Ratings, Words, and Wine Learning as A Gordian Knot

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Abstract

In a recent paper, Cicchetti and Cicchetti (2014; hereafter C/C) did a close analysis of the differing opinions of two prominent wine experts Robert Parker and Jancis Robinson about the quality of 2009 red Bordeaux wines as represented by the ratings they gave to the wines. They found that the two experts had a “chance-corrected agreement level of only 4%” and that the “practical...usefulness of such a result was essentially nil” in helping one assess the quality of the wines. They concluded that “one consistent finding that remains indisputable is the known vast differences in the rating of wine quality by putative wine experts” and characterized the challenge of learning about fine wines from expert opinion as “unt[y][ing] this veritable Gordian knot”.

Many wine aficionados would acknowledge that, in the absence of own knowledge of a wine from personal experience with it—which can still yield surprises—they turn to wine ratings and tasting notes (TNs) to learn about wines they do not know and presumably inform their willingness to pay for them. The prominence of these two sources of information in wine advertising generally and fine wine auction catalogues in particular provides evidence of their perceived value in informing buyers. In this paper, I review many of the known and emerging critiques of these sources of wine learning and expand the critique. Recent developments in the interpretation of hedonic ratings in food science suggest why, even if we could treat an expert rating as a valid index of quality, we should be wary of comparing or aggregating ratings from wine experts generally and expecting that they can predict our enjoyment with much precision. In effect, this extends the skepticism of the pairwise C/C study to all wine experts. Wine economists are already more skeptical of the information value of TNs, and the paper extends that discussion as well, raising further questions about our ability to learn from TN language in light of recent efforts to measure their value.