CONSUMER WINE PREFERENCES, QUALITY PERCEPTION AND SENSORY IDENTITY: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM VALPOLICELLA

Different authors have approached the concept of wine quality from a multidimensional point of view. Different definitions and interpretations can be found in the relevant literature. It mainly analyses the subjective and the objective quality dimensions. The former concerns the quality as perceived by consumers and this represents a typical field of marketing research. The latest refers to the physical characteristics of the product, which especially involves the knowledge related to food science and technology. The connection between these two areas is a relevant challenge for the future research development in food and wine economics. This enables wineries to link efficiently the market demand for quality and product design strategies.

Recent trends in the international competition in the wine sector have shown a growing focus in the strategies on the territorial dimension at different levels (local, regional, national). Thus the geographical brands are becoming much more relevant as marketing tools for the company brands on the world wine market. In this context the geographical brand identity and its perception by the consumers represent the most important elements to give a sustainable advantage in a wider competitive environment.

In the past studies the consumers’ perception of quality have been especially emphasized through the analysis of the relationships between market prices, the willingness to pay or the choice to buy (as dependent variables) and the factors mainly characterising the extrinsic dimension of quality, also including the reputation (as explanatory variables).

Starting from the hypothesis of an existing strong direct relationship between brand (or product) reputation and positive consumption experiences it is becoming more and more important to concentrate the research focus on intrinsic quality dimension. This area includes the subjective spheres of pleasure, sensory/gustatory, paradigms perception (variety, origin, etc.), and their connections with the consumers’ behaviour and characteristics. Its importance is significantly increasing in the actual consumption context.

Taking into account these considerations, the present paper is focused on Valpolicella wines, which represents one of the most important Italian denomination of origin. This study presents the results gained from an empirical analysis. A survey was carried out on 443 consumers with the aim to quantify the impact on the quality classification by: i) the subjective sensory evaluations; ii) the consumers’ subjective characteristics; iii) the frequencies and consumption behaviour; iv) the subjective concept of wine quality. Quality indicators have been built using the willingness to pay and the subjective interpretation of Valpolicella wines tasted by the consumers.

The canonical correlation analysis has been used to estimate the relationships among the groups of variables listed above. As consequence the relationship between the consumer quality concept and the objective characteristics of Valpolicella wines placed on the market are evaluated. Finally the geographical brand identity through the consumers’ subjective evaluations and the future options have been discussed.