

A matter of taste: Consumer preferences of sweet and dry wines

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Abstract

The study represents an initial attempt to examine the role that sweet wine plays in a newly developed wine market. Specifically, the purpose was to assess consumers who favor sweet wines and to investigate how they might differ from consumers who prefer drier wines. By comparing the two groups, the data suggest that the sweet segment is younger, less well-educated, less involved with the product category and less informed about wine. Additional differences between the two groups were examined. As the two groups are contrasted, it is tempting to imagine a life cycle of wine preference with the sweet segment occurring in the early stages characterized by less wine knowledge, importance and consumption experience, giving way to a change in tastes as the wine consumer gains experience and knowledge. While the results reported above are consistent with such a model, much more research is necessary. The study gives impetus for further investigation of this research area.

Key Words: sweet, dry wines, wine consumption lifecycle, emerging wine region

Introduction

Whether a wine is sweet or dry is fundamental for consumer purchasing decisions (Spawton, 1991). Consequently, the level of sweetness is often an explicit part of wine marketing. Many brands include this information on labels, or it is part of the name of the wine (Chaney, 2000; Charters, Lockshin, and Unwin, 1999; Thomas and Pickering, 2003). Although wine writers spend the majority of their time critiquing expensive hand crafted products, much of the wine consumed in most world regions is not carefully cellared as an investment, nor is it reviewed on a 100 point scale system. In fact, in many regions of the wine drinking world, much of the wine consumed is sweet or semi-sweet mass produced wines.

Despite the amount of this type of wine being consumed, there has been little attention given by academics to these wines or to the segments of the population that consume them. Instead, most research has focused on luxury and high involvement consumers, their characteristics and behavior (e.g., Beverland, 2003). Nonetheless, significant segments of sweet and semi-sweet wine consumers have been noted in previous studies. For instance, Shultz and Ortega (1974) identified four wine consuming segments in California. One of the groups mainly consumed sweet wine which was generally served outside meal-time and for informal entertaining. In a more recent study of Hungarian consumers, Tóth and Totth (2003) found that a segment called *safety seekers* (the largest of four segments in their cluster analysis) generally preferred sweet and semi-sweet wines. This group of consumers tended to have average personal incomes and the values in their lives tended to revolve around family, comfort, and safety. The purpose of this study is to examine the role that sweet and semi-sweet wine is playing in a newly developed wine market and to assess the consumers who prefer these types of wine.

Literature Review

Until recently, there was little appreciation or interest in wine by the general population in New World countries. Wine was considered a product for a small portion of the population, and generally consumed at very high price points. The products mainly consisted of imported European wine. However, the rise of domestic wine industries, increases in overall wine quality, and changes in living standards has led to a growing level of wine consumption in many of those markets. For instance, while per capita consumption in traditional markets such as France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal were declining during the 1970s and 1980s, wine consumption in California, Australia, New Zealand, and a variety of other new world regions was increasing (Gluckman, 1990). At the same time these regions were experimenting and developing their own local wine industries.

Initially, these domestic industries relied upon sweet and semi-sweet mass produced wine for three reasons. First, these wines were very approachable to inexperienced consumers which allowed them an entry into wine consumption. Second, the wines are relatively easy to produce from whatever grapes were available. Third, the wines provided critical cash flow and were generally able to be sold within a few months of harvest to provide much needed revenue to wineries that had already invested substantially in building and equipment. In Australia and New Zealand, Riesling and Muller Thurgau semi-sweet wines were leading local wine styles in the 1970s and 1980s. In California, White Zinfandel helped to establish wine as a widely consumed beverage. The cash flow generated from this wine production also assisted a number of wineries in these regions to subsequently develop into internationally recognized brands.

Within the United States, wine consumption patterns vary substantially across regions. Several states, for instance California, Washington and many of the North-eastern states have per capita consumptions levels similar to many of the New World wine producing regions. On the other hand, other U.S. states have very low consumption levels. Texas is one of the states where wine has traditionally not been a beverage that most people consume on a regular basis. However, this has been changing in the past few decades and a variety of factors may be contributing to this growing interest in wine. These include recent information concerning the health benefits of wine, changes in the characteristics of the population as significant numbers of people from wine producing cultures have moved to Texas, and changing attitudes to alcohol in general. Another influence is the development of the local industry. Texas now has over 160 wineries and this has provided access for people to visit wineries and learn about wine.

Similarly to other new wine regions, a substantial amount of the wine produced and consumed within Texas is semi-sweet or sweet wine. Several wineries have relied on the production of semi-sweet red wine to introduce wine to consumers. These consumers may then form the nucleus of loyal consumers to the individual Texas brands and to Texas as a region, just as some consumers in other local wine industries tended to consume wine from their own region.

For many consumers the sweetness level attribute is similar to a decision to purchase red or white wine. It is an intrinsic cue that involves the physical component of the product (Zeithaml, 1988). Wu, Bargmann, and Powers (1977) found that sweet and dry were the terms most often used as descriptors of both red and white wines. They also noted that during blind tastings the majority of the tasting panel actually preferred the sweeter wines. The authors noted "Stripped of their labels and any mystique attached to certain types of wines, the panelists liked the characteristics of the wines which were not completely dry" (p. 951).

Therefore, the influences on consumption tend to be physiological as well as social and psychological. For instance, while some consumers have taste preferences for sweeter wines there may be pressure from friends and wine knowledgeable media personalities to consume drier style

wine. Over time they may begin to shift their purchasing habits away from sweeter wines to drier styles. However, the manner in which this occurs is still not clear. This study is an initial attempt to better understand the sweet wine consumers and how they differ from consumers who prefer drier wines in the context of an emerging wine market.

Method

Texas was selected as a site for the study because Texas provides a good setting for an analysis of an emerging wine region. Although Texas has come a long way since the emergence of the first wineries in the late 1970s, the region is still new to the development of its wine and grape industry. Texas households were contacted through a telephone survey center. Trained interviewers dialed randomly selected numbers from a database of listed Texas household telephone numbers. Specifications for the survey participation included screening for individuals who (a) were 21 years of age and older (legal drinking age in the U.S.), (b) consumed wine, and (c) consumed wine within the past 12 months. The twelve month time frame helped screen for respondents' involvement with wine. It also helped include individuals who might be casual drinkers and consume wine primarily during the holiday seasons. If the respondents passed the screening and agreed to participate, the callers proceeded to a structured script of the interview. The sample consisted of 496 interviews.

Measures

Preferences of sweet and dry wines were measured by a single-item measure, *Do you prefer wine that is dry or sweet?* with three possible answers: *sweet*, *dry*, or *no preference*. Since the purpose of the paper was to examine preferences of consumers who favor sweet wines and compare potential differences with consumers who prefer drier wine, additional measures were included to compare the groups. Listed below are constructs that the groups were compared against, along with specifications on how these constructs were measured.

Product knowledge was assessed in two forms, objective knowledge and subjective knowledge. *Objective knowledge* was measured with four questions involving factual information about wine. One point was recorded to an individual's score for each correct answer. *Subjective knowledge* was measured as a reflective construct developed by Park, Mothersbaugh, & Feick (1994). Respondents' self-reported assessment of product knowledge was measured on three items: *How much do you feel you know about wine?*; *Compared to your friends and acquaintances, how much do you feel you know about wine?*; and *Compared to a wine expert, how much do you feel you know about wine?* Each item was administered on a five-point Likert scale anchored between *very little* (1) and *very much* (5). For data analysis, scores on the three items were collapsed and averaged.

Product involvement was operationalized via the Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) scale originally developed by Zaichkowsky (1985). The modified version of PII (Mittal, 1995) was used in this study. The indicators of product involvement were *unimportant /important*, *means nothing to me/means a lot to me*, *insignificant/significant*, *does not matter to me/matters to me*, each assessed by a five-point bipolar scale. Ratings on the four items were averaged to generate the overall mean score for the product involvement measure. A higher number indicated higher product involvement.

Quality ratings of wine from different world regions were measured by a single-item measure, *Please rate the quality of wine from the following regions on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means poor quality and 5 means excellent quality.* The regions included France, Italy, California, Texas, and Australia.

Recommendation of local wines to others was measured by a single-item measure, *How likely are you to recommend Texas wines to others*, with ratings on a 5-point scale response from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely).

Similarly, **likelihood of purchasing local wines** was measured by a single item, *How likely are you to purchase Texas wines in the next 12 months*, with ratings on a 5-point scale response from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely).

Personal **spending on wine** was measured by asking respondents the dollar amount they spend on wine at different shopping venues. One item measured expenditures on the web and by mail-order. Expenditures at restaurants, bars and grocery stores were obtained by three separate questions. The scores on these questions loaded on a single component when subjected to principal components analysis. The sum of these expenditure scores was used.

Comparison was also made across **demographics**. Demographic characteristics used for the analysis included age, income category, education category, and gender.

In addition, respondents were asked about the frequency of their wine consumption and their preferences towards red, white, or rose wines.

Results and Discussion

The sample was comprised of 220 consumers who indicated a preference for sweet wine, 226 who preferred dry and 50 who indicated no preference. Due to space limitations, those indicating no preference have been dropped from the analysis. Demographically, the preference groups exhibit some differences. As depicted in table 1, the sweet segment is younger than the dry segment, makes less money, is less well-educated, and is more likely to be female, all statistically significant differences (as denoted by the *). However, the age difference is relatively small and may indicate that in fact is not a major differentiating factor. Instead involvement, lifestyle, and knowledge characteristics may be more important.

Table 1. Preference and Sample Demographics

Preference (N)	Average Age*	Average Income*	Average Education*	Male Wine Preference*	Female Wine Preference*
Sweet (220)	50.1	3.79	4.32	41%	53%
Dry (226)	53.6	4.22	4.89	59%	47%

Variables relating to the role that wine plays in the lives of these respondents are reported in Table 2. With regard to wine knowledge, the sweet segment knows less about wine (objectively and subjectively) than those preferring dry wine, which is also reflected in the lower importance placed upon wine by this group. Finally, with regard to the amount spent on wine in a three month period, and the frequency of consumption those preferring sweet wine spent significantly less than half the amount spent by the dry segment and consume wine a third less often.

Table 2. Wine Knowledge, Importance, Expenditures and Consumption Frequency

Preference (N)	Mean Objective Knowledge*	Mean Subjective Knowledge*	Mean Wine Importance*	Mean Wine Expenditure*	Drink at least once / week*
Sweet (220)	1.94	1.96	2.54	\$84.19	46%

Dry (226)	2.90	2.42	2.94	\$210.28	75%
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The two groups also differ with regard to their preference for red and white wine (Table 3). Not surprisingly, those preferring sweet wines are fairly evenly distributed across the red / white / rose dimensions, while the dry segment has a distinct preference for reds.

Table 3. Percentage Preference by Favorite Type of Wine

Preference	Red	White	Rose / Blush
Sweet	38%	32%	30%
Dry	65%	30%	5%

It is also interesting to look at how the two groups rate the quality of wine by origin (Table 4). The dry segment perceives greater quality in wines from anywhere but Texas (significance denoted by *), while those preferring sweet wine see Texas wines as comparable to those from France and Italy, slightly inferior to California wines and superior to those of Australia. It is not surprising, then, that the sweet segment is much more likely to recommend and to purchase Texas wines (data not shown).

Table 4. Quality Rating of Wine by Origin

Preference	France*	Italy	California	Australia*	Texas*
Sweet	3.81	3.84	4.09	3.37	3.80
Dry	4.03	3.85	4.08	3.67	3.28

Conclusions

First and foremost, the data suggest there are many differences between those who prefer sweet wines to dry, at least in the emerging market for Texas wines. The sweet segment is younger, less involved with the product category and certainly less informed about it. As the two groups are contrasted, it is tempting to imagine a life cycle of wine preference with the sweet segment occurring in the early stages characterized by less wine knowledge, importance and consumption experience, giving way to a change in tastes as the wine consumer gains experience and knowledge. While the results reported above are consistent with such a model, much more research is necessary before firm conclusions can be drawn. To the extent that such a life cycle does exist, however, the implications for wine making and wine marketing in emerging (and other) markets are quite significant.

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