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## Sensory expectations generated by colours of red wine labels

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## ABSTRACT

Since there is usually no sales assistance available in supermarkets, wine labels represent the pivotal source of information for consumers at the point of purchase. In particular, it is the colour of the label which largely influences consumers' wine choice. The purpose of our study was to reveal customers' sensory expectations in relation to the flavour of red wines based on their label colours. Moreover, our goal was to examine whether there are any differences in the consumers' expectations according to their frequency of wine purchase and gender. A survey was carried out among respondents who were intercepted in the wine aisles of two stores of an Austrian supermarket chain. The results indicate that label colours have a strong influence on flavour expectations. While, for example, red and black are most likely to create tangy flavour expectations, red and orange are most associated with fruity and flowery flavours. In addition, it appears that frequent buyers have stronger expectations than infrequent buyers with respect to most of the colours analysed. Finally, the customers' gender seems to have little influence on flavour expectations. The results may be considered by wine producers in their label design to create sensory expectations in accordance with the actual flavour of their wine and, hence, avoid any disconfirmation of consumers' expectations when they taste the wine. This is of particular importance when wine is sold in retail stores and consumers cannot rely on their taste experience prior to their purchase.

## 1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to explore which flavour consumers expect in red wines in relation to the colours of the corresponding wine labels. In addition, this paper seeks to find out whether these expectations differ according to the customers' gender and purchase frequency. For that purpose, we have drawn upon findings in sensory marketing as theoretical construct and conducted a survey among customers of Austrian retail stores. The results of this paper should help marketers of red wines design their wine labels effectively.

In the following, the current consumption trends in the Austrian red wine market are explored while paying special attention to the significance of label colours in the decision-making process of wine purchase as well as the complex nature of flavour and its relation to taste. Subsequently, correspondences between different sensory modalities, and, especially, associations between taste and colour, are demonstrated. Afterwards, the reasons for focusing on flavour expectations in the present study are given along with the data and methodology which were applied. Finally, the statistical results are reported and both the theoretical contributions as well as the strategic insights this paper provides for wine producers and marketers are

discussed.

## 2. Current consumption trends of Austrian wine consumers

Like in many other Western European countries wine buying patterns of Austrian consumers have gradually shifted from on-premise towards retail sales (Rowlands, 2013: 45; Austrian Wine Marketing Board, 2014: 61). While markets, such as the UK, US, Italy or France are already well familiar with the distribution of wine through grocery or discount store channels (Lockshin and Hall, 2003: 2), for Austrian wine producers supermarkets are still becoming an important distribution channel (Austrian Wine Marketing Board, 2014: 61), a distribution channel that is, according to Ritchie (2007: 539), used especially by women to buy wine as part of their daily shopping routine.

Although Austria can be considered a white-wine drinking nation, red wines which originate from Austria are gaining market share at the expense of red wines imported from Italy and France (Nielsen, 2014: 68). Nevertheless, while in 2014 domestic wines were dominating the white wine shelves in Austrian retail stores with a volume share of over 70%, Austrian red wines have been facing strong competition from famous red wine producing nations, such as France, Italy or Spain and

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make up for a volume share of only 54% of total red wine sales (Nielsen, 2014: 69). This growing presence of international and national wine brands on retail shelves has led to an increase in competition for Austrian wine producers (Bernabéu et al., 2012: 1229; Rocchi and Stefani, 2006: 33). At the same time, choosing wine in retail stores has become a complex process for consumers (Lockshin and Hall, 2003: 2). In general, wine consumers are confronted with over-crowded wine shelves, which offer, in many cases, more alternatives to choose from than other supermarket categories (Lockshin and Hall, 2003: 2; Rocchi and Stefani, 2006: 33). Moreover, the fact that wine also carries social connotations, as it may be consumed at a dinner party with friends or it may be bought as a gift, makes the purchase decision even more difficult and complex (Barber et al., 2009: 599). Another aspect that adds to the complexity of choosing wine on a supermarket shelf is the inability to taste the product, thus, to assess the quality of the product before purchasing it (Barber et al., 2007: 73). This is an essential shortcoming since taste constitutes, next to variety, the most important factor for Austrian consumers when selecting a wine (Goodman, 2009: 43).

Furthermore, the Austrian wine category is very fragmented, with most of the producers being small to medium-sized businesses who hardly advertise their wine products. Thus, there are no wine brands which have a dominating market share in the Austrian retail market (Sherman and Tuten, 2011: 222; Euromonitor, 2014). Finally, as wine customers can hardly rely on brand names or information from advertisements to judge the quality of wine, they must make their decision based on packaging cues at the point of purchase. In the following, light is shed on the role of packaging and specifically that of label colours found on wine bottles which are offered in retail stores.

### 3. The role of labels with respect to wine purchases in retail stores

By and large, wine packaging has to fulfill three basic tasks at the point of sale. First, packaging has to attract the attention of the consumer browsing the wine shelf and make sure that a particular brand stands out from the array of competing products. As a matter of fact, packaging is the most important instrument for a wine producer to differentiate one's brand from those of other available alternatives offered on the retail shelf (Elliot and Barth, 2012: 184). In other words, according to Rocchi and Stefani (2006: 42), the front label of the wine bottle has to particularly fulfill the task of evoking interest on the part of the customer.

Second, when tasting, that is, trying the product is no option for consumers, as mentioned above, the wine label becomes the pivotal source of information in the retail setting (Elliot and Barth, 2012: 187; Atkin et al., 2007: 337; Lockshin and Hall, 2003: 7), especially since wine is considered an "information-intense experience product" (Bruwer et al., 2011: 5). Barber et al. (2007: 83) found that front labels on wine bottles are the most important cue for consumers to determine what to expect from the content and, in general, the quality of the wine product. In particular, according to Chaney (2000: 17), taste description is the most important information consumers look for. It is worth mentioning that, compared to men, female consumers show a stronger tendency towards reading the label when selecting a bottle of wine (Atkin et al., 2007: 335).

Third, in a self-service environment the wine packaging functions as the "salesman on the shelf" (Rettie and Brewer, 2000: 56). The label has to be attractive and stimulate purchase. It is responsible for generating sales and persuade consumers to finally buy the product.

### 4. Colour as the most important design element of wine labels

In a retail setting, design elements are to 'inspire' wine consumers to purchase a certain wine brand on the basis of "art, imagery and

branding" (Elliot and Barth, 2012: 184). This is especially true for female wine consumers who are more influenced by design elements than men (Bernabéu et al., 2012: 1244). As a matter of fact, it is label design that makes up for the lack of space available on wine bottles/labels for a detailed taste description (Chaney, 2000: 17) as well as consumers' time constraints when selecting wine in front of retail shelves.

Rocchi and Stefani (2006: 43) as well as Barber et al. (2007: 81) have confirmed that, in particular, colour is perceived as an important label attribute which influences consumers' wine choice, that is, when it comes to differentiate a wine bottle from competitive offerings. Moreover, whereas there are many requirements and legal restrictions in relation to the wording of wine labels, the selection of colours is entirely left to the discretion of the designer of the wine label and can, therefore, be applied to make individual statements (Hine, 1995: 216). According to Atkin et al. (2007: 337), colour becomes an even more important element when attracting female wine consumers.

According to Hine (1995: 216–220), generally consumers experience packaging colours on three different levels, that is, physiological, cultural, and associational. The physiological level involves involuntary reactions certain colours generally entail, like red increasing and green or blue slowing down the pulse rate. In addition, especially eye-tracking tests have confirmed the drawing effect of the colour yellow. On the cultural level, visual conventions have evolved in different cultures over time. An example is black, which evokes in a marketing context connotations of luxury and elegance in Europe and the Americas. Moreover, the perception of red as hot, blue as cold, and green as pleasantly neutral generally transcends cultures. On the associational level, packages of particular product categories are usually associated with certain colours, such as the yellow on margarine containers, light blue or light red on milk bottles, or orange on orange juice packages. Having stressed the importance of label colours in retail stores, let us take a closer look at the multisensory nature of flavour.

### 5. The multisensory nature of flavour

When we eat and drink, complex brain processes generate sensations of flavour. These processes have been analyzed by a new scientific discipline called *neurogastronomy* since the beginning of the twenty-first century. The foundations for which were laid by the neuroscientist Shepherd (2006, 2013). Shepherd (2013: ix) has combined brain studies and food studies and rejects the common misconception that foods, like beverages, contain flavours. Yet, as a matter of fact, foods comprise flavour molecules, and it is our brain which gives rise to the flavours of these molecules.

According to Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman (2014: 183), flavour represents one of the most multisensory experiences in our daily lives. Moreover, with respect to multisensory flavour perception, cognitive neuroscientists have made much progress in revealing the mechanisms involved (Auvray and Spence, 2008; Stevenson, 2009; Spence, 2013). Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman (2014: 184–185) and Piqueras-Fiszman and Spence (2015: 168) have detected two categories of senses which determine multisensory flavour perception. On the one hand, there are the *exteroceptive* senses, which include orthonasal olfaction (such as when smelling a steaming soup or wine in a glass), vision (like the colour of the food or drink, such as wine, and the form of the food), and audition (for example the sizzle of the steak, the sound of chopping vegetables, or the sound of clinking wine glasses). This category of senses is generally stimulated before the consumption of food or beverages. In addition, these *exteroceptive* cues play an essential role in creating expectations on the part of the person eating food or drinking beverages (Deliza and MacFie, 1996; Hutchings, 2003; Cardello, 2007; Shankar et al., 2010a, 2010b).

On the other hand, there are the *interoceptive* senses, which include retronasal olfaction, gustation (taste), oral-somatosensation,

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