



Critical review

‘Marketing quality’ in the food sector: Towards a critical engagement with the ‘quality turn’ in wine


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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Quality turn
Marketing of quality
Agro-food label
Wine sector

ABSTRACT

Our review explores the role of quality conventions that have emerged since the ‘quality turn’ in the food sector. By examining how the ‘quality turn’ contributes to transforming the wine sector, it asks whether the labeling systems seek to certify the quality of productive practices (informative function) or are intended to create imaginaries of quality as a differentiated business market strategy (symbolic function). After discussing relevant literature in geography and related fields, this review uses two emblematic examples from the wine sector to argue for the need to move beyond the marketing of quality to deepen the analysis and understanding of quality. This analytic insight questions the viability and usefulness of quality conventions aimed at differentiation, territorial development, with a focus on markets with high added value, and argues for the need to open new lines of research and policy in this sphere.

1. Introduction

The ‘quality turn’ has been extensively studied in the geographic literature and in related fields, such as rural studies, management and sociology (Climent-López et al., 2014; Coq-Huelva et al., 2014; MacDonald, 2013). The ‘quality turn’ refers to a widespread shift from mass consumption to the increasing qualitative differentiation of food products (Goodman, 2004). This paradigm shift entails complex transformations that strongly influence the evolution of agro-food systems, most notably the tendency to move from an Industrial-Fordist standardization-and-quantity orientation towards quality conventions (Murdoch et al., 2000).

However, far from clarifying the criteria used to evaluate the quality of food, this trend has resulted in the proliferation of differentiated products and market segmentation. Distinctive certification systems point to the emergence of a new moral economy model based on a food safety culture that entails the bureaucratization of production, packaging and food distribution. This model, however, avoids addressing the real risks involved in food processing or those related to the presence of additives and toxic waste in foods, as well as the real human toll of these problems (Baur et al., 2017). Moreover, legal certification requirements differ among countries and intellectual property agreements, making the information provided partial and asymmetrical

(Conneely and Mahon, 2015).

Our intervention aims to show how the notion of quality in food translates into increasingly complex labeling systems focused on differentiation, which is a symbolic function. This has led to the proliferation of certification-based marketing strategies aimed at increasing the added value of products and preventing price competition from other products (Renard, 2005). We use the wine sector, which has well-developed infrastructure for assessing quality, to illustrate our point but is also to register that it is not without contradictions. Wine is the product obtained from alcoholic fermentation of grapes or grape must.¹ Wines with geographical indications include on their labels information on region of origin, grape variety and year of harvest. Wine could include descriptors of the viticulture process, such as organic or biodynamic. However, consumers are hardly given any information about the winemaking process and oenological practices, aside from general terms used to describe the wine itself (e.g., carbonic-macerated, oaked, etc.). Only information on alcohol content is generally present in labels. Other ingredients and additives are not listed, or are noted but with no indication of amounts (e.g., “Contains sulfites”), despite the fact that some of them are potentially harmful to certain consumer sectors (Annunziata et al., 2016).

Given this absence of information, labels, prizes or wine critics have emerged to foster a framework based on expert opinion that seek to

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¹ European Commission Regulation 491/2009.

define taste, differentiation and pricing (Overton, 2010). The marketing of quality has thus become a business strategy engendering certifications aimed at increasing the value of a wine in a culture of abundance (Paddock, 2016). However, the absence of homogenous information reinforces the nature of wine as a niche market, creating a distance between consumption and production. Ultimately, we show that the growing number of certifications that have no relation to the properties of a wine make informed decisions impossible for consumers. To show how wine differentiation relies upon the marketing of symbolic quality rather than wine's actual properties, we present two controversies revolving around quality conventions currently taking place in the Spanish and European wine sectors. Then, it discusses the criteria of objectivity and transparency used to frame the differentiation of products and their contradictory character.

2. Quality certifications: The challenge of globalization for Spanish DOs

According to Ponte and Gibbon (2005: 7) “there is no ‘universal’ understanding of quality, and, second, [...] quality is cognitively evaluated in different ways depending on what world is used to justify evaluation and action and hence on which broader normative order is invoked”. This approach favored assessing quality criteria based on reputation and prestige imagery that associated the intrinsic characteristics of wine, grape, color or origin, with extrinsic ones, geographical indication, labeling, winery tradition, recognition by critics and/or prizes received. These criteria determine the symbolic capital of a product and, indirectly, the consumer's willingness to pay for a particular wine (Macías Vázquez and Alonso González, 2015).

Climent-López et al. (2014) address the complexity of the ‘quality turn’ by looking at 19 indicators tested in 16 Designations of Origin (DOs) in the Spanish wine region of Castilla y León. However, there has been some debate about the association of quality with the DOs system, which respond to historical, cultural and economic factors of ‘Old World’ wine producing countries like France, Italy or Spain. Sánchez-Hernández et al. (2010) explained how the introduction of the DO system valorized the Spanish wine from 1990 onwards. The Spanish certification of origin system introduced a series of analytical protocols for wine, both objective (volatile acidity, alcohol, sulfur, etc.) and subjective (tasting panels evaluating visual, aromatic and flavor qualities) criteria, thereby ensuring minimum quality standards and territorial differentiation, in a sector previously focused on local consumption and bulk wine production. Certainly, DOs played a key role in transforming the Spanish wine sector, enabling it to enter the global marketplace by establishing minimum quality standards and defending socio-economic structures and actors in their territories. The process also entailed the development of an entire wine industry and its large-scale technification, with large wine companies and cooperatives established in rural areas, favoring increases in production volumes, exports and overall economic revenue for the sector.

However, this model failed to achieve what was, theoretically at least, its *raison d'être*—to add value to wines by assuring consumers that they were buying a differentiated quality product. However, the marketing of quality lacked any real policy to control and promote differentiated productive practices and territorial zoning, but instead prioritized protecting the industrial nature of the wine sector. Ultimately, the model has given Spain's wine sector a huge challenge: while the country currently has the largest vineyard area in the world and is the top wine exporter, its wine sells for the lowest price (see Table 1).

Indeed, the establishment of a model based on minimum quality standards concealed a tendency to produce cheap, homogeneous wine and prevent territorial differentiation of plots and *terroirs* within the DO system. Moreover, legislation prohibits wine producers outside the DO to deviate from its regulatory standards. These producers are barred from including key information on their labels such as village, parcel or

Table 1

Main indicators of wine producing countries, 2015. Source: International Organization of Vine and Wine.

	Vineyard surface (thousands of hectares)	Export volume (millions of hectoliters)	Price per liter (€/l)
Spain	1021	24	1.1
France	786	14	5.37
Italy	682	20	2.5
USA	419	4.2	2.37
Argentina	225	2.7	2.38
Portugal	217	2.8	2.55
Chile	211	8.8	1.74
Australia	149	7.4	1.73
South Africa	130	4.2	1.21
Germany	102	3.6	2.1

region of origin, vintage and grape variety.² For a quality-oriented winemaker,

Wine has sulfites and those are labeled; other food products have sulfites and those are not labeled. The public should be informed about this. But if a producer decides to market his wine outside the DO where it is produced, he cannot include information on the label about the grape with which it is made, nor the vintage, regardless of product quality. In an information society, the absence of information is an absurdity (Spanish winemaker#1, 2016).

This penalizes quality- and *terroir*-oriented winemakers, who produce fine wines and prevents them from reaching potential consumers, especially in high-end international markets. Those producers frequently come into conflict with the DOs and seek out alternate forms of distribution and certification. This is evident, for instance, in the recent emergence of the *terroirist* movement in Spain around the *Matador* Manifesto, which seeks to promote the differentiation of exceptional vineyards and the production of unique wines.

The arrival of ‘New World’ wine producers, such as Chile, Argentina, United States, Australia or South Africa, onto the market aggravates this process of disinformation and/or asymmetrical information. Because New World producers do not abide by the European or Spanish DO system, they are able to include all kinds of information on their labels, including grape variety, vintage and geographic origin, offering fierce competition in terms of both volume and price. To counter the New World's competitive pricing, countries, such as France, Italy, Portugal, Hungary and Germany, have been differentiating the DO system by regions, parcels, soils, grapes, and winemaking processes for decades, allowing them to add value to their wines (Agostino and Trivieri, 2014).

Spain, however, has remained tied to a quality marketing approach that has lacked a corresponding shift in productive practices. Instead, the highly standardized Spanish wine industry has paved the way for any country to produce wines with Spanish grape varieties and similar winemaking techniques, at even cheaper prices and with more label information, threatening the future of an entire productive sector. As another winemaker states:

If a producer in New Zealand wants to make a wine with a Spanish grape variety (obviously outside the Spanish DO system) he will be able to put whatever he wants on the label [...] and a Spanish DO will not be able to control it (Spanish winemaker#2, 2016).

This analysis of the Spanish wine sector points to two potential solutions that could ensure the sustainability of quality products and the DO system. First, a commitment among key stakeholders in the wine sector is needed to control and certify productive practices that provide an actual differentiation in wine quality; and, second, an effort must be made to help consumers make informed decisions based on

² European Commission Regulation 479/2008.

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