

THE STARTER WINE: EXPLORING HOW WINE CONSUMER TASTE PREFERENCES CHANGE OVER TIME

Liz Thach, MW, Sonoma State University, USA

Introduction

There is a perception in the wine industry that consumer wine tastes change over time. For example, it is thought that many wine drinkers begin with semi-sweet white or light fruity red wines, and then “progress” to more complex white wines and more tannic earthy red wines. But is this really true?

The answer is significant from a strategic wine marketing perspective, because it is important that a consumer’s first experience with wine be positive. Indeed research has shown that if the first wine tasting experience is negative – the wine tasted bad, they got a headache - that they are more likely to avoid wine or become an occasional rather than core, or high-frequency, wine drinker (McIntyre, et al, 2016; Thach & Olsen, 2004). Therefore, it is important to understand if a winery needs to produce a variety of wine styles so that consumers can have a positive first experience. In other words, do they need a starter wine?

Preliminary Literature Review

There have been numerous medical research studies showing that taste preferences are based on a variety of factors including, genetic, physiological, social and economic variables (Mennella & Bobowski, 2015; Drewnowski, 1997). From a wine taste perspective, there have been fewer studies, but several that confirm that wine taste preferences change over time (Klatsky et al, 1990; Bruwer et al, 2011; Hanni & Utermohlen, 2012). Despite this, many wineries do not seem that concerned about consumer tastes, and only produce the types of wine that they prefer (Bruwer et al, 2011), or that their “terroir” delivers.

So why do consumer wine preferences change over time? Some researchers cite cohort influence (Hawkins et al, 1994; Wilson & Riebe, 2002); whereas others suggest a wine critic’s viewpoint (Rasmussen and Lockshin, 1999), or vintage variation (Ockzlowski, 1994). However medical researchers have verified that genetics and receptor genes such as TAS2R38 strongly impact a person’s ability to taste bitterness, such as that found in wine

tannins – and that age modifies this effect (Mennella & Bobowski, 2015; Shiffman et al, 1979). Therefore as people age, their tastes change. Tim Hanni (2012) in his book, *Why You Like the Wines You Like*, describes this phenomenon, explaining that genetics and environment impact wine preferences, but that tastes may change over time.

Other research has examined the impact of gender on wine preferences, but with no conclusive findings. For example, a study of California wine drinkers found no significant difference between male and female wine preferences, with men and women equally enjoying red and white wines (Thach, 2012). The notion that women prefer sweeter wines is also not substantiated. Studies in both the UK and US show that sweet and dry wines are consumed equally by both genders (Low, 2001; Fuhrman, 2001).

Research Questions

- 1) Do wine tastes change over time? If yes, how?
- 2) Does gender or age have an impact on wine preference changes over time?
- 3) Do reasons for drinking wine have an impact on wine changes over time?
- 4) Does consumer wine knowledge level have an impact on wine changes over time?
- 5) Do perceptions of types of wine considered to be healthy have an impact on wine taste changes over time?

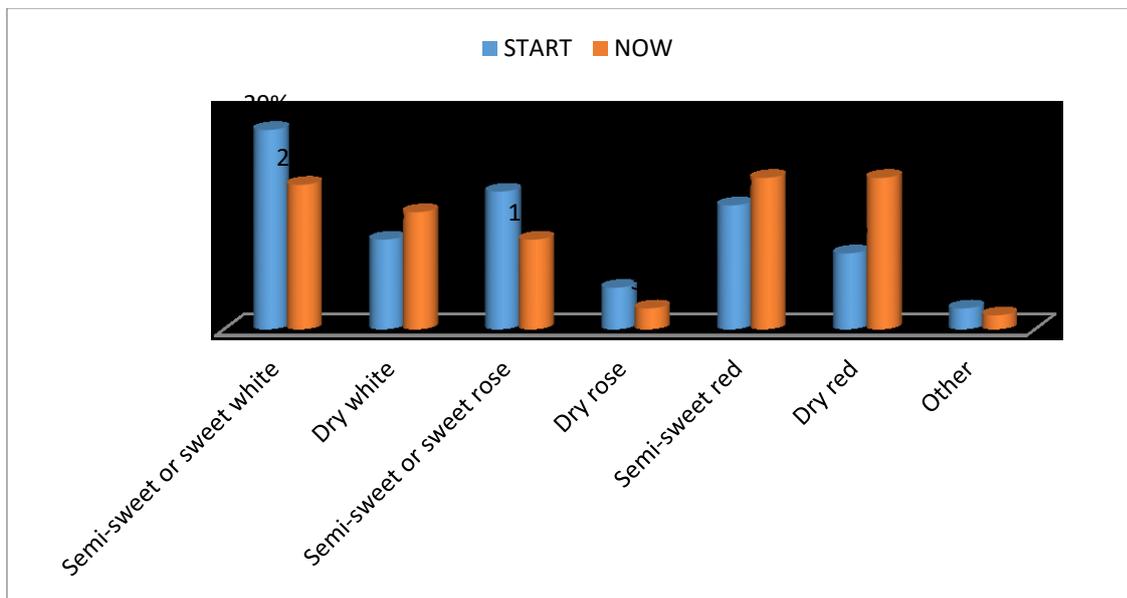
Methodology

An online survey instrument was developed to collect information regarding American wine consumer preferences, behaviors, and demographics. A representative sample of the American population was sought through the use of quota sampling technique across selected socio-demographics of gender, age, and ethnicity. The sampling protocol required that all respondents must be wine drinkers over the age of 21, all 50 states be included in the sample. The survey was pilot tested and minor revisions were made based on the feedback. Survey Sampling International, a panel data provider conducted the survey, which was launched on Survey Monkey for a period of two weeks in spring of 2016. In the end, a total of 1088 useable responses were received. Data will be analyzed using SPSS.

Preliminary Findings

Of the 1088 responses, 833 or 77% reported that their wine preferences changed over time. Of those who reported a change in preference, in almost every case, a preference for semi-sweet or sweet wines in the beginning declined compared to current preferences (See Table 1). This occurred with white and rose wines. However, a preference for semi-sweet red wines increased over time. This may be due to the current popularity of semi-sweet red blend brands in the US market, such as Apothic.

Table 1: Wine Preferences Changes Over Time



In analyzing dry wines, there was an increase in preference for dry white and dry red wine over time, but interestingly, a decrease for dry rose wine over time. Preliminary ANOVA shows significant difference in starter wines between men and women, with more women starting with semi-sweet and sweet white and rose wines compared to men, and more men starting with semi-sweet red and dry red than women.

Conclusion/Managerial Implications

Preliminary results support prior research suggesting that wine preferences do change over time for a certain percentage of consumers – in this case around 3/4th of US wine consumers completing the survey. The change is primarily a graduation from semi-sweet and sweet wines to drier styles. This suggests that wineries should have an entry level wine that is

sweeter in style, and should also provide both semi-sweet and dry reds, as these two styles seem to be more popular over time.

References

- Bruwer, J., Saliba, A. and Miller, B., 2011. Consumer behavior and sensory preference differences: implications for wine product marketing. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 28(1), pp.5-18.
- Drewnowski, A., 1997. Taste preferences and food intake. *Annual review of nutrition*, 17(1), pp.237-253.
- Fuhrman, J. (2001), "Red or white: like day or night?", *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2 February.
- Gawel, R., & Godden, P. (2008). Evaluation of the consistency of wine quality assessments from expert wine tasters. *Australian Journal of Grape and Wine Research*, 14(1), 1–8.
- Hanni, T. and Utermohlen, V., 2010. Beverage Preferences, Attitudes, & Behavior of 'Sweet' and 'Tolerant' Wine Consumers.
- Hanni, T., 2012. Why You Like the Wines You Like: Changing the Way the World Thinks about Wine. HanniCo.
- Hawkins, D., Neal, C., Quester, P., and Best, R., 1994, *Consumer Behavior- Implications for Marketing Strategy*, Irwin Publishers, Sydney, Australia, pg 329
- Klatsky, A. L., Armstrong, M. A., and Kipp, H., 1990, Correlates of Alcoholic beverage preference: traits of persons who choose wine, liquor or beer, *British Journal of Addiction*, vol.85 pp.1279-1289
- Low, S. (2001), "One for the Ladies", *Wine International*, 1 November.
- McIntyre, E., Ovington, L.A., Saliba, A.J. and Moran, C.C., 2016. Qualitative study of alcohol consumers who choose to avoid wine. *Australian journal of grape and wine research*, 22(2), pp.182-189.
- Mennella, J.A. and Bobowski, N.K., 2015. The sweetness and bitterness of childhood: Insights from basic research on taste preferences. *Physiology & Behavior*, 152, pp.502-507.
- Schiffman, S., Orlandi, M., & Erickson, R. P. (1979). Changes in taste and smell with age: Biological aspects. *Sensory Systems and Communication in the Elderly*, 10, 247–268.
- Thach, L., 2012. Time for wine? Identifying differences in wine-drinking occasions for male and female wine consumers. *Journal of Wine Research*, 23(2), pp.134-154.
- Thach, E.C. and Olsen, J.E., 2004. The search for new wine consumers: Marketing focus on consumer lifestyle or lifecycle. *International Journal of Wine Marketing*, 16(3), pp.44-57.

Thach, L. & Bus305W Researchers. (2018). Do Wine Consumer Preferences Change Over Time? New Research Study Provides Some Answers. *Winebusiness.com*. April 20, 2018.

Available at: <https://www.winebusiness.com/news/?go=getArticle&dataid=198045>

Wilson, D.M. and Riebe, E.L., 2002. Do wine consumption habits change with age or follow a cohort group? White Paper.