

How effectively do we communicate about wine?

Steve Charters (corresponding author),
Edith Cowan University,
100 Joondalup Drive,
Joondalup,
WA 6027,
Australia

Tel.: +61 8 6304 5047 email s.charters@ecu.edu.au

Simone Pettigrew,
University of Western Australia,
35 Stirling Highway, Crawley,
WA 6009,
Australia.

Tel.: +61 8 6488 1437 email spettigr@gsm.uwa.edu.au

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Abstract

The relationship between wines and the words used to describe them is a complex one, and has received little attention from academics involved in wine marketing. This paper reports on an exploratory study in Australia which investigated how both consumers and professionals use words to communicate ideas about wine in the context of evaluation, promotion and sales. The findings suggest that imprecisely used and misperceived language compound issues of evaluating wine. Additionally, while professionals feel confident that they can communicate with consumers, the latter are more sceptical about the claims that those in the industry make for wines. The implications of this are crucial for those involved in marketing wine who wish both to convey ideas about the product and to understand what consumers have to say about it.

Introduction

There is a growing body of work on the marketing of wine; there is also increasing physiological and psychological research into the way in which experts and amateurs taste and drink wine, as well as the language used to describe it (Brochet & Dubourdieu, 2001; d'Hauteville, 2003; Engen, 1987; Gawel, 1997; Lehrer, 1983; Morrot, Brochet, & Dubourdieu, 2001; Solomon, 1990). This research all attests to the importance of the words that consumers use to communicate about the drink. However, there has, to date, been little interaction between the two streams of research. This paper aims to bring those two streams together and, using a qualitative research study, examines how Australian drinkers use language to communicate about wine and how effective that communication is. Particular attention is given to the ability or otherwise of professionals and consumers to maintain an effective dialogue with each other.

Wine writers and critics have a reputation for using excessively flowery language about wine. One Australian wine writer, Huon Hooke, quotes a colleague who described a chardonnay as being like 'deep-fried lucerne patties served with a crème of hazelnut sauce on a bed of dried paspalum leaves' (Hooke, 1997 p. 16). Whilst such a description may seem overblown to some, it is at least comprehensible to those who have smelt the foods in question, and thus is potentially verifiable. Of greater opacity is the following, which quotes Genevieve Janssens, the chief winemaker of Robert Mondavi Wines:

'[The] To Kalon vineyard has very big tannins, the oak fermentors sculpt those tannins. The wines are very lean, very zen' (Alloway, 2001 p. 34).

The comment includes simple description ('big tannins'), an aesthetic metaphor, a human metaphor, and the philosophical allusion that the wines are 'very zen'. Even an experienced wine taster might baulk at the last comment. Those with a little experience may understand the first two or three suggestions, and a novice may have some idea about what 'big tannins' are, but little else. Communication about wine needs to be clear if producers and marketers are to be able to convey to consumers what they can expect with a product, and if consumers in turn are to be able to inform wine professionals about their needs.

There tends to be an assumption in wine marketing that you select your message and then just promote the product. There may be, however, an idiosyncratic nature to the interpretation of words about wine. One drinker has noted that whilst he understands the descriptor of 'road tar', he finds the term 'wet slate' mysterious (Crane, 2003); it is possible

that other consumers would argue for the reverse, or that they understand both terms or neither. This issue of understanding is crucial for those marketing wine as descriptions of the way wine tastes are regularly used in press releases, on back labels, at promotional events or on shelf-talkers. Marketers and professionals therefore need to be aware of the limits of what they can communicate.

Context

The language of wine

The issue of communicating about wine comprises two parts - how do we understand what others are saying about wine and how do we convey our judgments in an understandable language? These two factors are distinct, although interrelated, as it is our personal and prior verbal categorisation of the components of a wine which informs our ability to assess the impact of those components.

It has been suggested that the words used to describe wine are regularly misinterpreted (Lehrer, 1974). Some experiments conducted with groups of novice and expert wine tasters have suggested that even though drinkers may use the same words, these words can possess different meanings to different people (Lehrer, 1974, 1983). Lehrer concluded that, even for expert tasters, communication is more about social interaction than conveying information. Talking about wine offers 'phatic communion' – speech which binds people socially rather than giving a precise exchange of knowledge (Lehrer, 1974). Lehrer (1974) noted in passing, however, that more knowledgeable tasters do use more words. She also pointed out that some words are very value laden. 'Dry' is perceived to be a positive descriptor, whereas 'sweet' is often negative. Different tasters will conclude that a wine is dry or sweet based not on their sensory evaluation of it (and irrespective of its level of residual sugar) but on their liking or disliking of it. This perspective has been confirmed by marketing research (Judica & Perkins, 1992), which explicitly showed that consumers link the term dry to higher quality.

There are possible criticisms of Lehrer's work. Some researchers have disagreed with Lehrer's methodology and therefore with her conclusions, at least as far as the language used by expert tasters is concerned (Lawless, 1984; 1985), although Lawless (1984) has noted that even experts can be idiosyncratic in their use of wine terms. Solomon (1990) concludes that experts, at least, do understand the terms used by their peers and also analyse wines more precisely.

Suffice it to say that, at the level of performance, wine experts were associated both with more precise discrimination and more precise use of language...They could agree significantly at ranking wines on the dimensions of tannin, balance, and sweetness where novices could only rank the wines for sweetness (Solomon, 1990).

Gawel (1997) assessed the communication skills of two groups of wine professionals: oenology students trained formally in sensory evaluation and untrained hospitality and wine distribution workers. They tasted wines and had to write descriptions of the wines and match the wines to descriptions written by the others. The students described the wines more accurately (and significantly above chance); they also more consistently matched wines correctly to descriptions written by others. They also relied more on abstract descriptive terms (such as balance and length) and less on concrete elements of the wines such as tactile and flavour intensity descriptions. This suggests that, at least between experts, some common wine language exists. However, given that contextual factors (such as colour) also

substantially influence the words which experts apply to wine (Morrot et al., 2001), it is also evident that communication about wine is subject to many external constraints.

How can judgments and descriptions of wine be conveyed in an understandable language? Work on smell recognition suggests that human memory for odours is good but the association with words is low which often results in an inability to name a recalled smell (Engen, 1987). There have been specific attempts to overcome this split between recognition and articulation for wine. These include development of the 'aroma wheel', a result of Noble's work on descriptive analysis (Noble et al., 1987). The aroma wheel attempts to classify the odours of wine into broad categories, such as fruity, vegetative or chemical and within that framework it then provides more specific characters, such as blackcurrant or grass. It is used by wine professionals as a prompt to recognition and as a means of improving their identification of the specific aromatic character of wines.

However, the conclusion that there is a language for wine which is commonly understood by experts has been challenged recently. Brochet (2001; Brochet & Dubourdieu, 2001) claims to have analysed not the lexicon of wine experts but the structure of their language. He then investigated the co-occurrence of words (essentially a form of linguistic cluster analysis), producing between two and five common 'fields' for each expert analysed. He concluded that:

In looking at most of the word fields it is clear that they mix together visual, olfactory, taste, trigeminal, hedonistic and idealistic descriptive terms which cannot all strictly be considered to be part of a tasting vocabulary (Brochet & Dubourdieu, 2001 p. 190).

The fields therefore mix both 'hard' descriptors with more general terms (it can be noted that trigeminal in this sense relates to a tactile sensation). Thus one taster who was analysed, the well-known American critic Robert Parker, had terms such as great, elegance and 'no filtration' in the same field. This intermixed the evaluative, the descriptive ('elegant') and production methods (Brochet, 2001). Even though filtration is not a tasting term 'it seems that knowledge of [this] element influences representation' (Brochet & Dubourdieu, 2001 p. 8). Thus, Brochet concludes, each taster uses terms idiosyncratically - there is little crossover between tasters. Only the terms 'dark' and 'blackcurrant' were used by three of the five tasters scrutinised. What appears to be an objective, analytical process may in fact be a prototypical one that is based on comparison with other wines rather than analysis, and on preference rather than objectivity. This essentially suggests a return to the original conclusions of Lehrer (1974) a quarter of a century earlier.

Communication between experts and amateurs

The importance of experts being able to convey ideas about wine to non-professionals as part of the marketing and education process has been acknowledged (Gawel, 1997; Robichaud & Owens, 2002). By inference one may conclude that the reverse, communication from consumer to expert, may be important. The issue of the ability of experts to convey their evaluations to non-professional wine drinkers is one which has been alluded to in some research (Gawel, 1997; Solomon, 1990) and d'Hauteville (2003 p. 11) pertinently asks 'if experts cannot efficiently describe the characteristics of wine to ordinary wine consumers, how useful for the market are the sensory descriptions provided by the leaflets, wine reviews and catalogues, or written on the label at the back of the bottles?'. Nevertheless, the way consumers and experts communicate about wine has rarely been investigated in detail, with most studies being carried out within rather than between groups such as novices or experts (e.g., Lawless, 1984). Solomon, who has considered this issue of communication between groups, suggested that:

Expert and novice wine tasters may even constitute linguistic communities, with the language of one community not completely translatable into the language of the other (Solomon, 1997 p. 41)

Solomon's research did not directly answer the question of how well experts communicate with consumers. Instead he concluded that experts use much more complex methods to categorise wines than novices, and that they may be approaching wines conceptually rather than perceptually. However, even by just having more complex methods of categorisation one could surmise that the structures underlying the language of wine might be fundamentally different. Certainly, as one newspaper report has suggested, consumers do not necessarily agree with expert descriptions (Stavro, 2001). According to the report, a judge at the Sydney Wine Show praised the top red wine as 'an ultra-ripe cabernet-based wine, but more of an Australian ripe fruit wine, with tastes of blackberry jam, liquorice and sweet fruit'. This prompted the following responses from four consumers chosen at random and given the wine to taste: 'it's too fruity. The mix of flavours is so potent you can't tell one from another'; 'I can't tell if it's blackberry or any other fruit'; 'I would say it's more woody than fruity'; 'it's not very fruity' (Stavro, 2001 p. 3). From a marketing perspective this view about the failure to communicate is shared by Lockshin (2002). He suggests that the fact that professionals are also themselves high-involvement consumers means that they unduly influence public discussion about wine quality. This is at the expense of low-involvement consumers, who are, as the majority of wine consumers, much more important to the industry.

It has been noted that consumers believe that the label is important as a cue to purchase and do read it, claiming that descriptions of aroma or taste are the most useful aid to them (Charters, Lockshin, & Unwin, 1999). However, Charters et al. (1999) suggested that drinkers (in this case including a number of professionals) actually found it hard to match a group of wines tasted blind to the descriptions given on their label. Research has also noted the particular use made by consumers of wine labels (Shaw, Keeghan, & Hall, 1999), and particularly that information about the style of wine, and about production methods, is considered to be helpful.

Process

This research stemmed from a study which examined the broader issue of the understanding of wine quality in Australia. That study was exploratory so qualitative processes were deemed appropriate. The research used two data-collection methods: focus groups and individual interviews. Focus group participants were provided with four wines to taste in order to encourage the development of their views about wine. This method also allowed observation of the varying processes used to evaluate wine, including the way in which the participants talked about it. The bottles were disguised to avoid participants making any judgment about the wine based on extrinsic cues. There was a total of 62 participants over 10 focus groups. Additionally, individual or small group interviews were carried out with a further 43 interviewees, making a total of 105 informants.

Three reference groups were used for comparative purposes in the study. These comprised (1) wine producers (representing a range of wineries across Australia); (2) those involved in marketing, promoting and selling wine; and (3) consumers. The latter group was split into three levels of involvement with wine (low, medium and high). This was done to enable a comparison of approaches to the product across a range of levels of interest and consumption practice. All except one of the wine professionals were classified as high-involvement drinkers. Informants were recruited in a number of locations across Australia, focusing on Sydney, Adelaide and Perth, but also including some regional areas.

Sample size varied from group to group. Whilst equal weight was given throughout the research to the views and feelings of each reference group, it is clear that the population size of each group varies substantially. In particular, consumers represent a much larger percentage of the overall population than either of the other two groups. Additionally, it was envisaged that as 'elite groups' (Marshall & Rossman, 1989 p. 94), both wine producers and those involved in distribution would have more well-formed ideas and feelings about the topic, possibly showing more commonality, and certainly ensuring that the issues would be easier to explore. For these reasons more time was spent on data collection from consumers in order to allow for a more comprehensive exploration of their perspectives. Thus there were 60 consumer informants, 22 producers and 23 other professionals.

To attain a level of trustworthiness for the data obtained, two forms of triangulation were employed (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). The first was data triangulation. Using three locations, different reference groups and – within the reference group of the consuming public – three levels of consumption practice, allowed a cross analysis of the dependability of the data collected. Second was methodological triangulation. Two methods (focus groups and interviews) were adopted to obtain the data necessary for the study. Nevertheless, this study was exploratory only, and conducted solely in Australia. Further research, both expanding the study within Australia and replicating it overseas, would increase the credibility and transferability of its conclusions.

All focus groups and interviews were recorded on audiotape and the focus groups were also video recorded. In addition, field notes were kept of each interaction. The recordings and the field notes were transcribed into MSWord. Each transcript was then imported into NUD•IST for subsequent analysis. This was done to assist the categorisation of responses of each reference group and to establish correspondences or dissonances between informants' responses. From the beginning of data collection a process of cross-referencing data was employed - matching and distinguishing what informants did and said. This was done for two reasons. First, to start the process of analysis establishing categories of data (Janesick, 1994). Second, to enhance the continuing data collection by making it focused more precisely (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This analysis method included the creation of categories and sub-categories of data, called 'nodes'. The analysis process began with 170 nodes and as it continued further categories were introduced. When analysis was completed there were 343, 50 of which reflected demographic information.

Findings

The role of language in the evaluation of wine

Throughout the interviews it was apparent that in any attempt to evaluate wine quality, problems of terminology appeared to compound the difficulties caused by the physiological process of evaluation. These terminological problems seemed to revolve around two connected difficulties. One was the situation where the specific words used were personal to an individual and therefore hard for anyone else to grasp. The second was where the words were in common use – but the interpretation of them varied from individual to individual.

As an example of the former the following extract from a focus group can be noted. Ellie and George – both low-involvement consumers – are discussing the third wine which they had tasted:

Ellie: I smelt sort of broccoli and green stuff, what do you smell?

George: Something like a weak cheese sort of thing. [As if] it has ... been in an oak barrel or something and they haven't cleaned it properly. Something's growing in it.

Ellie: Something in a Dr Who special.

George: Yeah.

They have agreed that the wine is unpleasant – but their language, reflecting the different aromas that they identify, means that they reach agreement by different means. One smells green vegetables, the other cheese and dirty barrels. They end up agreeing on an idea less defined, and entirely abstract, though possibly more evocative - the smell of something out of a television programme. In the event, having tasted the wine together their lack of linguistic convergence was unimportant – in fact their initially disparate comments seemed to reinforce rather than weaken their distaste for the wine. It is possible to extrapolate from this example to other situations. If they had not both tasted the wine their vague terminology may not have adequately communicated its poor quality. This is especially true of their concluding comments.

The notion of 'smoothness'

Informants used a number of terms to define wine quality. One interesting notion was smoothness, which was referred to by a number of informants and this is a useful example of the second terminological problem – where a commonly used word has varying interpretations. Smoothness as a concept is hard to pin down. It seems to have aspects of flavour – but went beyond that, also having textural or mouthfeel components. Informants were regularly asked to discuss smoothness but gave no absolutely common interpretation of the term.

Smoothness seemed to be most usually defined by an absence of certain perceived negative factors in a wine. On balance 'smoothness' was a positive term more associated with red wines. When used in that context the more articulate informants tended to link it with appropriate levels and fineness of tannins, and perhaps of bitterness. However, on some occasions white wine was also commended for being smooth, and in one focus group a sparkling wine was explicitly praised for this quality. In those cases (and also with some of the red wines), smoothness seemed to be equated to an absence of a 'vinegary' character (presumably related to the acid balance of the wine and possibly to volatile acidity).

'Smoothness' as a term was only used by low- and medium-involvement informants. However, it is worth noting the possible relation of smoothness to what professional tasters would call mouth feel – and possibly also balance. The varying interpretations of smoothness (for white or red wine, and relating to tannin, bitterness or acidity) were readily apparent. Thus it appears to be an evaluative term in general use which has little common definition or understanding from drinker to drinker. This is especially relevant given the marketing advantage sought by some wine marketers who make a point of promoting their wine as 'smooth'.

Communication between professionals

One might expect that this linguistic diversity would have been more of a problem for low-involvement consumers, whereas the more highly involved would have the experience and knowledge to provide linguistic precision. However, as the following extract from a focus group of wine producers suggests, that is not necessarily true. In this case the second terminological problem - the varying interpretation of words in common use - presents the problem. The group is discussing the assorted dimensions of wine quality:

Gemma: Concentration, I think, as well complexity...

Hal: I'd say intensity more than concentration.

Maria: I'd call intensity concentration.

Interviewer: How would you distinguish intensity and concentration?

Hal: You can have wines that aren't particularly concentrated but have amazing amount of intensity. I'd look at them in different ways. I would consider concentration more as volume in terms of concentration, intensity of fruit, of florals, of character, which isn't particularly concentrated. I don't know – it's hard. They are pretty similar in a way. I'd use them in a different context, I guess.

Maria: Concentration almost seems to get sort of bullish.

Hal: Yes – it's like thick and heavy.

Gemma: Maybe that's right. Maybe concentration means that they've... The opposite to concentration is diluted, therefore concentration is a water [related issue]. I think that perhaps that's right - intensity is there. I'm thinking German riesling.

Hal: Yeah, in German riesling, I wouldn't describe it as concentrated, I would describe it as amazingly intense.

Hal objected to Gemma's use of concentration as a dimension of quality, preferring the term intensity. Trying to distinguish them was hard, however. Concentration, Hal claimed, is about 'volume' (normally a measure of auditory rather than organoleptic sensation) and about context – although he did not expand on that point. Maria's criticism of concentration was almost semiological – that the word has 'bullish' overtones (perhaps excessively weighty, cumbersome, domineering, or dangerous to china), although she did not clarify why intensity does not have that connotation. Gemma, trying to fit into the mood of the group, explored intensity as a concept though she spoke without real conviction. Hal finally seized German riesling as a wine to prove his point, but still found it hard to make his distinction clear. Concentration and intensity are terms that are in regular use by professionals at wine tastings, but in this extract there seemed to be a lack of a common understanding about how they should be applied. Such problems challenge communication on the subject amongst experts and between experts and non-experts.

Communicating quality

Informants were regularly probed to see whether or not they understood what others meant when they discussed wine. In the case of consumers they were asked if they comprehended what professionals were talking about when they claimed that a wine was of good quality. A variety of responses was elicited.

The consumer perspective

A regular response among consumers to the enquiry about dialogue comprehension was scepticism. The following comes from a group interview of low-involvement consumers when asked if they understood what professionals mean when they use the term quality:

Ian: Salesmanship - they don't know what the hell they're talking about.

Neil: I'd say they do know for themselves. To pass it on to you ... because they're trying to sell you something.

Ian was merely cynical – people promoting wine do not actually know what they are talking about. Neil was marginally less cynical, claiming that marketers understand what they think quality is. He remained sceptical, though, when they try to convey that idea of quality to him. He seemed to be suggesting that marketers' understanding is warped by the need to sell wine. This perspective was widespread, and not merely held by low-involvement consumers.

Others followed a similar line, but distinguished between marketing puff and the knowledge of a producer:

Gerhard (high-involvement): Depends whether it's marketers or whether it's the winemaker. Marketers will use whatever means they can think of to sell the product and I don't trust them. Most winemakers are proud enough to tell you which vintage is good and which one is maybe not so good. They won't run their own wine down - but they will not say 'this is the best vintage ever' if it's wrong.

Gerhard accepted that winemakers are generally straight about their wine; they are – perhaps – too intimately involved with its creation to be able to create illusions about it. Maybe, he would claim, because marketers have less direct connection with shaping the wine they are more prepared to do whatever it takes to promote it.

One comment – made even by those who thought that they do understand the dialogue of wine quality – was that it can be too shrouded in jargon. Thus one informant, when asked if he understood what was said by those who were trying to sell him wine, responded cautiously:

Waldemar (medium-involvement): I think I do. I suspect that - and maybe I'm too cynical - but I suspect that in many cases people do not understand what they are saying For me this is [the] criteria – [the] less jargon [the] more people understand. In wine a lot of people just hide behind this jargon.

Waldemar has already expressed some interest in wine. He claimed that he reads about it and he enjoys visiting wineries. His conclusion, as a result of this, is that what is said by professionals is often learnt by rote, without being fully understood. As a result he considers that professionals may hide behind the jargon. In contrast he later praised one particular cellar-door manager who made an effort to be clear and jargon-free when talking with visitors. This standpoint, condemning jargon, tended to be held by low- and medium-involvement consumers rather than the most highly involved.

Whilst scepticism and a dislike of jargon characterised consumers' concern about the dialogue surrounding wine, some informants claimed that they did, at least in part, understand professionals when they talked about wine quality. In this case quality regularly became related to production processes rather than to anything organoleptically inherent in the wine. Prior to the following extract David had been asked if he understands professionals who talk about wine quality:

David (low-involvement): To some extent I do ... What's gone into making that wine. What ... the quality of it [is]. But at the same time I can't appreciate why one wine is going to taste better than another if the process is going to be the same ... If they said it was smooth, it had complexity and balance - well that doesn't mean anything to me. If they said they'd aged it in oak, and it came from this crop, and it was a great crop that year - then I'd say 'Ok there's more quality involved.'

David could not see how a wine has higher quality merely because of taste, and he did not accept the organoleptic dimensions of quality. But low yields or good weather for ripening and vintage are factors which can make the dialogue of quality valid for him. Thus

communicating quality is reduced to communicating processes and no more. Other informants shared this general perspective, even if they did not share David's mistrust of the relationship of quality to taste.

There consequently seems to be a split between some consumers' organoleptic evaluation of wine (taste, smoothness etc.) and their understanding of the dialogue about quality – which fixes on production issues. Thus, when consumers were asked to consider the quality of a wine which they tasted they tended to use one set of criteria. However, if they hear a professional talking about the quality of a wine the consumer engages an entirely different set of criteria, which may have no perceived link to the quality they evaluate organoleptically. This may reflect an uncertainty in their own judgments. It may also imply that they consider that experts use different, perhaps more 'objective', production-related criteria in making their quality judgments.

The professional perspective on dialogue

In general, wine professionals tended to think that they could understand consumers' dialogue about quality:

Interviewer: When consumers talk about quality in wine, do you think you understand what they mean?

Mark (winemaker): Yeah, I do actually.

Mark is a successful winemaker with a large company. He was confident that he could interpret what the consumer says about how good a wine is and use that to deliver the quality his customer's desire. His confident perspective on understanding the dialogue of quality was also shared by a number of those involved in distribution:

Keith (show-judge): Balance is critical for consumers – and the wine must have flavour for them.

Ernest (importer): Generally I do feel I can understand what [consumers] are getting at ... I don't feel like they're talking a completely different language that I don't understand.

Keith was clear that balance is the pre-eminent quality dimension for the consumer (a view which a few other professionals supported). The implication is that when the consumer showed approbation or disapprobation he understood precisely why. Ernest was explicit that he and the consumers of his wine are not talking a 'different language'. The wines that Ernest imports tend to be quite expensive, probably generally sold to more highly involved consumers. It may well be the case that their interest and knowledge allows both parties in a discussion to interpret what the other says with some degree of accuracy which would not be the case with lower involvement drinkers.

Some professionals were a little more cautious about their ability to understand the consumer:

John (distribution manager): I have to say that I think I have a good idea. I wouldn't like to say 'yes, I know'.

[later]

John: I think the one thing that is difficult is for someone in the wine trade to perceive what the punter ... thinks. And I think ... our opinion gets slightly distorted, because of us being in the field. And I think that one of the things that is really quite interesting to note is that we over complicate things. And the people we are selling it to ... look at wine in a more simple context.

John was hesitant. Initially he suggested that he may understand what the consumer says about wine. Returning to the issue a few minutes later he was not so sure. Rather, the perspective of working all the time with wine ('being in the field') means that professionals see wine as being more complex – perhaps investing it with more importance – than the consumer. That inevitably clouds perspectives on what is liked by consumers and this ambiguity undermines his absolute certainty of knowledge. Fewer professionals took this hesitant approach and more tended to think that they understood the consumer well.

Discussion and conclusions

The research reported here was exploratory only and limited to consumers in Australia, and thus has potentially limited transferability. However, within this context the study found that drinkers face key problems with the language of wine and of tasting. To a certain extent this stems from the well-established fact that people categorise tastes by aroma and flavour, rather than by words (Engen, 1987; Lawless, 1985). Drinkers, especially those of lower involvement levels who are less likely to have received any wine education, find precise description less easy than a general evaluation. As a result, they may not use any words in common and thus develop their own discrete language for wine appreciation. Where terms are generally used – as with smoothness – their interpretation is imprecise. This imprecision is not limited to low-involvement drinkers however. Even wine makers, who may generally reach agreement about some aspects of describing wine, may have difficulty in reaching a clear-cut interpretation of the idea of intensity. At the same time, based on this study, many drinkers may object when a specific language of wine is developed. They may see it as jargon, designed to exclude the general public from understanding the product. It also seems to be the case that there is a different vocabulary for low- and high-involvement consumers. The former are less precise in the words they use and, crucially, the words they use are different. No high-involvement informant used the term smoothness when evaluating wine and other words appeared to be discrete to one group or the other.

In the case of consumers, the uncertainty about the language of wine focuses particularly on the evaluation of quality. Individually, or with other consumers, particular (if idiosyncratic) evaluative terms may be used. When they interact with professionals, on the other hand, they may engage with a completely different language which focuses on the production of the wine rather than the way it tastes, and if a professional (particularly one involved in marketing) attempts to deal in abstract terms such as quality they may be suspicious.

Communication about wine quality is a key issue. It is clear that mutual understanding of the dialogue of wine quality is limited, at best. As d'Hauteville has previously noted (2003) wine professionals need to recognise that consumers may find it hard to understand what they say and they therefore need to spend more time listening to the language of the typical low-involvement wine drinker. Crucially, language seems to be used by many low-involvement consumers for the purpose of expressing an affectively evocative response which reflects pleasure or displeasure, rather than any precise description of the structure and aroma of the wine. Describing a wine as being like 'something in a Dr. Who special' may ultimately convey more than suggesting that it is 'herbaceous, ungrapey, methoxypyrazine-ridden, oxidative and coarse'. It has been noted by one academic commentator on wine tasting that technical terms fail to communicate a wine drinker's affective response. Thus 'the metaphoric, emotive illusions typically used to describe wines have their legitimate place, despite their inherent imprecision' (Jackson, 2002 p. 194). Such 'imprecision' may be hard for technically-trained wine tasters to acknowledge, but its importance to the majority of drinkers must be acknowledged. In any event, even

professionals seem unable to use terms about wine in precisely the same way, making communication even more fraught.

In this regard it is worth noting that the public debate has been dominated in the past by wine experts (Lockshin, 2002). The language of textbooks on tasting focuses on terms like balance, concentration and complexity – and these terms have often been mirrored in wine industry publicity. The findings of this study indicate that most Australian consumers (though not necessarily those who read tasting handbooks) are more likely to understand terms like good flavour, smoothness, and drinkability. It is also worth noting the suggestion that some consumers use one framework for the analysis of wine quality themselves (focusing on organoleptic response) but apply another framework (focusing on production related issues) when interpreting comments made by professionals about quality. This highlights a potential paradox in the way some consumers view the understanding of quality. Wine marketers may need to readjust the way in which they try to communicate about wine in the light of the imprecision of what is said, the idiosyncratic interpretation of commonly-used terms and the scepticism some consumers have about the jargon used to describe wine – particularly its quality.

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