

"THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF WINE PURCHASING BY CONSUMERS IN NEW ZEALAND"

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Abstract

Wine production in New Zealand is in an expanding stage of development. Over the past decade, there has been aggressive growth in hectares planted, numbers of grape varieties, and of newly established wineries entering production. These developments have occurred along with increases in domestic wine consumption.

During the same period, consumption of other forms of alcohol has decreased, in rough proportion. However, as is the case in many countries, domestic wine production capacity is greater than the rate of domestic consumption. Clearly, this presents a significant problem to vintners and the other businesses between them and the consumer. Documentation of change in consumer preferences could yield a deeper understanding of consumers and their motivations for purchasing and consuming wine. A more accurate picture of the consumer would thereby be of strategic value the wine marketplace. Ongoing documentation of changes in how the public perceives wines is therefore prudent, with potentially far-ranging outcomes. In service to this goal, a study was designed to identify and measure a variety of behaviors and perceptions of product characteristics relevant to wine purchasing and consumption.

This paper presents and discusses general trends and significant changes in consumer attitudes and behaviors toward a variety of wine relevant variables over a recent five year period in New Zealand. It begins with an examination of longer-term trends in per capita alcohol consumption, and consumption in the wine, fortified wine, beer, and ready-to-drink beverage categories, in order to provide necessary socio-cultural background. These trends are then examined in light of changes in the legal and retail environments over this period.

Data was collected in 1998 and in 2003 by personal interviews. Samples were chosen in a systematic fashion from consumers living in Christchurch, the largest city on the South Island of New Zealand. Response rates for both administrations were good (90% and 93% respectively), with robust sample sizes (n98 = 498, n03 =368).

A wide range of consumer variables were measured, including changes in the volume of wine consumed, type of container, motivations for purchase, and the impact of various product attributes on perception of the product and subsequent behavior. Standard demographic measures were taken, along with assessments of decision-making and purchase behavior variables.

Results indicate areas of change in the behaviors, knowledge and expectations held by consumers with regard to wine. For example, there was an increase in the proportion of subjects preferring imported wines, and an increase in the proportion considering the tastes of their partner before purchasing. A shift from box or cask to bottled wine was also observed, as was movement to dry wines. Responses to statements concerning practical attributes, e.g., the information content of labels, the importance of bottle shape and color, are also presented and discussed. Our overall impression is that wine buyers have become somewhat more discerning over the measurement interval, with consumers paying more attention to the production details of the products they purchase.