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Keywords
sparkling wine, origin, quality cues

Research Question
How important is origin for consumers when assessing the quality of sparkling wines?

Methods
An online Survey with more than 400 Austrian participants was conducted.

Results
For consumers sensory cues such as taste and mouth feeling are more important than origin when assessing the quality of sparkling wines.

Abstract
In this paper we examine factors influencing consumers' quality perceptions on sparkling wines. In the European Union, origin is considered to be the most important quality indicator for wines in general, and particularly for sparkling wines, where appellation systems directly focus on origin. We investigate and test, whether in the light of additional quality cues, this assumption holds true.

Following findings of Martinez-Carrasco Martinez et al (2006), and based on the seminal studies of Charters and Pettigrew (2007), we identify and categorize wine quality cues for consumers. To substantiate our research, we defined four categories: origin, production, marketing and sensory cues, in order to test and assess the quality of sparkling wines. Origin, the first of those, consists of items such as country of origin, region, vineyard designation, and grape variety. Production includes method of production, vintage, storability and content of alcohol. Marketing is composed of price, image, place of purchase, packaging, awards, brand, and expert advice. Sensory cues, finally, comprise of taste, mouthfeeling, taste consistency, colour, sweetness, and perlage. We conducted a factor analysis confirming those items to their four categories, with just method of production and vintage being re-assigned to origin rather than to production.

Austria with its high tradition in wines, has recently established a three-tier quality system for its local ilk of sparkling wines called “Sekt”, to enable its industry to measure up to the likes of “Champagne” and “Franciacorta” on the upper echelon of this system. It is hence an eminently apt topic of research. We present the results of an online survey with a sample size of more than 400 Austrian participants. In addition to evaluating the general importance of the quality categories themselves, we closer examine differences within alternative places of purchase, like retail stores, on premise sales, dedicated wine shops and restaurants, as well as willingness to pay and frequency of consumption. The latter is of interest, since Austrian sparkling wines producers as of late aim to position their wines as an “everyday drink” rather than a beverage solely for special occasions. We further asked
for the various types of sparkling wines that consumers usually drink. Following their sales ranking and awareness to Austrian consumers, these sparkling wines types are established as “Sekt”, “Prosecco”, “Frizzante”, “Asti”, “Champagne”, “Mixed drinks & Cocktails” such as “Aperol Sprizz” and comparables.

Our sample consists to 70% of women confirming the fact that women are the primary target group of sparkling wine. It transpires to be more difficult to attract male consumers to answer the survey, as this topic seems not as relevant to them as it is for women. Amongst the different types suggested, “Prosecco”, “Frizzante” and “Asti” are strongly preferred by women. Younger respondents tend to consume “Asti” and sparkling wine in the form of “Cocktails” such as “Aperol Sprizz” or “Hugo”. Moreover, this product type is not consumed on a daily basis, but nearly 50% drink sparkling wines more than once a year, and nearly 30% at least once a month. These numbers reinforce the common perception that sparkling wine is still consumed rather in social and celebratory situations. Counter to prior expectations, our results suggest that origin is not the most important quality indicator for sparkling wines consumers. Instead, it is found that sensory cues such as taste and mouth feeling play a much more dominant role when assessing quality. Sensory perception and its influence on quality perception of wines have been widely discussed in the scientific community, however our results reveal new insights. Taste is often tested against origin and above all compared to marketing aspects such as brand, pricing or packaging. Following our findings, however, we cannot confirm the dominating effect of marketing elements such as price, image or packaging/labelling for quality choices of consumers. While price is often used to predict quality, it only ranks fourth within the marketing category, with reputation and brand being the most important marketing quality cues. The brand is thus likely to be used to best predict the quality of a sparkling wines product. Labels were expected to have a stronger influence on quality perception, due to the fact that the results of several other studies suggest label design to be an important quality driver for wines. Label and label design further allow consumer to predict quality for wines even more than origin does, and is observed to be more important for younger and female sparkling wines consumers.

Origin itself, however, is arguably more relevant in cellar door sales and for consumers who buy sparkling wines in dedicated wine shops. In food retail stores, where 70% of all survey respondents purchase their wines, this does not seem to be the case. A surprising fact for Austrian wines consumers, where the variety name is the predominant piece of information on front labels, when making a buying decision. However, in order to judge the quality of a product category such as sparkling wines, it turns out to be not highly significant. Further, results suggest that there is a positive correlation between willingness to pay more and relevance of origin as quality indicator. This seems to support the general knowledge of country of origin effects being higher for high-involvement and older consumers.