with two social groups: 40 wine producers’ from Chablis, France, and 47 burgundy wine consumers. To examine the social representation of minerality, we used a verbal association task through the question “when I say the word minerality, what comes to your mind?” Data collected were subjected to a prototypical analysis (Vergès, 1994; adapted by Abric, 2003), for the purpose of identifying the areas of the social representation, and to a correspondence analysis. For the Correspondence analysis, we separated winemakers and wine consumers in two subgroups according to their age: under forty years and over forty years. Results showed that winemakers and wine consumers have a different way to represent and conceptualize minerality. The central core of winemakers’ social representation is formed by terms that give an idea of minerality coming from "a place", such as Chablis, geology and terroir. Salty, gunflint, chalky and freshness are also present in the central core but slightly less important. The elements of the first periphery for winemakers were stone, acidity and shellfish. For wine consumers, the central core consists of only one term: terroir, which is common to both groups of participants. This goes back to the notion that the minerality representation is strongly supported by the belief that minerality originates on terroir. The first periphery for consumers contained only stone which was common to winemakers. The
Correspondence analysis showed an opposition between winemakers and wine consumers and a slight difference between ages for consumers. For older wine consumers, minerality is related with most general terms as minerals, white wine and water while for young wine consumers; minerality is associated with more specific terms such as taste, winemaking and astringency. No effect of age was found for winemakers. Our study showed that minerality social representation is stable and well structured around the idea of terroir.