

Padua 2017 Abstract Submission

I want to submit an abstract for:

Conference Presentation

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Keywords

Flavour development; Chinese; French; lexicon; meaning of wine; hedonic; complexity; genuine; health; social; network; involvement

Research Question

What is the meaning of wine to the Chinese and French wine consumers?

Methods

Qualitative research; semi-structured interviews with a mixture of low and high involvement Chinese and French wine consumers, in Bordeaux, Burgundy (France), in Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen (China); by convenience sampling.

Results

This study is able to expand the scope to study how Chinese and French wine consumers enjoy to drink wine from social, historical and physical aspects.

Abstract

Exploring the meaning of wine to the Chinese and French wine consumers

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Introduction

This paper presents some preliminary results of a main study examining Chinese and French consumers' wine preference and their willingness to pay for wines. The purpose of this pilot study is to contextualize the meaning of wine to the Chinese and French wine consumers, and to identify patterns in consumers' preferences regarding the sensory attributes of wine.

While the role of sensory preference towards Chinese consumer behaviour has been widely discussed in the literature (see, for example, Camillo, 2012; Corsi, Cohen, & Lockshin, 2014; Li, Jia, Taylor, Bruwer, & Li, 2011; Liu & Murphy, 2007; Somogyi, Li, Johnson, Bruwer, & Bastian, 2011; Williamson, Robichaud, & Francis, 2012), no prior study has been conducted to compare the behaviours between the Chinese and the French consumers in the context of wine. Given China has emerged as an important wine consumption country, there has been a growing interest in studying Chinese consumers' preferences for wine. By comparing Chinese consumer preference with that of French consumers, we could find out how the concept of wine is perceived differently in the two countries.

Methods

Using convenience sampling method, a mixture of low and high involvement wine consumers, who represent consumers' in France (from Bordeaux and Burgundy), and in China (from Tier 1 and 2 cities) are chosen for the interviews. Respondents with a wine-related background are assumed to be high-involvement wine consumers. Using the interview guide, face-to-face interviews with the French respondents were conducted by the first author in natural settings in Bordeaux and Burgundy between May and June 2016. In June 2016, internet calls were conducted with Chinese respondents from Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou. Each interview lasted for 20 to 45 minutes. Respondents first answered questions regarding what they like about wine followed by their preference to the sensory factors of wines. The design of the interview was semi-structured with open-ended questions to allow respondents to fully express themselves. Notes were taken during the interviews, and all of the interviews were taped. The collected data were organised, read and coded by meaning and by topic, special attention was paid to unusual information following the general process of data analysis as adopted from Creswell (2014).

Results

All respondents have a minimum 4 years, with a maximum 40 years, wine consumption experience. The average wine consumption experience for the eight respondents from China is 10 years whilst the seven respondents from France on average have 23 years wine consumption experience. Half of the respondents are consumers who are highly involved in wine related business in France and China. Most of the respondents drink almost every day, or on alternative days.

Based on the interview, the results show that all respondents, regardless of ethnicity, responded positively about wine. The responses were related to their sensory enjoyment of the taste particularly on the fruitiness of wine, its hedonic quality (Charters, 2006, p. 132) and its linkage to relaxation, socialization, the joy, and the feeling of euphoria when drinking wine.

Charters (2006, p.132) found that the physical aspect of wine was rarely mentioned by wine consumers, and our respondents in France substantiated Charters' observation. On the other hand, the respondents in China provided a very different result, with over 50% of them mentioning "health" as an important reason for them to drink wine.

Wine was recognized by both the Chinese and French consumers as a means to socialize and network with different people, including sharing with friends or networking in business occasions. Wine carries the ability to link the consumers from wine itself to the region of production.

In China, one topic constantly being brought up is about how wine revolved over a period of time. Many respondents related their enjoyment of wine to the "flavour development in the glass", the "diversity", "complexity", and the "layers" of wine. The high involvement respondents were particularly sensitive to these wine

attributes.

While acidity is generally preferred in both France and China, most of the respondents stated their preference to wines with balanced acidity; that is balanced with sweetness and tannin. In France, acidity was explained by the respondents to improve with time.

In France, most of the respondents do not enjoy sweetness in wine. Most of the respondents in China prefer some sweetness in wine. One high involvement consumer offered further explanation as acidity and tannin is challenging to the Chinese consumers.

The topic of wine and food matching was constantly brought up by French consumers. One of the respondents, who was a French sommelier, shared her observations that French people always pair a wine with each dish they order. As for Chinese consumers, they tend to order only one type of wine for the whole meal.

All the French respondents described wine related to a region or history of wine. The regional sense is very strong that French respondents would rarely consume and enjoy wine from other regions, or non-French wine. Most of the French respondents stated the important of wine and grape variety, as a good representation of the terroir, and the region.

Chinese respondents shared their views about the lack of regulation in China governing vintage, the composition and processing of wine. In France, many respondents mentioned their purchase of wine immediately after tasting at chateaux and domaines. 'Genuine wine' was a commonly discussed topic by the Chinese respondents, but this was not mentioned by the French respondents during the interviews.

Concluding Remarks

This study reveals several differences in wine interpretation between the Chinese wine consumers and their counterparts - the French wine consumers.

The sensory attributes of wine, such as the acidity and sweetness in wine, serve different functions to the Chinese and French wine consumers. This represents the cultural difference of the two group wine consumers with French consumers emphasizing the food and wine matching for haute cuisine (Mennell, Murcott, & Otterloo, 1992). The Chinese consumers generally perceive wine as a healthy drink. Wine consumers from China enjoy the change in flavour from one sip to another, from one glass to another to taste how the wine improved or declined over the course of consumption of that bottle of wine. They prefer sweetness, rather than acidity in wine. The French wine consumers' consumption of wine is dependent upon food matching. Further, they will be concerned about matching wine with different seasons and different occasions.

As for the historic and regional aspects of wine, the wine consumers from France have already developed their preferences towards different wines while the Chinese consumers are still in the initial phase of learning about wine history and culture. The culture of red wine enjoyment in China is only a recent phenomenon, as in 1983, there was only one winery in Ningxia but 30 years later, there are more than 200 wineries (Phillips, 2016).

While the Chinese wine consumers are often concerned about whether the wine in their hand is real or fake, this highlighted the accessibility of wine for the Chinese population. Most of the French respondents were found to have easy access to wine, to have cellar at home, and to be able to directly purchase wines from regional wineries.

Through this study, it is identified that the Chinese consumers particularly enjoy flavour development in the glass. "Flavour development", "changes" and "layers" as described by the Chinese consumers, in the context may bear the same meaning as "complexity", "novelty", "interest", "distinctiveness" as discussed by Amerine & Roessler (1976), and Charters (2007). It is however believed that the underlying substance is quite different amongst the choice of words. Bach (2007) discussed that wine consumers generally lack the vocabulary to describe the wine flavour and taste, and that there is a vast difference between the tastes of a wine and what drinkers like to taste.

This study has been able to show how consumers enjoy drinking wines. Drinking wine for enjoyment is not

necessarily the same as tasting wine. The flavour development related lexicons are not currently discussed by Lehrer (2007) in her recent review about wine vocabulary. Professionals' wine critics' or judges' tastings are subjective judgement of quality (Amerine & Roessler, 1976). And these lexicons are not currently discussed in wine education programmes and do not appear in any systematic approach to tasting (Wine & Spirit Education Trust, 2016).

Wine professionals may taste over a hundred of wine a day, but they do not have the time to appreciate the full potential of a wine and explain to consumers the ways in which the wine evolves in the glass. A further study about the meaning and definition of flavour development is necessary in order to understand the meaning of these related lexicons to the Chinese and French consumers respectively. As knowledge can promote one's ability to discover more pleasure (Bach, 2007), a study of flavour development could aid in future marketing to general consumers in order to maximize their enjoyment in drinking wine and to expand their wine choices, thereby benefiting the wine industry as a whole.

This comparative study is designed to examine the meaning of wine to the Chinese and French consumers. However, only English speaking French respondents were invited for the interview, and the geographical coverage of the study is limited to respondents from Bordeaux and Burgundy in France and Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou in China. The results may not be generalizable to represent consumption patterns in the whole of China and France.

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