

If Parker Likes It, What's Wrong with Me? A Critique of Wine Ratings as Psychophysical Scaling

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“We cannot share experiences so we cannot compare perceived sensations directly.”
(Bartoshuk et al., Physiology and Behavior 82 (2004), p. 110)

Abstract

Purpose: Beyond technological change to enhance wine market efficiency, dispassionate expert wine evaluation to educate consumers might have increased information efficiency in recent decades since consumer ignorance likely inhibited growth of the fine (or premium) wine market, despite increased global affluence and an expanded middle class.

Considerable research explores how ratings correlate with fine wine prices, testing whether ratings correlate positively with willingness to pay (WTP), perhaps mitigating the consumer's problem. However, the mixed results say that ratings are not reliable guides to wine quality and WTP.

A structural difficulty with interpreting and comparing ratings is that, as a form of hedonic quality index, interpersonal comparisons are questionable—say, between experts or an expert and oneself. For example, different tasters may have different standards for measuring a taste's appeal (e.g., the existence of “supertasters”). Saying that experts can tell consumers what is in the bottle and that guides their willingness to pay is logically flawed.

Design: This paper explores ratings as a form of hedonic psychophysical scaling (PS), using the scaling literature.

Findings: This illuminates the difficulties and raises fundamental questions about the reliability of ratings—in effect, adopting someone else's psychosocial scaling as one's own—and the interpretation of any price-rating correlation.

Implications: Food scientists have addressed the challenge of interpersonal hedonic evaluation using “magnitude matching” which attempts to establish a common scale of taste appeal and intensity so that tasters provide hedonic ratings against a putative common yardstick. The paper asks whether this technique might lead to more reliable expert ratings.

Key words: fine (premium) wine, experts, ratings, psychophysical scaling, hedonic index