

Issue: 5, 2003

"I Like It, But How Do I Know if It's Any Good?": Quality and Preference in Wine Consumption

AUTHOR(S): Stephen Charters, Simone Pettigrew

ABSTRACT

This study explored the relationship between quality perceptions and preferences in the context of wine consumption. Interviews and 'focus tastings' were used to elicit information from Australian wine consumers, wine producers, and wine industry mediators. The findings indicate that in the context of wine consumption preference seems to be a means of linking a personal, subjective approach to wine enjoyment with a more objective viewpoint on wine quality. It allows for the idea that quality is 'out there' and is verifiable independently of what drinkers like to consume. It also allows both a subjective and an objective perspective to be maintained contemporaneously despite their initial apparent contradiction.

ARTICLE

Introduction

The issue of quality is particularly important for the wine industry because of an increasingly competitive market. World wine production has been exceeding consumption by over three billion litres per annum for much of the last decade (Wine Institute of California 2001). At the same time the rapidly increasing production of many New World wine producing countries is merely exacerbating that imbalance, causing the scramble for market share to intensify (Lockshin 2001). This issue is particularly acute for the Australian wine industry where supply is increasingly outstripping demand, resulting in a particular need not only to increase exports but also to develop a greater domestic market share (Geene, Heijbroek, Lagerwerf and Wazir 1999).

The role of product quality has been a key focus of much marketing research over past decades, both in its own right (Garvin 1984; Grewal 1995; Holbrook and Corfman 1985; Olson and Jacoby 1972; Steenkamp 1989; Zeithaml 1988), and in relation to price and value (Holbrook 1994; Oliver 1999; Sweeney and Soutar 1995). The urge to deliver a product that is better - or, ideally, best - is one of the key themes of marketing theory (Buzzell and Gale, 1987; Reichheld, 1996; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990). Despite this the nature of quality itself has proved elusive. The issue is complicated by the fact that, at an abstract level, there may be different ways of conceptualising quality. Can it be established objectively or is it merely perceived idiosyncratically by the consumer?

Some work has been carried out to determine what consumers perceive to be high quality in particular products. Thus, for instance, in regard to wine, Batt and Dean (2000) note the intangibility of many of the quality dimensions in wine. Further Lockshin and Rhodus (1993) noted that whilst low-involvement consumers used price as a cue to quality, those who were more highly involved tended to focus more on taste, confirming previous research by Mitchell and Greatorex (1989). However, less research has addressed consumers' perceptions of the general concept of quality. Furthermore, the relationship between post-consumption quality evaluation and preference and the consequent impact of that relationship on purchase decision have been barely explored. Preference is defined in this context as "something that is preferred; the object of prior favour, or choice" (Delbridge and Bernard 1998, p. 908), and is seen as a precursor to consumer choice.

This article examines the concept of quality as it relates to the wine market. Wine as a product has a substantial aesthetic component, so it is a useful tool for investigating approaches to quality within the broader class of aesthetic goods. This study is differentiated from other studies of wine quality by a dual emphasis on consumers' conceptualisations of wine quality and how they distinguish wine quality from their preferences for certain types of wine. The study is primarily concerned with the evaluation of quality at the point of consumption, rather than through the use of cues prior to consumption, and thus focuses on that process. In marketing terms this makes the research of most use in understanding quality assessment as a precursor to repeat purchase, rather than an initial purchase.

Conceptualising Quality

Quality is recognised as a difficult concept to define (Garvin 1984; Holbrook and Corfman 1985; Sweeney and Soutar 1995; Zeithaml

1988). There are multiple definitions of the term. A clear analysis of the varying definitions has been presented by Steenkamp (1989; 1990). He observes that quality is a widely used term in a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, economics, product management, and marketing. The interest of this article is within the latter field, specifically within the subdiscipline of consumer behaviour where the concept of quality is considered to be relevant to the purchase decision-making process (Olshavsky, 1985; Zeithaml, 1988).

Consumer researchers tend to distinguish objective quality from perceived or subjective quality (e.g. Garvin 1984; Grunert 1995; Holbrook and Corfman 1985; Steenkamp 1989; Zeithaml 1988). As an example of the former Zeithaml suggested that "quality can be defined broadly as superiority or excellence" (1988 p. 3), adding that "the term 'objective quality' refers to measurable and verifiable superiority on some predetermined ideal standard or standards" (1988 p. 4). The concept of perceived quality, however, is utilised much more often than objective or absolute quality in the marketing literature (e.g., Bolton and Drew 1991; Jacoby and Olson, 1985; Lange, Issanchou, and Combris, 2000). Perceived quality has been defined by Zeithaml as "the consumer's judgment about a product's overall excellence or superiority" (1988 p. 3). The element of excellence or superiority is common to both the objective and subjective definitions, but the critical emphasis here is on the 'consumer's judgment.' One precise definition of perceived quality is 'an overall subjective, evaluative judgment of a product's perceived ability to deliver an expected bundle of benefits relative to benefits offered by other products' (Compeau, Grewal, and Monroe, 1998 p. 296). This definition sees quality as primarily subjective. One reason for the stress on perceived quality may be that it relates easily to the current emphasis in marketing on customer satisfaction and the prevention of dissatisfaction (Bolton and Drew 1991).

Protagonists of the perceived quality approach would generally argue that as quality is 'perceived' it has no existence independent of the consumer. Monroe and Krishnan (1985 p. 212) claim that 'perceived quality is viewed purely as an evaluative measure'. Even Steenkamp (1990) shows some ambivalence over this issue, suggesting at one point that perceived quality is neither completely personal nor entirely objective, but later concluding that it is an 'idiosyncratic (and therefore entirely individual) value judgment' (1990 p. 317).

It may be possible to simplify the understanding of how quality operates by focusing on this distinct objective/subjective divide. Objective quality is externally verifiable; for instance the economic

fuel consumption of a car. Subjective quality is only established personally. The response to the colour or styling of a vehicle, for instance, will be a matter of personal taste. The assumption has generally been made by past researchers that 'perceived' quality is more relevant to consumers' choices (e.g., Olshavsky, 1985; Steenkamp, 1989, 1990; Zeithaml, 1988). However, there has been little examination of how consumers themselves actually conceptualise quality - at least in aesthetic products - and whether they consider it to be an objective or subjective aspect of a product.

It is thus evident that there is some debate over the subjective/objective nature of quality and uncertainty about the nature of perceived quality and its relationship, if any, to quality per se. Does it only exist in the perception of the consumer, or does it have some independent and quantifiable reality? These problems are explicitly relevant to the fields of wine appreciation and wine marketing. Furthermore, the unresolved issue of the relationship of quality to consumer choice needs to be considered.

Quality and the Purchase Decision

It is almost universally assumed that the evaluation of quality is closely connected to purchase decision. Only occasionally is the relationship questioned (Olshavsky, 1985), and rarely is evidence adduced to suggest otherwise. Monroe and Krishnan (1985) are almost alone in suggesting that there may only be an indirect relationship between perceived quality and motivation to buy. However, even Monroe and Krishnan are only considering the quality evaluation/purchase decision link in the context of the relationship of perceived quality to price - so their caveat still accepts that quality is the determining factor within an 'acceptable price range'. It is, however, quite possible that consumers are able to make quality judgments that are absolutely independent of a purchase decision - indeed it is conceivable that they may rate the quality of a product highly but actually dislike it (thus that taste and quality judgments do not coincide). This assumption is certainly accepted by wine professionals (Basset, 2000; Spurrier, 2001). Basset, for instance, claims taste is personal, but "that does not mean that personal preferences are related to quality" (2000 p. 84).

The quality-evaluation/preference relationship has been questioned by Rust, Inman, Jia and Zahorik (1999) in the area of service quality. Their point, however, is a specific one that consumers may not opt to purchase the service with the highest perceived quality if the potential quality variance appears to be higher than for another service offering. Instead they may choose the service with lower probable quality but greater consistency.

In any event, much of the research that surrounds preference focuses on predicting purchase decisions (examples relating to wine consumption include Gil and Mercedes, 1997; Nerlove, 1995; Tustin and Lockshin, 2001). Quality evaluation finally occurs at the point of consumption, and for a non-durable, experience product like wine any prior judgements are merely an assessment of cues rather than a final quality appraisal. This experiential perspective may have little marketing relevance for the initial purchase, but with a product like wine prior quality evaluation can be critical to subsequent sales. It is therefore useful to investigate the relationship that may (or may not) exist between consumers' evaluation of a product's quality and their preference for it.

Involvement

It has already been suggested that the wine quality cues adopted by consumers may vary depending on the level of the consumer's involvement with the product (Batt and Dean, 2000; Lockshin and Rhodus, 1993). In an investigation of how consumers view subjective and objective quality and the relevance of quality to their preference, involvement may be relevant. There is some evidence that this is the case (Bloch, 1986; Lichtenstein, Bloch, and Black, 1988), although the research has focused on the relationship between involvement and price, rather than quality per se.

A definition of involvement characterises it as 'a person's perceived relevance of the [consumption] object based in inherent needs, values and interests' (Zaichkowsky, 1985 p. 342). A consumer's involvement may be with a product (enduring over time) or with a particular purchase decision (Richins and Bloch, 1986), but in this study only the former is addressed.

Some work into the impact of involvement in wine consumption has been carried out and involvement has been seen to affect the operation of cues. It is claimed that low-involvement consumers are more likely to use price as a cue and whilst high-involvement consumers pay attention to price they are more likely to use grape variety (Zaichkowsky, 1988). Quester and Smart (1996), on the other hand, found no significantly valid evidence for the declining importance of price with higher involvement.

As one would expect, heavy wine consumption has correlated with high-involvement (Dodd, Pinkelton, and Gustafson, 1996; Goldsmith and d'Hautville, 1998). The highest involvement enthusiasts are also more likely to exhibit variety-seeking behaviour, including maximising their information search. They also tend to consume greater quantities of wine and spend more on it than those less involved (Dodd et al., 1996). Critically, involvement

has been shown to be a key determinant in the formation of the customer's perspective on wine. Some researchers have suggested that age and income are the causal factors most closely linked to the involvement levels of wine consumers (Quester and Smart, 1998). However, it seems that in this case the researchers have confused the corresponding features of high-involvement with its causes. That is, by definition highly involved wine consumers are likely to have the time for their interest (to be a little older) and the money to pursue it, but those necessary conditions are not sufficient cause for high-involvement.

Critically, low-involvement consumers order the attributes of wine differently from the way that high-involvement consumers do, placing less emphasis on region of origin and style (Quester and Smart, 1998). Low involvement wine purchasers, it has been suggested, are less cognitively involved with the correlates of wine (i.e., less inclined to seek information) than high-involvement consumers (Lockshin and Spawton, 2001). However, in Australia low-involvement consumers are no less likely to use grape variety as a cue to purchase, though the region of origin and style of the wine are less important for them (Quester and Smart, 1998). High-involvement consumers are more likely to pay attention to wine writers than any other consumers (Lockshin, 2002).

Methodology

This research took place as part of a larger study which examined the understanding of wine quality amongst three reference groups - wine producers, mediators and the consuming public. The mediator group was comprised of marketing managers, commercial wine buyers, retailers, wholesalers, sommeliers, wine writers, judges and critics. The consumers group included consumers exhibiting a range of gender, age, socioeconomic and involvement characteristics. Consumer involvement was assessed based on a wide range of expressed consumption behaviours, including frequency of purchase, methods of evaluation and information-seeking. Professionals were automatically classed as high-involvement. Comparison between the target groups formed a key element of the analysis.

The research was exploratory, seeking to investigate drinkers' engagement with wine quality and to consider some of the nuances of the process. As qualitative methods are more appropriate when the aim is to generate exploratory data rather than to facilitate predictions (Harper 1994), a qualitative approach was adopted in this study. Once a qualitative approach has been adopted, it is acknowledged that the objective is not to achieve generalisable findings but to provide new conceptual insights (Calder 1977).

Qualitative methods are also recognised to be useful where the operationalisation of concepts is problematic (Barnes 1996), and this is very much the case in the topic area of quality. Two specific qualitative methods were employed: focus groups and individual interviews. Interviews constitute one of the most valued qualitative research methods (Haley, 1996). Due to their effectiveness and flexibility they are used extensively within a wide range of subject areas (Fontana and Frey 1994). Interviews allow informants to articulate the values and beliefs motivating their behaviours (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994), and they can also enable the researcher to access subconscious motivations (Dichter 1964). Interviews in both the individual and focus group formats were appropriate for use in this study as they enabled the elicitation of drinkers' beliefs relating to wine quality and the impact of these beliefs on product choices.

Given the subject matter of the research the focus groups included a short wine tasting, thus making them 'focus tastings' rather than just focus groups. This served two purposes. First the wines selected stimulated and enhanced the participants' exploration of their ideas about wine quality. Additionally, the use of focus tastings allowed the participants to concentrate on the process of aesthetic evaluation in isolation from the normal concentration on extrinsic cues. The tasting took place in the middle of the focus groups after the issue of quality had already been discussed in some detail.

Topics for individual interviews and focus groups were wide-ranging, and designed to cover the whole gamut of issues relating to wine quality and the motivation to drink wine. Topics tended to be open-ended (e.g., "tell me about wine quality", although when informants offered perspectives on some topics more specific questions were asked (e.g., "do you think quality in wine is objective or subjective?").

Informants were drawn from a number of locations across Australia, primarily Sydney, Adelaide and Perth, but also including some regional areas such as McLaren Vale and Margaret River. The selection of informants was made with the aim of obtaining a spread of age and gender and also to ensure a wide variety of wine consumption practices. More informants were sourced from the consumer category as this group constitutes a much larger percentage of the overall population than either of the other two reference groups. In total 58 consumers, 22 producers and 23 mediators were interviewed. Consumers were categorised by involvement level, with 25 consumer informants being categorised as low involvement, 25 as medium involvement and 12 as high involvement.

All focus tastings and interviews were recorded on audiotape and the focus tastings were also recorded on video. In addition, short field notes were kept of each interaction. The recordings and the field notes were transcribed and imported into NUDoIST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Information Searching Indexing and Theorising) software for subsequent coding and analysis. This facilitated the emergence of the key themes from the data and allowed these themes to be examined in greater depth. From the point where data collection began a process of analysis and cross-comparison of responses was employed, not merely to commence the analytic process by developing categories for the data (Janesick 1994), but also to refine future data collection (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Thus emerging themes were able to permeate subsequent data collection, both in an attempt to add plausibility to concepts as they arose (Huberman and Miles 1994) and to seek out possible 'negative instances' (Douglas 1985 p. 49f.).

It can be noted in passing that the informants quoted in the findings of this study tend to be medium- or high-involvement individuals. This should not be taken to suggest that low-involvement consumers had different perspectives. It tended, however, to be the case that where a viewpoint was held it was the medium- and high-involvement informants who would make the point with articulate precision. Consequently they tend to be quoted more often. Where differences in perspective between higher and lower involvement consumers are relevant the point is made explicitly.

Findings

Just as the academic perspective on the nature of quality varies between perceived and objective interpretations, so the wine drinkers interviewed discussed the subjective-objective dichotomy. Understanding how consumers come to adopt either a subjective or objective approach to wine quality is important because it is a precursor to understanding the perceived characteristics of wine quality itself. The findings below are presented using synonyms for informants' names.

Subjective quality

Many informants considered wine quality to be a subjective phenomenon, which equates primarily to their personal taste and is rooted in subjective experience:

Dan (low-involvement consumer): If you sum up quality for me, it's just whether I like it or not, it's just taste. I don't care how big a reputation it has but if I like it then I don't care.

A similar response was given repeatedly. However, whilst subjectivity was commonly offered as a perspective across the range of informants, there was a tendency for the view to be expressed more by low-involvement drinkers than those with higher levels of involvement. Low-involvement drinkers regularly talked about personal taste and 'the eye of the beholder' when asked to discuss the nature of quality. Some high-involvement drinkers also took that stance, but less commonly - although one winemaker in the context of a discussion on subjective quality made the following comments:

Wendy (producer): We went to Italy for a few days and we were with a friend of mine - he was a Serbian. I was trying this wine and I said 'it smells like 'wild fennel'. And he said 'that's it, that's just too much'. I'd pushed him right over the limit. Anyway, it was not quite fennel it was just a little bit wild. He just wouldn't have a bar of it. The next day I pulled up some wild fennel from the path as we walked along and showed him. But he was 'wild fennel. Are you out of your mind?' But, yeah, I saw wild fennel in it. That's why I mean [quality] can only be subjective.

This extract pays particular attention to the nuances of flavour in a wine as a component of quality. It initially appears that Wendy's friend may have been objecting to the precision with which she was dissecting the aromatic profile of the wine. However, both the context and Wendy's concluding sentence suggest that the dispute was more than just a disagreement over the aromatic character of the wine. Rather, she suggests that the complete process of tasting (and by necessary extension, quality evaluation) is personal and therefore subjective.

A subset of the subjectivist approach was suggested by some wine professionals, including wine makers and mediators. They suggested that quality is personal, but it is personal to consumers rather than to themselves. Thus the public decide what quality is. So, in a producer focus group:

Clive: I guess in that sense quality is again measuring the goodness of the wine.

Martin: But who measures it?

Clive: The consumer.

For some the subjectivist perspective (personal taste) shades into a relative perspective on quality. Thus:

Briony (medium-involvement consumer): I might say 'I'm going to buy this because I like it'. But the next time I might feel like 'oh -

it's not so good, I'm not really in the mood for this'. But usually when I like a wine I like a wine.

For Briony taste is subjective, but it is also dependent on mood (and perhaps, by extension, on situation) and is therefore also a relative concept. A few others shared this perspective.

Objective quality

In contrast to the subjective view of wine quality there was a number of informants who held an explicitly objective perspective. In this instance quality may be described as inhering in the product itself, rather than in the personal response to it. This perspective was expressed almost as commonly as the subjective viewpoint, although more notably amongst higher-involvement consumers:

Simon (high-involvement consumer): I think the quality's inherent, [I] really do. There may be styles you don't like - but you can tell the difference between good quality and poor quality in something you don't like. And I think that's fairly easy to do. You know I'm not a great fan of rosés but had quite a few in France. One chap was very proud of this rosé he made...It was nice...very good fruit in it. Good quality wine.

Others mirrored Simon's approach. Martha, who had already defined quality as 'excellence', was asked if fluctuations in the taste of wine were due to variable quality in the product, or changes in her perception:

Q: So you think the quality is inherent in the wine whether or not you're able to pick it up?

Martha (mediator): Absolutely, yes it stays there. I think you're just in a mood to taste or you're in an area where you can [taste effectively].

For many respondents the objective position was adopted distinct from a more relativist position in which situation was perceived to vary the quality of wine. Thus Martha distinguished what was actually in the glass from her situational ability to assess and enjoy it. This view was shared by a number of informants and is in overt contrast to the more relativistic viewpoint expressed earlier by Briony.

Objective approaches to quality were also evident in the view that quality is determined by production processes:

Leo (high-involvement consumer): It gets back to whether it's a well-made wine. If it's a well-made wine...you enjoy it.

Leo is talking at this point within the context of exploring what he considers wine quality to be, and he relates it explicitly to external factors - the way that the wine is made. Some professionals insisted that objective quality is critically important, in some cases for professional reasons:

Umberto (Mediator): I do then start getting a bit picky if somebody says 'this is the best because I think it's the best wine'. I say 'well actually it isn't. You absolutely have the right to say "yes it's my preferred drink" but it may not be the best of its type. And you won't know that unless you do the type of stuff that I do on a regular basis, and you want to learn about that type of thing.'

Umberto tastes widely and regularly for his work, and that, he concluded, puts him in a position to judge wines objectively. Others are entitled to their preferences but they could not, he argued, by extension claim that their preferred wine is the highest quality. It is important to Umberto to maintain this perspective. Were the alternative perspective, that quality is purely individual, to gain widespread acceptance, his career of tasting, evaluating and recommending wines would cease to exist.

As noted above the objective view of quality tended to be held by higher-involvement drinkers rather than low-involvement drinkers (although this was not an absolute rule). Producers in particular were more likely to express a belief in objective quality - though in one instance another winemaker made a caustic observation about this. In a comment after the formal interview had finished, Wendy (who, as we have already seen, adopted a more subjective approach) noted that most winemakers favour an objective view of quality because they want to believe that their wine is 'objectively' better than that of their rivals.

Nevertheless, some medium- and low-involvement drinkers also tended towards an objectivist viewpoint. Where this happened they often separated their preference from any ability to discern quality. Some even disclaimed any capacity to assess quality, though they did not doubt its existence. In what follows Cleo is referring to wines tasted during a focus group:

Cleo (medium-involvement consumer): If you were to ask me which is the best quality I really can't say, because I don't think I'm qualified to know what is the best quality wine.

Cleo accepts that some external, objective quality exists and that others are trained and qualified to judge it. However, she feels that she cannot assess it. This point of view illustrates how objective concept of quality can have an existence alongside personal

preference and it is this relationship which can act as a nexus between the objective and subjective approaches to wine quality. This relationship is expanded upon below.

The role of personal preference

A majority of informants - including a number who initially conceived quality as a subjective process - distinguished their own personal taste in wine from what may or may not be high quality. The following comes from a focus group:

Ellie (medium-involvement consumer): I think taste and quality are related but I think they're different concepts. I've had very well made, very expensive, lovely bottles of wine but they just weren't to my taste. But they were balanced, they were great quality, they were fantastic wines - but I personally didn't like them. And I've gone for a cheaper bottle on the table that I happened to enjoy and everyone else drank the really expensive one.

This viewpoint - distinguishing quality from preference - was widely held across all reference groups and all levels of involvement. As would be expected, it was particularly common amongst those drinkers who adopted an objective view of quality. Ellie, for example, will drink a cheaper bottle that others prefer not to drink (and which is therefore perceived to be 'lower quality') if she enjoys it more than a bottle which is both more expensive and preferred by her companions (and is thus perceived to be 'higher quality').

The view that preference is separate from quality was most clearly expressed by the producers and mediators:

Q: Do you think there's a difference then between people saying 'the wine's good' and people enjoying it?

Richard (producer): At a technical level, yeah. This is the notion of wine show judging - where I think 'this wine's fantastic, and I'll give it a gold medal, but for God's sake don't give me lots of it to drink.' We're supposed to be able to do that... There are wine styles that you've been asked to judge [where that happens]. In my case - sparkling reds - I'm a non believer... So I'd like to think I could judge a class of them and give an appropriate gold medal to a wine that I would not choose to drink in a fit.

Richard accepts that there is an element of objectivity in the evaluation of wine, and that he could exercise his critical faculties to engage with this objectivity. He dislikes sparkling red wine and finds it hard to judge it as a class; nevertheless he does feel he can do it at times if required. His view that show judging - in particular - requires professionals to suspend their personal likes and dislikes,

to achieve an 'objective' judgment about the quality of a wine, was regularly repeated by winemakers.

Only one professional expressed a dissenting view. Wendy (a thoughtful and highly respected winemaker, and also a show judge) was quoted earlier as tending to hold a subjectivist concept of quality. She refused to separate her preference from her decisions as a show judge:

Wendy: I've never given a gold medal to a wine that...I don't like, that I wouldn't want to drink.

For professionals, however, that perspective was exceptional rather than the rule.

For a number of the more knowledgeable drinkers, the issue of preference often focused not so much on style as on specific grape varieties. Many informants, particularly professionals and medium- and high-involvement consumers, nominated a grape variety they did not particularly like. Often that variety was sauvignon blanc. In the following extract Waldemar has been discussing the importance of preference, and its relationship to quality:

Waldemar (medium-involvement consumer): I'll give you an example. I'm not a drinker of sauvignon blanc. Ok, I can recognise very good sauvignon blanc [but] it doesn't mean that I will drink it very often. But I will be able to recognise it's a very good sauvignon blanc.

The distinction Waldemar is making is important, and was made regularly. Quality may be objectively high or low, but the preference for specific flavours is personal and subjective. For consumers this has an impact on the selection of wine as they are likely to choose those varieties and brands they prefer rather than the 'highest quality' bottle on the shelf.

For many drinkers who distinguished quality from preference this differentiation seemed to be a means of resolving the apparent paradox of personal taste and belief in the objective nature of quality. Preference thus seems to be a means of linking a personal, subjective approach to the concept of wine enjoyment with a more objective viewpoint. It allows for the idea that quality is 'out there' and is verifiable independently of what drinkers like to consume, and it allows both perspectives (subjective and objective) to be maintained contemporaneously despite their initial apparent contradiction. In the case of high-involvement drinkers that stance was predicated on an ability to evaluate quality, but then to separate that evaluation from their own preference. For some low-

involvement consumers a split appears to occur between the certainty of what they like and an acceptance that 'objective' quality exists, despite their inability to recognise, evaluate or articulate it. Cleo has already been quoted claiming that she does not think she is qualified to judge the quality in wine. She continued:

Cleo (medium-involvement consumer): I only know what I like...my taste doesn't seem to coincide with any of the judges. Consequently I'm no judge of quality wine. I only know what I like and when you asked us earlier how we judge quality, I don't really buy a wine for quality - I buy it just for me liking it.

Cleo articulates a kind of bafflement by the idea of quality. She accepts that it exists and that it can be evaluated, but she has no comprehension of it - merely of her personal preference. This is very different from Richard's assertion, above, that he can identify good wine even though he may choose not to drink it. Cleo's declaration of inability was often articulated by other low- and medium-involvement consumers.

The purchase decision

Informants often discussed the relevance of quality to their purchases. At times they raised the issue voluntarily and at other times they were prompted for information. No consensus was evident over the relationship between quality and the purchase decision.

Briony (medium-involvement consumer): Probably [quality is] not ... a very good way to choose wine...I'd say taste is the main factor for choosing wine.

Briony's wine selection process was not primarily focused on quality. Ultimately taste was seen to be the main factor. On the other hand, for more high-involvement consumers quality could be seen to be more important.

Morag (high-involvement consumer): I imagine [quality has] got everything to do with what I select.

This was often the perception of both professionals and higher involvement consumers.

It was in the context of repeat purchase that quality per se became most significant and more important than most quality cues (price being the key exception). Repeat purchase seemed to be a key issue for many informants. Quality is experienced and therefore gives confidence. In this way quality acts negatively as a risk

reduction factor and also positively as something to be sought out for its own sake. Thus, when asked about the relevance of quality, one consumer responded:

Waldemar (medium-involvement consumer, Russian migrant): ...I probably look in the first place for the wines that I know, that I drink...I'll use [as an example] Metala. Because it's - in my reasoning - probably the best value for money for wine in Australia, or one of the best. And we drink it a lot. We probably consume four cases a year of this wine ... Same story with d'Arenberg. I really like d'Arenberg. I think they're [a] very good quality winery. And ... they're not too big. Simultaneously, at least, they produce enough wine to world-consistent quality. And in particular I drink a lot of their traditional shiraz which, in my view, you can call it a middle of the road but it's a very soft wine.

Waldemar relates his view of quality to regular purchases of the same wines. Metala is a brand that he is especially fond of and consumes about once per week. D'Arenberg is not a wine but a winery which, he considers, is small enough (perhaps to make interesting wines) yet also large enough to produce consistently good quality wines.

Discussion

Just as some researchers acknowledge the confusing dichotomy of objective/perceived quality (Garvin 1984; Zeithaml 1988), so these findings suggest that wine drinkers may also adopt either a perceived quality approach ('the quality of wine is merely what accords with my taste') or a more objective position (an expectation that there are accepted general norms by which the quality of wine may be judged). The approach of the drinkers sampled seemed to be fairly evenly split between the two conceptual positions, although there was a tendency for higher-involvement drinkers to adopt a more objectivist approach and for lower-involvement consumers to focus more on personal taste (i.e., perceived quality).

This division of conceptual approach inevitably means that marketing the attribute of wine quality is inherently difficult. If drinkers cannot agree on how wine quality actually operates, there is no firm basis for a marketing position predicated primarily on the quality of the wine. However, given the apparent partial significance of involvement level there may be scope for segmentation of the categories. The findings also indicate that those researchers who have focused just on one concept of quality (perceived or objective) may be missing what many consumers feel to be a core facet of quality. For example, the tendency for consumer researchers such as Bolton and Drew (1991), Olshavsky (1985), Ophuis and Van Trijp

(1995), and Rust et al. (1999) to prioritise perceived quality over objective quality may result in a failure to appreciate the possible effects on purchase behaviours of consumers' beliefs that objective quality exists.

Additionally, and crucially, some drinkers may adopt both a subjectivist and objectivist position, even though they are apparently inherently contradictory. This has been hinted at occasionally in the literature, where the suggestion has been made that the quality perception process is more complex than a mere subjective/objective dichotomy. This complexity may involve both objective and subjective elements (Garvin, 1984), or more specifically, that quality involves an engagement between a subjective consumer and an external, more 'objective' context (Steenkamp 1990).

In this study the splitting of preference from quality evaluation was especially relevant to specific grape varieties. It was common for informants to nominate a grape variety that they disliked, although they accepted that high quality wine could be produced from such grapes. Higher-involvement drinkers typically felt that they could still evaluate the quality of a wine although it may not fit with their own personal preference and may not be a wine that they would ever choose to drink. This finding supports the perspective of some wine critics (Basset 2000; Spurrier 2001). By comparison, low-involvement drinkers tended to believe that they cannot recognise objective quality although they accept its existence. One way to view this paradox, therefore, would be to see quality engagement as a tension between a subjective element and an objective element. Objective quality seems to stem primarily from production-related issues. Subjective quality is the core of the individual's relationship with the product, and relates closely to pleasure. It is rooted in the individual's inability to have absolute certainty in the external validity of their evaluation of the product.

There are two ways in which the consumer can reconcile this paradox of the subjective and the objective. One, generally for low-involvement consumers, is to accept the existence of objective quality but to claim no ability to discern it, merely to 'know what I like'. These drinkers start from a subjectivist position but accept that objective quality exists paradoxically alongside that viewpoint. However, objective quality as a means of determining preference has no relevance for them, for they cannot engage with it - they do not understand how to analyse a wine objectively. To that extent they are divorced from objective quality.

The second way of reconciling this paradox was adopted by a few high-involvement consumers and many of the professionals. They

approach a wine systematically with a checklist of points to be considered and/or a benchmark against which it can be evaluated. These approaches are consistent with many professional studies of wine tasting (Basset, 2000; Broadbent, 1979; Peynaud, 1987). Such processes give these drinkers an objective way into engagement with the product. At the same time, while checklists and benchmarks offer a framework for evaluating the quality of the wine they do not necessarily guarantee enjoyment. Thus an individual who drinks wine with this perspective starts from an objective standpoint, evaluates the wine using objective standards, but may reach the subjective position when they gain little pleasure despite the wine apparently displaying the indicators of quality.

These findings have implications for wine consumers. In a market characterised by massive product choice, a large number of suppliers, the extensive use of industry jargon, and a product possessing considerable status symbolism, consumers can find it difficult to make informed and satisfying purchase decisions. Some consumers may find the selection process more comfortable by appreciating the extent to which other consumers can share this difficulty. Similarly, an awareness of the lack of consensus of the subjective/objective nature of wine quality among consumers and industry members alike may allow some drinkers to focus more on their own preferences and to be less concerned with getting the wine selection process 'right'.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations to this research. It has been restricted to an investigation of the consumption of wine, a product with a substantial aesthetic dimension. Relevance for more utilitarian products, however, may be limited. However, any possible conclusions from the research may be expected to relate to wine, at least in the Australian context, and may have some transferability to other products with a large aesthetic component (such as music, food and perhaps clothing). Also, as the study was limited to Australia there is no certainty that the findings could be replicated elsewhere in the world, although the cultural similarities throughout the Anglo-Saxon world suggest that they may at least have relevance in other Anglophone countries. Future research could look to investigate the views of consumers, mediators and producers quantitatively to assess the generalisability of the findings to a representative sample and to replicate the study in other cultural contexts.

References

- Arnould, E. J., and Wallendorf, M. (1994). "Market-Oriented Ethnography: Interpretation Building and Marketing Strategy Formulation". *Journal of Marketing Research*, 31(November), 484-504.
- Barnes, D. M. (1996) "An Analysis of the Grounded Theory Method and the Concept of Culture" *Qualitative Health Research* 6(3): 429-441.
- Basset, G. (2000). *The Wine Experience*. London: Kyle Cathie.
- Batt, P. J., and A. Dean (2000). "Factors Influencing the Consumer's Decision". *Australian and New Zealand Wine Industry Journal - Marketing Supplement* 15:34-41.
- Bloch, P. H. (1986). "The Product Enthusiast: Implications for Marketing Strategy". *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 3(3), 51-63.
- Bolton, R. N., and J. H. Drew (1991). "A Multistage Model of Customers' Assessments of Service Quality and Value". *Journal of Consumer Research* 17:375-384.
- Broadbent, M. (1979). *Pocket Guide to Winetasting*. (sixth ed.). London: Mitchell Beazley.
- Buzzell, R. D., and Gale, B. T. (1987). *The PIMS Principle*. New York: The Free Press.
- Calder, B. J. (1977). "Focus Groups and the Nature of Qualitative Marketing Research". *Journal of Marketing Research*, 14(August), 353-364.
- Compeau, L. D., Grewal, D., and Monroe, K. B. (1998). "Role of Prior Affect and Sensory Cues on Consumers' Affective and Cognitive Responses and Overall Perceptions of Quality". *Journal of Business Research*, 42, 295-308.
- Delbridge, A., and J. R. L. Bernard (Eds.). (1998.) *The Macquarie Concise Dictionary*. Sydney: The Macquarie Library.
- Dichter, E. (1964). *Handbook of Consumer Motivations*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Dodd, T. H., Pinkelton, B. E., and Gustafson, A. W. (1996). "External Information Sources of Product Enthusiasts". *Psychology and Marketing*, 13(3), 291-305.
- Douglas, J. D. (1985). *Creative Interviewing*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

- Fontana, A., and Frey, J. H. (1994). "Interviewing: The Art of Science". In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 361-376). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Garvin, D. A. (1984). "What Does 'Product Quality' Rally Mean?" *The Sloan Management Review* Autumn: 25-43.
- Geene, A., A. Heijbroek, A. Lagerwerf, and R. Wazir (1999). *The World Wine Business*. Utrecht: Rabobank International.
- Gil, J. M., and M. Mercedes (1997). "Consumer Preferences for Wine Attributes: A Conjoint Approach". *British Food Journal* 99:3-11.
- Glaser, A., and B. Strauss (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co.
- Goldsmith, R. E., and d'Hautville, F. (1998). "Heavy Wine Consumption: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives". *British Food Journal*, 100(4), 184-190.
- Grewal, D. (1995). "Product Quality Expectations - Towards an Understanding of Their Antecedents and Consequences". *Journal of Business and Psychology* 9:225-240.
- Grunert, K. G. (1995). "Food Quality: A Means-end Perspective". *Food Quality and Preference* 6:171-176.
- Haley, E. (1996). "Exploring the Construct of Organisation as Source: Consumers' Understanding of Organisational Sponsorship of Advocacy Advertising". *Journal of Advertising* 25(2): 19-35.
- Harper, D. (1994). "On the Authority of the Image". In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 403-412). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Holbrook, M. B. (1994). "The Nature of Customer Value: An Axiology of Services in the Consumption Experience" in *Service Quality*, edited by R. T. Rust and R. L. Oliver. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Holbrook, M. B., and K. P. Corfman. (1985). "Quality and Value in the Consumption Experience: Phaedrus Rides Again". Pp. 31-57 in *Perceived quality: How Consumers View Stores and Merchandise*, edited by J. Jacoby and J. C. Olson. Lexington: D. C. Heath.
- Huberman, A M., and M. B. Miles. (1994). "Data Management and Analysis Methods". Pp. 428-444 in *Handbook of Qualitative*

Research, edited by N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Jacoby, J., and Olson, J. C. (1985). "Preface" In J. Jacoby and J. C. Olson (Eds.), *Perceived Quality: How Consumers View Stores and Merchandise* (pp. xi-xiii). Lexington: D. C. Heath.

Janesick, V.J. (1994). "The Dance of Qualitative Research Design". Pp. 209-219 in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Lange, C., Issanchou, S., and Combris, P. (2000). "Expected Versus Experienced Quality: Trade-off with Price". *Food Quality and Preference*, 11, 289-297.

Lichtenstein, D. R., Bloch, P. H., and Black, W. C. (1988). Correlates of price acceptability. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15(2), 243-253.

Lockshin, L. (2001). "Motoring on the Wine Lake". *Australian and New Zealand Wine Industry Journal* 16:84f.

Lockshin, L. (2002, 11th October.) "Brands Seak Louder than Words". *Harpers*, 16.

Lockshin, L., and Spawton, A. (2001). "Using Involvement and Brand Equity to Develop a Wine Tourism Strategy". *International Journal of Wine Marketing*, 13(1), 72-87.

Lockshin, L., and W. T. Rhodus (1993.) "The Effect of Price and Oak Flavor on Perceived Wine Quality". *International Journal of Wine Marketing* 5:13-26.

Mitchell, W-M., and M. Greatorex (1989). "Risk Reduction Strategies Used in the Purchase of Wine in the UK". *European Journal of Marketing* 23:31-46.

Monroe, K. B., and R. Krishnan (1985). "The Effect of Price on Subjective Product Evaluations". Pp. 209-232 in *Perceived Quality: How Consumers View Stores and Merchandise*, edited by J. Jacoby and J. C. Olson. Lexington: D. C. Heath.

Nerlove, M. (1995). "Hedonic Price Functions and the Measurement of Preferences". *European Economic Review* 39:1697-1716.

Oliver, R. L. (1999). "Value as Excellence". Pp. 43-62 in *Consumer Value: A Framework for Analysis and Research*, edited by M. B. Holbrook. New York: Routledge.

- Olshavsky, R. W. (1985). Perceived Quality in Consumer Decision Making: An Integrated Theoretical Perspective. Pp. 1-29 in *Perceived Quality: How Consumers View Stores and Merchandise*, edited by J. Jacoby and J. C. Olson. Lexington: D. C. Heath.
- Olson, J. C., and J. Jacoby (1972). "Cue Utilization in the Quality Perception Process". *Advances in Consumer Research* 3:167-179.
- Ophuis, P. A. M. Oude, and H. C. M. Van Trijp (1995). "Perceived Quality: A Market Driven and Consumer Oriented Approach". *Food Quality and Preference* 6:177-183.
- Peynaud, E. (1987). *The Taste of Wine* (M. Schuster, Trans.). San Francisco: The Wine Appreciation Guild.
- Quester, P. G., and Smart, J. (1996). "Product involvement in consumer wine purchases: Its demographic determinants and influence on choice attributes". *International Journal of Wine Marketing*, 8(3/4), 37-56.
- Quester, P. G., and Smart, J. (1998). "The Influence of Consumption Situation and Product Involvement over Consumers' Use of Product Attribute". *The Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 15(3), 220-238.
- Reichheld, F. F. (1996). "Learning from Customer Defections". *Harvard Business Review*, March-April, 56-69.
- Reichheld, F. F., and Sasser, W. E. (1990). "Zero Defections: Quality Comes to Services". *Harvard Business Review*, September-October, 105-111.
- Richins, M. L., and Bloch, P. H. (1986). "After the New Wears Off: The Temporal Context of Product Involvement". *Journal of Consumer Research*, 13(September), 280-285.
- Rust, Roland T., J. Jeffrey Inman, Jianmin Jia, and Anthony Zahorik (1999). "What You Don't Know About Customer-perceived Quality: The Role of Customer Expectation Distributions". *Marketing Science* 18:77-92.
- Spurrier, S. (2001). "Making the Grade in Shanghai". *Decanter* 26(8):18
- Steenkamp, J-B. (1989). *Product Quality*. Assen: Van Gorcum.
- Steenkamp, J-B. E. M. (1990). Conceptual Model of the Quality Perception Process. *Journal of Business Research* 21:309-333.

Sweeney, J. C., and G. N. Soutar. (1995.) Quality and Value: An Exploratory Study. *International Journal of Business Studies* 3:51-66.

Tustin, M., and L. Lockshin. (2001). "Region of Origin: Does it Really Count?" *Australian and New Zealand Wine Industry Journal* 16:139-143.

Wine Institute of California. (2001). *Economic Industry Background*. <http://www.wineinstitute.org/communications/statistics/index.htm>.

Zaichkowsky, J. L. (1985). "Measuring the Involvement Construct". *Journal of Consumer Research*, 12(December), 341-352.

Zaichkowsky, J. L. (1988). "Involvement and the Price Cue". *Advances in Consumer Research*, 15, 323-327.

Zeithaml, V. A. (1988.) "Consumer Perceptions of Price, Quality, and Value: A Means-end Model and Synthesis of Evidence". *Journal of Marketing* 52:2-22.

Copyright the Journal of Research for Consumers 2001