

STUDIES REGARDING THE WINE QUALITY PERCEPTION OF THE ROMANIAN CONSUMERS

CERCETĂRI PRIVIND PERCEPȚIA CALITĂȚII VINURILOR LA CONSUMATORII ROMÂNI

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Abstract. *In the present international context, when the competition in the wine market becomes increasingly tight, market studies prove to be important tools for the efficient marketing of this product. Getting the consumers accustomed with one's type of product is the only way to be successful in the long run. This paper discusses certain aspects related to the Romanian consumers' perception regarding the quality of the wines on sale on our national market. The study consisted of a survey performed on a representative pool of consumers including 174 persons of all ages and social categories. The survey was based on a questionnaire of 30 complex questions, of which only those directly related to the perception of the wine quality are discussed in this paper.*

The answers regarding the preference for noble wines and hybrid wines, the preference for table wines, wines with geographical indication and controlled denomination of origin were statistically evaluated. At the same time, the answers of respondents from the two genders were compared in order to determine the most important wine parameters that influence their decision of buying a certain wine. Among the wine parameters evaluated there were: the grape variety, the region of origin, the wine producer, the vintage and also the packaging style (bottle and label), the prizes received in wine competitions or the advice of an expert. These preferences were also correlated with general composition characteristics of the wines, such as: colour, aroma and maturation in barrels. The correct interpretation of the results may lead to a better understanding of the consumers' behaviour and to an improvement in the product assortment offered on the market, and perhaps contribute to a more efficient information campaign regarding wines in general.

Rezumat. *În contextul actual, în care competiția în domeniul vinurilor devine din ce în ce mai acerbă, studiile de piață devin instrumente esențiale pentru realizarea eficientă a marketingului acestui produs. Atragerea consumatorilor și obișnuirea lor cu anumite produse reprezintă condiții necesare pentru asigurarea unui succesului constant și de perspectivă. În această lucrare sunt prezentate unele aspecte legate de percepția consumatorilor români privind calitatea vinurilor de pe piața noastră. Studiul s-a bazat pe realizarea unei anchete în rândul unui eșantion reprezentativ de consumatori, alcătuit din 174 de persoane de vârste diferite, din toate categoriile sociale. Chestionarul a cuprins un număr de 30 de întrebări complexe, din care în această lucrare sunt prezentate doar cele care sunt legate direct de percepția calității vinurilor. Sunt interpretate statistic rezultatele privind preferințele pentru vinuri din soiuri nobile și/sau cele de hibrid, preferințele pentru vinuri de masă, vinuri cu indicație geografică și vinuri cu*

denumire de origine controlată. Sunt, de asemenea interpretate, defalcat pe cele două sexe, modalitățile prin care consumatorul român decide asupra vinurilor pe care le cumpără. Se evidențiază astfel rolul unor parametri generali precum soiul, regiunea de proveniență, producătorul, anul de recoltă, dar și influențele datorate aspectului ambalajului (sticla și eticheta), premiile obținute în competiții sau recomandarea unui expert. Aceste preferințe sunt corelate de asemenea și cu anumite caracteristici intrinsece ale vinurilor, precum culoarea, aroma sau maturarea vinului în baricuri. Se consideră că interpretarea corectă a rezultatelor unor astfel de studii poate conduce la o mai bună înțelegere a comportamentului consumatorilor și la o îmbunătățire a ofertei de produse, precum și la o mai bună informare a consumatorilor în privința vinului, în general.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

A survey was conducted in order to determine the behaviour of Romanians regarding wine consumption. The survey consisted of a questionnaire of 30 questions on various aspects related to wine. A number of 174 persons responded to this questionnaire, of which 70 women and 104 men. For this paper only the results from three questions relevant for the evaluation of the perception of wine quality were selected for analysis. For reasons of clarity, the details of the questions are described later in the “*Results and discussion*” chapter. For all the data, the significance was statistically evaluated by the z-test, but only relevant results are presented.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Q1. The first question that we evaluated is a closed-end question, aiming to differentiate between the preference for wines obtained from noble or hybrid grapes. The question also admits the possibility that the consumer does not make any difference between noble and hybrid wines; in this case he/she can select the answer “I don’t know”.

According to the results reported below in Table 1, 76.6% of the respondents selected noble wine as their preference. The statistic z-test for all the respondents regarding their preference for noble wine versus hybrid wine proves that there is a significant difference in the proportions of individuals interested in noble wine ($P = <0.001$, meaning that the probability that this conclusion is wrong is less than 0.1%)

Most of the consumers selected what appeared to be the “good answer”, thus recognizing the quality of the *Vitis vinifera* grapes as opposed to hybrid grapes. Actually, we doubt that all the persons that selected “noble grapes” as their preference really knew that this means “made of grapes from *Vitis vinifera* varieties”; there is also the possibility that at least some of them considered “noble” a word definitely related to quality, and therefore they felt inclined to select it.

On the other hand, those who selected as their preference “hybrid wine” were certainly aware of what this means. Perhaps they did not necessarily know that the grape varieties used as raw material are not pure *Vitis vinifera*, but they

recognised the specific foxy aroma of the majority of those wines, produced in many places in Romania, by small farmers in country side, for their own consumption. In this respect, we can say that 9.2% of the women and 15.1% of the men clearly indicated a preference for hybrid wines, although their actual numbers are probably larger. Moreover, although apparently more men than women prefer hybrid wines, the z-test shows that $P = 0.365$; this means that jumping to the conclusion that there is a significant difference in the proportions of women and men who are interested in hybrid wines is made with a risk of 36.5% of being wrong. However, if we disregard for the moment this high chance of being wrong, we can assume that a more extensive survey might actually prove that more men prefer hybrid wines than women. But this is surely also related with the tradition for hybrid wine consumption in country-side and with the fact that women drink less wine than men (as indicated by other data, not shown in this paper.)

As for the 10.5% of the respondents that sincerely admitted that they do not know the difference between noble and hybrid wine, we believe that the actual percentage is higher, since many of those who selected “noble wines” were probably not sure what “noble” stands for. This issue of hybrids was only raised recently, on the occasion of the harmonization of the Romanian legislation with that of EU; at this point it became evident that Romania must get rid of the forbidden hybrids, planted illegally before 1989. Since then, the officials have been trying to improve the public awareness regarding the low quality of some hybrid wines, and made efforts in order to persuade the farmers to grub the forbidden hybrid vine plantations. Unfortunately, these efforts and the information campaigns were inconsistent and unsuccessful.

As for the percentages of 15.4% for the women and 7.5% for the men that admitted not to know the difference between “noble” and “hybrid”, the z-test showed that there is no significant difference between genders in the level of information ($P = 0.805$). Actually, there is a 19.5% chance that there are more men informed in this matter than women, but this is too small to be taken into account, and more extensive research is needed to draw such conclusions.

Table 1

Preference for the type of the wine according to the raw material – noble grape or hybrid grape

	Noble		Hybrid		Don't know		Total	
Women	49	75.4%	6	9.2%	10	15.4%	65	100.0%
Men	82	77.4%	16	15.1%	8	7.5%	106	100.0%
All respondents	131	76.6%	22	12.9%	18	10.5%	171	100.0%

Q2. The second question that we discuss in this paper is also a closed-end question, aiming to differentiate between the preference for table wine, superior quality wines and wines with DOC (Controlled Denomination of Origin). Here

too, the respondent can select the answer “I don’t know”, if he/she is not sure about the difference between the wine categories.

In our present legislation the wines are classified in *table*, *superior* and *DOC wines*; the *superior* category was recently replaced by that of “geographic indication” wines. The classification is quite confusing for the consumer, since it mixes terms related with an intrinsic quality of wines (*table wine* vs. *superior wine*) with terms that are only suggesting the origin of the wine (*geographic indication*, *denomination of origin*).

This confusion is clearly reflected in the answers we got for this question, which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

**Preference for a category of wine according to the quality level:
table wine, superior wine and DOC wine**

	Table wine		Superior		DOC		Don't know		Total	
Women	13	18.6%	25	35.7%	27	38.6%	5	7.1%	70	100.0%
Men	21	20.2%	40	38.5%	35	33.7%	8	7.7%	104	100.0%
All respondents	34	19.5%	65	37.4%	62	35.6%	13	7.5%	174	100.0%

Evaluating the answers we concluded that:

- The superior wines and DOC wines were equally selected by the consumers, as they recognized in both categories wines of a higher quality than “table wine”. The fact that there is no significant difference between the results for these two categories (superior wines 37.4%, DOC wines 35.6% respectively) proves, however, that the consumer has no clear idea regarding the difference between the two.

- We assume that some consumers selected DOC wine only because they considered that the order in which the categories were presented in the questionnaire is related to the increase in the quality, and they wanted to show their preference for the highest quality.

- Under the law, the classification in wines with denomination of origin and superior wines with indication of origin is based on quality parameters; the wines which only have an indication of origin are those that could not achieve the quality level of those awarded with the “denomination of origin” title. On the first ones, only the region of production is declared on the label, but not the specific vineyard or the variety (with some exceptions). Although related to the level of quality, these wine categories are perceived by the consumer in the same class, for which the label only shows the origin of the wine. Many Romanian consumers will select DOC wine not because they recognise a higher quality in it, but because its label mentions the grape variety, a parameter to which people grant more importance than to others. (This fact is also confirmed by the results presented in Table 3, in which we can see that the preference for the variety received the mark 6.26 ± 1.29 out of the maximum 7, compared to only 5.84 ± 1.68 out of 7 for the region of origin).

Q3. The last question is the most complex of this study. The respondents were asked to rate the importance they attach to a specific characteristic of wine, on an appreciation scale of 1-7. The scale is not from 1 to 10, which is how Romanians are accustomed from school; such scales were avoided because they show a tendency of avoiding the values of the higher end (9-10) which are considered to represent “perfection”.

Among the wine parameters rated there are: the information that appears on the label (region of provenance, grape variety, vintage year, wine producer or brand), compositional characteristics (colour and aroma, including that specific to barrel maturation) and various marketing techniques (from the appearance of the bottle and label, to the recommendation of an expert and prizes received, and also the availability on the market and price).

Table 3

Preference for various wine characteristics, rated on scale of 1 to 7

Characteristic	Women			Men			Total		
	No.	mean	SD	No.	mean	SD	No.	mean	SD
Variety	69	6.33	1.09	109	6.21	1.39	178	6.26	1.29
Region / vineyard	68	5.84	1.70	108	5.84	1.67	176	5.84	1.68
Brand / Producer	69	5.77	1.73	109	5.96	1.51	178	5.89	1.60
Vintage year	69	5.74	1.53	107	5.20	1.95	176	5.41	1.81
Bottle (aspect)	69	4.83	2.03	108	4.66	2.07	177	4.72	2.05
Label (aspect)	69	4.84	2.00	107	4.42	2.11	176	4.59	2.07
Recommendation of an expert	68	5.31	2.10	108	4.59	2.21	176	4.87	2.19
Prizes taken / Advertising	69	4.91	2.08	108	4.93	2.05	177	4.92	2.06
Availability on the market	68	3.79	2.14	107	4.38	2.10	175	4.15	2.13
Price	69	4.72	2.11	109	5.03	2.10	178	4.91	2.11
Colour (red, white)	69	5.81	1.67	109	6.13	1.22	178	6.01	1.41
Aroma	68	6.50	0.86	109	6.33	1.18	177	6.40	1.07
Maturation in <i>barrique</i>	68	5.29	1.80	108	5.51	1.70	176	5.43	1.74

By analysing the data shown in Table 3 we can draw some interesting conclusions, as shown below:

- Among the items of information which appear on the wine label, the consumer pays attention especially to the variety. Then, equally important are considered the region and the producer (marks 5.89 ± 1.60 and 5.84 ± 1.68 , respectively). All these items are judged by the respondent as more or less similar, if not redundant.

- Regarding the availability on the market, this parameter was considered the least important of all (mark 4.15 ± 2.13) and had the larger standard deviation (2.13), showing a large variation of responses. This confirms that the Romanian

consumer is not faithful to a specific brand, and at the same time reflects the discontinuities of the supply and the frequent changes in the appearance of the wine packaging. Moreover, aspects related to the bottle and labels are not considered important either, both by men and women, the marks being scattered around 4 ~ 5, with a large dispersion. Among the marketing techniques, the recommendation of an expert or the prizes taken are valued a bit more, with the observation that women tend to rely more than men on a recommendation (mark 5.31 ± 2.20 versus 4.59 ± 2.21).

● Among all the parameters studied, the one that is generically called “aroma” is the most appreciated by all the consumers. They awarded the average mark of 6.40 (close to the maximum of 7), both women and men being in agreement with this evaluation (mark 6.50 ± 0.87 and 6.33 ± 1.18 respectively). The fact that the selection of a wine is dictated by its aroma should not mislead us. These responses do not necessarily mean that the consumer is a fine connoisseur, able to discern among the many complex aroma compounds of the wines, and therefore selecting a wine produced by a specific technology or after maturation or aging. Actually, this stated preference for “aroma” actually reflects again the preference for the variety, most of the respondents bearing in mind the typical aroma of the Muscat grapes. In support to this interpretation comes the fact that “maturation in barrel” is rated high enough (5.43 ± 1.74), in spite of the fact that our study also shows (data not presented in this paper) that only a few consumers can recognize the specific aroma induced by the oak barrels wine maturation of wines. This means that the “barrel aroma” was often selected randomly.

CONCLUSIONS

The nowadays Romanian consumer does not have enough wine culture and draws little benefit from relevant advertising when taking an informed decision on wine buying. Romanians tend to trust the most their own senses and selections, attaching the most importance to parameters such as the grape variety, the producer or the production region. The advertising of a wine and the image created by the label or bottle or by the experts are not yet highly appreciated. The study shows that there is an urgent need for more education of the consumer in this field, especially in the present context when getting the customer “hooked” to a product is one important secret of future success.

REFERENCES

1. **Glantz Stanton A., 1997** - *Primer of biostatistics*. 4th edition, McGraw-Gill.