Title

The impact of setting on wine experiments: Is the process of wine tasting inherently flawed?

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Conference Presentation

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Keywords

wine tasting, experiment, manipulation, natural setting, appreciation, willingness to pay

Research Question

Does the setting in which a wine tasting is conducted impact consumers' appreciation and WTP.

Methods

Experimental method using manipulation

Results

Experiment to be conducted in Dijon in April 2016

Abstract

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The impact of setting on wine experiments: Is the process of wine tasting inherently flawed?

Geoffrey Lewis (corresponding author)

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Abstract

Introduction
This paper will present the results of a wine tasting experiment to be conducted at ESC-Dijon School of Wine & Spirits in April, 2016. The aim of the experiment is to explore whether consumers’ appreciation and willingness to pay (WTP) is influenced by the setting in which the wine is consumed.

The research is, in part, inspired by a letter to the editors of the JWE by Jeffrey Postman where he poses a challenge to wine researchers with the question: “Is our understanding of what makes a wine good completely mistaken or is it possible that the process of blind tasting is inherently flawed?” (Postman, 2010). In the letter Postman (an New York cardiologist) examines recent research by Goldstein (2008) and Plassman et al. (2008) and makes the point that there is more to the enjoyment of wine than can be captured in a blind tasting setting.

As Postman observes regarding Plassman’s research, “Any number of conscious or unconscious influences from above [in the cognitive processing sense] can and do alter the degree of gratification one experiences from the primary sensations alone.”

Research has shown that the objective characteristics such as brand, label and price can overwhelm subjective appreciation of wine (Lewis & Zalan, 2014). Postman’s criticism of research into the behaviour of wine consumers, however, goes well beyond the subjective/objective debate. It goes to the heart of wine research that relies on data collected in wine tasting settings:

Some wines are much better than others, but the satisfaction one gets from them is so much more nuanced in a social setting than in a blind tasting, the latter is but a pale shadow of the former. The message that I take home from the Plassman experiment is that blind tasting has little to do with the real life experience of tasting wine.

We argue that there is more to the enjoyment of wine than can be captured even when both the subjective and objective characteristics of the wine are revealed. We postulate that the setting in which wine is consumed – as Postman puts it, the “real life experience of tasting wine” – has a significant impact on wine appreciation. We plan to test this hypothesis by repeating a wine tasting experiment conducted at ESC-Dijon in 2014 (Lewis, Lecat and Zalan, 2015), but this time in a ‘natural’ setting.

Prior Research
This study is an extension of our earlier work (Lewis & Zalan, 2014) aimed at exploring the way the price of wine (an objective characteristic) influences willingness to pay (WTP) and appreciation using price manipulation similar to that of Plassman et al. (2008). The price manipulation involved presenting five wines at different prices, two of which were actually the same wines presented at two different prices. The key conclusions from
this study were that for non-expert wine drinkers; (1) there is no relationship between intrinsic wine character and enjoyment (individuals rated the same wines quite differently), and (2), price influences both appreciation of wine and WTP, but the latter more strongly.

This experiment was replicated at ESC-Dijon in 2014. For the French study we conducted a wine tasting experiment at the School of Wine & Spirits with two experimental groups: (1) English-language program students in the Master of Wine Business and Master of Wine Management programs and (2) students in the French-language program CIVS (Commerce International des Vins et Spiritueux), the leading post-graduate wine business program in France. The experiment was different from the earlier study in a number of important ways. The composition of the tasting groups differed in that the students were knowledgeable about wine, all having achieved at least WSET level 2 as well as nearing completion of post-graduate wine business programs. A second difference was that the price manipulation was slightly modified and the protocol was refined in several ways: a strict WSET tasting procedure was adopted and the manipulation was strengthened by relabelling bottles so that as participants poured the wines into their glasses they could fully engage with the objective characteristics.

The experiment was structured in two rounds. In Round 1 participants were asked to identify the Village appellation of three red Burgundies and to rate the wines on a scale of 1-6 and indicate their willingness to pay for the wine. The primary purpose of Round 1 was to put participants at ease so they would be less likely to expect manipulation in Round 2.

In Round 2 the participants were presented with five red Burgundy wines from the same producer and vintage and were asked to assess the classification (ranging from Grand Cru to Bourgogne Regional Appellation) of the wines. The question was posed whether some classifications were over/under-rated or over/under-priced and how they valued these wines based on quality, regardless of the classification. They were also asked to rate the wines and indicate their willingness to pay for each of the wines.

Round 2 was conducted under the same five price conditions discussed above, with a price manipulation similar to Plassman et al. (2008). The wines were listed on the tasting form along with their appellations and retail prices, and the participants poured the wines themselves from the labelled/mislabelled bottles. In this way the wine tasters were fully exposed in Round 2 to objective characteristics of the wines.

We found compelling evidence that even for knowledgeable wine drinkers, WTP is influenced more by objective cues, such as price and labelling, than the subjective characteristics of the wine. While this is consistent with our earlier experiment using a non-expert group, it suggests objective characteristic may have less influence on appreciation for more knowledgeable wine drinkers. For the French students the manipulation with one of the wines did not override their palates, but it did seem to override the way they valued the wine (WTP).

In both experiments the tasters were debriefed at the end of the tastings about the nature of the experiment, in recognition of the challenges of experimental designs in economics involving manipulation (Cooper, 2014).

**The New Experiment**

In April 2016 we will conduct a new experiment with participants drawn from the same ESC-Dijon programs as the 2014 experiment, but this time with invited friends. The experiment will be presented to the students as a “French Food & Wine Experience” rather than a formal (WSET) wine tasting. The experiment will be conducted in a private room at the Dame d’Aquitaine, a highly regarded restaurant in central Dijon. To create a ‘natural setting’ the students and their friends will be seated at tables of eight people. On each table will be ‘menu du jour’ showing the food courses and the wines. A ESC Dijon faculty will join each table in the role of ‘participant observers’. This will allow us, unbeknown to the participants, to collect qualitative data about the experiment. The participant observers will be carefully briefed prior to the experiment.

The hypothesis being tested is that the participants in the natural setting will produce quite different results (less influenced by objective characteristics and more influenced by sensory experience) and are more likely to detect the price manipulation. If the hypothesis is confirmed it would bring into question much of the extant wine consumer behaviour research based on wine tastings.

During the introduction to the dinner the participants will be told we are going to explore the relationship between food and wine – first with three white wines and then with five red Burgundies. The first round being used to make a more complete and natural food and wine event, but will also serve the purpose of putting the participants at ease and make them less likely to suspect manipulation. We will stress that the participants are asked to make individual assessments of the wines, but should feel free to discuss their opinions with others at
the table and that the results will be discussed at the end of each course. They are asked to make notes on each wine, rate them on a scale of 1 – 6 and, finally, indicate what they would be willing to pay for each wine. Round 1 will be debriefed after participants have finished the first course and filled in their forms. Data will be listed on a whiteboard and a poll will be taken: “Who thought which wine went best with the first course?” We will then discuss food and wine matching and finally the chef will comment on the food – wine matching. The second round will involve five wines from the same Burgundy producer and vintage and a copy of the producer’s price list will be made available to the participants. We will explain to the participants that the challenge is to assess how each of the wines pairs with the main course. Participants will again be asked to enjoy the wines and while they can share their opinions as they would over any meal, they should form their own individual assessment of each wine and how it pairs with the food. When the course is completed they will be asked to rate the wines, write down their tasting notes and indicate their willingness to pay on the form. The experiment will be conducted under the five conditions of price with manipulation as with the earlier research. The participant observers will enable us to assess how appreciation of the wines progressed during the meal and whether any of the participants detected the manipulation. The extent to which the sharing of opinions about the wines shaped individuals’ appreciation and WTP.

References

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