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Sustainable wine labeling: a framework for definition and consumers’ perception

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Abstract

In the last twenty years there has been a large interest in sustainable winegrowing initiatives worldwide. As a consequence, the wine sector has seen the growth of “environmentally-friendly” and ethical claims according to specific eco-certification schemes and labelling programs. Thus, sustainable claims are becoming credence attributes that compete with other quality indications on a wine label and might influence the choice, the quality perception and willingness to pay (WTP). The objective of this study is twofold: first, to explore the concept of consumers’ perception of sustainable wine and second, to investigate different cluster groups based on three factors identified (belief about environmental protection, beliefs about sustainable wine certification and attitude towards sustainable labelled wine) and WTP.

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1. Introduction

According to the RESOLUTION CST 1/2004, the OIV (International Organisation of Vine and Wine) defines the development of sustainable vitiviniculture as a “global strategy on the scale of the grape production and processing systems, incorporating at the same time the economic sustainability of structures and territories, producing quality products, considering requirements of precision in sustainable viticulture, risks to the environment, products safety

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and consumer health and valuing of heritage, historical, cultural, ecological and aesthetic aspects” (OIV. RESOLUTION CST 1/2004).

Background research has shown that people generally appreciate the idea of “sustainable winemaking”, but they do not know much about it, its meaning or processes (Zucca et al., 2009). Many consumers associated the term “sustainable” mostly to the environmental dimension of sustainability, without a strictly relation to the economic and social aspects. Consumers can be confused by the complex systems of sustainable labelling and some of them are doubtful about “green” claims (Forbes et al., 2009). In this case, sustainable certifications and labels play a very important role: (1) to convey useful information for discerning more sustainable wine and, thus promote more sustainable consumption patterns; (2) to increase product trustworthiness; (3) to “educate” consumers on the topic and the different meanings of sustainability. Although consumers seem not willing to trade wine quality for more environmentally friendly aspects (Lockshin et al., 2012), it is worthwhile to ascertain how sustainable certification on the wine label is perceived. The objective of this study is twofold: first, to explore the concept of consumers’ perception of sustainable wine and second, to investigate different clusters based on three factors identified (belief about environmental protection, beliefs about sustainable wine certification and attitude towards sustainable labelled wine) and WTP. Then, socio-demographic characteristics have been considered to assess whether group’s composition differ considerably.

2. Sustainability in the wine market

In the recent years we have seen a growing interest of sustainable production method from wineries, although it is not clear if this has reflected in consumers’ positive environmental perception and preferences (Mueller and Herve, 2010).

Furthermore, consumers’ choice about wine is considered more complex than for other food products (Lockshin and Hall, 2003) and it is difficult for an individual to judge a bottle just by looking at it. Based on this assumption, it becomes important to explore what the expectations for sustainable wines might be (Barber et al., 2009).

First of all, even though price and quality are still the main drivers influencing wine choice (Rasmussen and Lockshin, 1999), sustainable wine claims might compete with other quality indications on the product label, such as price, brand, region of origin, grapes’ variety and some consumers might be willing to pay a price premium for this attribute (Loveless et al., 2010; Appleby et al., 2012).

As indicated by Thøgersen (2000), in order to purchase a sustainable product, consumers must firstly notice the environmental label and then understand, trust and valorize this sign as a tool and main factor for purchasing decisions.

Background research has shown that consumers generally like the idea of sustainable winemaking, but they actually do not know much about it, its meaning and the processes behind it (Zucca et al., 2009). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that there is a general positive perception and awareness of sustainable wines; however this does not translate into a significant purchasing demand. Moreover, several studies have shown how consumers are skeptical about products with green claims and think that companies induce these environmental issues in order to make higher prices (Peattie, 1995).

One of the strongest barriers against sustainable wine success is that this industry is already perceived as “green” and environmental-friendly, compared to other food and non-food industries (Berghoef and Dodds, 2011).

These circumstances have brought to a lack of transparency about this meaning: even though consumers like the concept of sustainable winemaking, there is a variability of perception concerning wine with eco claims. For instance, some consumers relate such indications to health issues. In a study performed by Stolz and Schmid (2008), organic wine was perceived to be healthier than conventional wine, mainly due to the absence of synthetic pesticides and additives in the winemaking process.

Another research, carried out by Sirieix and Remaud (2010), indicated that even if organic wines are viewed as healthier than conventional wines, most consumers still perceive environmentally-friendly products as too expensive and with a lower sensorial quality image. Additionally, there is a general perception that wine is a “natural” product and therefore the organic claim does not provide a significant diversification as it happens for other food products (Sogari et al., 2013). According to Colman and Paster (2007), wine is perceived as one of the most “natural”

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