

Florence “Sustainability of Well-Being International Forum”. 2015: Food for Sustainability and not just food, FlorenceSWIF2015

## The consumer loves typicality but prefers the international wine

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### Abstract

One of the principal production alternatives in the wine sector is represented by choosing between international grape species in view of creating products with popular tastes or instead preferring autochthonous species capable of bringing out the typicalities of wines and their ties with the territory. The objective of this study is to estimate, with an experimental auction, the difference of willingness to pay for wines with different shares of international grape varieties. The results show that consumers have a general belief that determines a preference for wines made from autochthonous grape varieties. In fact, the values of auction offers limited to information about the grape variety used have shown a willingness to pay greater for wines produced with typical blends than with international blends. However, the auction experiment that uses blind tasting for the wines examined in our study has pointed out a substantial decrease of the premium price for autochthonous grapes varieties. This result therefore highlights the risks of a standardisation of productions and, consequently, a decline in the connection between the wine and the territory. A competition on homogeneous products would inevitably lead to a selection based solely on price, with a loss in terms of variety and quality of the wines and, especially, with the risk of weakening important territorial systems in economic and historical-cultural terms. Communication strategies also aimed at cultivating wine consumption appear to be the principal solutions to adopt in order to limit these dangers.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Fondazione Simone Cesaretti

**Keywords:** Experimental Auction; Taste; Vine; Wine; Typicality

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## 1. Introduction

Food products are closely tied to the territory and have strong historical and symbolic ties with the place of origin (Scozzafava et al., 2014) induced by interactions with the natural resources and the lifestyles of inhabitants (Casini et al., 2013; 2015a). The effect of origin is particularly intense in the case of wine. Exogenous trends and factors in food consumption, however, may relax the tie between consumers' preferences and typicality. These trends may affect the economic sustainability of traditional winegrowers and jeopardise the development of typical productions.

In response to these trends, several winegrowers have started to make wine using higher percentages of non-typical blends. The aim is to produce wine with a more international taste and to increase the potential market. Given the rather rigid production specifications, the option of differentiating products by introducing international grape varieties could in fact prove to be one of the possible strategies to promote the winegrower's image and to obtain greater consumer approval.

The purpose of this paper is to understand whether this strategy is effective in intercepting the preferences of consumers. In fact, while literature has already targeted understanding the importance of typicality with respect to the product considered globally, scarce attention has been devoted to understanding whether this relationship also extends to other attributes of wine, such as blend. In other words, this study intends to understand the consumer's reaction to product changes that veer towards an internationalisation of taste to the detriment of typicality.

Moreover, increasing the knowledge about the consumer's preferences concerning typicality and wine is not only relevant for wine producers, in view of growing economic sustainability (Casini et al., 2014), it is crucial in terms of rural development. The development of traditional wine production can be seen as an opportunity to revive mature markets and promote the sustainability of the production site. Indeed, valorising the tie between traditional production and the territory of origin could bring potential advantages in terms of economic opportunities, environmental and social benefits (DEFRA, 2005; Thomé da Cruz and Menasche, 2014; Bernetti et al., 2013).

The methodology used to estimate the preferences of consumers was experimental auctions with blind tasting of products. The case study involved three vinicultural products characteristic of Tuscany and certified by the CHIANTI CLASSICO DOCG trademark with a share of autochthonous grape species varying from 80% to 90% to 100%.

## 2. Consumers' preferences about geographic indication, tastes and blends

There is no agreement in literature about the influence of sensorial characteristics on consumers' choices. In fact, when explicitly asked, in the course of interviews, about the determinants of choice, taste is cited as the principal factor (Thompson and Vourvachis, 1995). However, by applying an experimental auction with experts of the sector, Lecocq et al. (2004) conclude that the information on the label and in guidebooks influence the willingness to pay more than taste. The cause of the scarce influence of the sensorial aspects on prices could lie in the impossibility to know the taste before purchasing, or in the difficulty and subjectivity of sensorial evaluation, particularly for non-expert consumers.

Among the elements that influence wine choice, the indication of origin is the one that has been most studied. In general, the information on the bottle creates a combination of expectations as to the wine's quality, which constitute the geographic indication on which specific studies exist. Origin can therefore be considered in two distinct manners: as an objective attribute, an attribute of study, or as an index of the region's reputation.

In general, the denomination of origin is one of the most important attributes in wine choice. For example, Skuras and Vakrou (2002) estimate that consumers are willing to pay almost twice as much for a certified product compared to one without certification. In Spain, Bernabéu et al. (2005), and in Italy, Lai et al. (2006) show that the certification of origin is the most important attribute in orienting wine choice. Martínez-Carrasco et al. (2006) and Mtimet and Albisu (2006) also reached the same conclusions, and stressed that whatever the type of denomination (PGI, PDO), it always comes first among the choice criteria of consumers.

Grape variety is directly connected with wine taste and is therefore fundamental in choice. It can be considered as one of the most accessible indicators of organoleptic quality. By establishing constraints on the grape varieties that can be used, the specifications of a denomination of origin partially carry the same information, thus playing down

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