

GETTING TO KNOW WINE: CHINESE CONSUMERS' MOTIVATIONS FOR, AND EXPERIENCES OF, WINE EDUCATION COURSES

Joanna Fountain, Lincoln University, New Zealand
Murray Mackenzie, Hong Kong University Polytechnic, Hong Kong

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Wine knowledge and wine culture is challenging and, at times, intimidating for consumers. A lack of knowledge may result in poor wine choices by consumers, or the perception of too great a risk, resulting in reduced wine consumption (Taylor et al., 2008). Increasing wine knowledge can be achieved in a number of ways: through structured educational courses, enthusiastic experimentation with wines, informal discussions with friends, or visiting wineries and wine regions to experience the wine and wine culture. To date there has been limited research exploring the role of formal wine education programmes on consumer's wine knowledge, preferences and consumption patterns. Furthermore, the motivation for participating in wine education programmes is relatively unknown. The need for wine education as a component of market success can be better illustrated through regions of the world that have not previously experienced a strong desire for wine such as China.

Despite the growing range and availability of foreign wine in the Chinese market, in general, Chinese consumers' wine knowledge remains relatively limited. In recent years there has been in China and Hong Kong an increase in the number of consumers signing up to attain formal wine education through courses such as CSW (Certified Specialist of Wine) and WSET (Wine and Spirit Education Trust). The growth of the wine trade in China partly accounts of the increase in wine education courses, as those able to demonstrate a level of wine competency can position themselves at a distinct advantage in the job market, however the number of consumers from outside the wine industry wishing to improve their wine knowledge and general wine tasting ability has increased also.

The larger research project on which this paper is based explored wine education practices and wine consumption behaviour amongst Chinese wine consumers in Hong Kong and China. An online survey of 518 respondents of Chinese ethnicity residing in Hong Kong or mainland China who consumed wine regularly (at least once a month), resulted in a sample of 289 who had participated in a formal wine education course. This paper outlines the characteristics of these respondents in relation to the sample as a whole. In particular, it focuses on their motivation to pursue formal wine education, and their perceptions of the outcome of the experience in terms of their wine knowledge and consumption behaviour.

Analysis of the sample who had enrolled in formal wine education reveals that they are likely to be relatively young, highly educated and somewhat more likely to be male than the overall sample of wine consumers. A quarter of respondents stated that their wine knowledge was advanced, and close to half reported intermediate wine knowledge. While red wine was most frequently consumed by this sample, two-thirds of the sample consumed white wine at least weekly. The primary motivations for wine consumption amongst this sample was for enjoyment, or because it suited the occasion, however, pairing wine with food was an important motivation also. These respondents reported using a range of sources to learn about wine, including reading online articles, or books and magazines about wine and meeting with friends to discuss wine and joining online wine groups.

Two thirds of respondents who had taken formal wine education had enrolled in more than one course. They were motivated to take their most recent course to aid wine purchase decisions (at restaurants and in general situations), and to learn more about wine and wine etiquette. Considerations around career progression or workplace requirements, or creating a good impression on friends or business associates and superiors were not important motives. Respondents reported that the outcomes of their formal wine education was an increased knowledge of wine and wine regions and increased confidence in discussing wine with other people and choosing wines to buy. It seems that undertaking formal wine education had also changed wine consumption behaviour, with three-quarters of the sample indicating that they consume more wine and a wider range of wine since taking their course. A large majority of these respondents reported that the course had made them interested in learning more about wine. The picture is not all positive, however, with a sizeable minority reporting that they had forgotten most of what they had learnt on the course.

These findings provide an interesting important insights into an under-researched topic with implications for the marketing of wine education courses in a Chinese context. It reveals a sizeable market for formal wine education courses, amongst a knowledgeable cohort, with broad motivations for seeking knowledge, and increasingly involved wine consumption behaviour.