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Poetics

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# How rosé became high class: Categorical divestment and evaluation<sup>☆</sup>



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 23 November 2015

Received in revised form 13 October 2016

Accepted 18 October 2016

Available online 29 October 2016

### Keywords:

Classification

Omnivorous consumption

Categories

Boundaries

Elites

## ABSTRACT

Elite consumption is increasingly described through theories of omnivorous taste, driven by the pursuit of authenticity. However, the literature on classification, cultural logics, and semiotic codes has the potential to offer a complementary perspective on the dynamics involved in the valorization of cultural objects as high-status. The case of rosé wine—and the newfound status the category gained from 2001 to 2011—provides an illustrative case. Based on analysis of elite wine writing during this period, I show how critics redefined rosé as commensurable with European traditions of winemaking and worthy of elite lifestyles of leisure. Rosé was not accepted on its own terms—high-status critics appropriated rosé through a process of “categorical divestment.” Through explicit and implicit comparisons, rosé was recast as a serious wine and stripped of its feminine, low-status associations. Critics then invested the category with new meanings, using elite consumers and lifestyles as the referents for its worth.

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## 1. How rosé became high class

In 2004, *New York Magazine* declared rosé the new “it” wine (Steinberger, 2004). However, this “it” wine was, even in the not-so-distant past, a denigrated category in the wine world. The style of rosé renders wines that are often sweet, approachable, uncomplicated, and best-consumed young—leading critics to suggest rosés “posses the faults of both white and red wines, but none of their benefits,” (Jackson, 2008:9–10). Critics described rosé as a frivolous category, suitable for fueling summer fun but unworthy of critical examination. As recently as 2002, an influential wine writer remarked, “anyone who starts analyzing the taste of a rosé in public should be thrown into the pool immediately,” (Asimov, 2004). Yet, just a few years later in 2010, the same critic would write that the “call to abandon critical faculties is an insult, both to rosé and to us, the consumers,” (Asimov, 2010:D4). How did critics change their definitions of rosé, remaking the category and discursively appropriating it? The case of rosé wine poses questions about the dynamics at work in the consecration of a culturally degraded commodity as “high status.” Namely, what semiotic codes and underlying logics do important audiences draw upon to discursively recognize and reformulate a beleaguered product’s identity?

Cultural capital and distinction have become key concepts in the study of consumption (Bourdieu’s, 1984), with changes in aesthetic judgments analyzed through the dynamics of distinction and the logic of taste within a field. Today, scholars

<sup>☆</sup> For helpful critiques and suggestions at various stages of this project, thanks are due to Ashley Mears, Juliet Schor, and Emily Barman. Thanks are also due to the three anonymous reviewers whose insightful comments greatly improved this manuscript.

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describe high-status consumers not as snobs but omnivores, selecting distinguishing products, places, and experiences across the chasms of high, middle, and lowbrow taste (see Holt, 1998; Khan, 2011; Peterson & Kern, 1996). Across a variety of fields, cultural omnivores often rely upon constructions of “authenticity” as a highly salient criterion in their aesthetic judgments of worth, rather than standard classifications of high and low culture, whether in the consumption of urban space, food, music, or even sex (Brown-Saracino, 2007; Grazian, 2003, 2004; Johnston & Baumann, 2007, 2010; Lindemann, 2010; Lloyd, 2010; Zukin, 2008).

Constructions of taste, worth, and identity—even authenticity—are reliant upon audience framings and the implicit and explicit comparisons such cultural understandings are predicated upon, suggesting the importance of processes of categorization to the movement of cultural objects within the status hierarchy. Such processes have drawn the attention of organizational and economic sociologists (Espeland & Stevens, 1998; Khaire & Wadhvani, 2010; Zhao, 2005), and provide a useful complement to taste-based approaches within the study of consumption to such questions. Based on an analysis of a pivotal ten years of wine writing in the *New York Times* and *Wine Spectator*, I show how critics worked to codify and disseminate a new, high-status, category identity for rosé.

I document how critics engaged in a process of “category divestment,” disavowing previous definitional boundaries and identities, thereby opening the category up to new and wide-ranging comparisons—both to wine in general and to specific intra-style distinctions. These comparisons not only redefined the category, they also rendered rosé a meaningful and relevant object open to critical evaluation. In the face of category-wide stigma, the salient comparison for critics centered on widely used yet style-specific production techniques as a means of highlighting differences they constructed between “good” and “bad” examples of the style. To that end, they worked to emphasize *good rosés*’ possession of sensorial qualities formerly associated only with styles outside the category—disavowing many former hallmarks of the style to emphasize serious, intellectual, and masculinized attributes.

## 2. Changing hierarchies of taste: omnivores and the quest for authenticity

What types of comparisons would we predict could establish a new basis for authenticity within the category of rosé, making these wines high-status consumer objects and commensurable with other valorized wine categories? Approaches examining changing standards of taste within the framework of distinction represent a dominant approach in the literature on culture and consumption (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1998; Johnston & Baumann, 2007; Peterson & Kern, 1996; Peterson & Simkus, 1992). Dramatic transformations in value and meaning are often central to the social lives of cultural objects (Appadurai, 2011; Schneider 1994; West 2010), and are consonant with an underlying logic of distinction (Holt 2000).

The recognition that elite objects of consumption may be increasingly diverse and highly variable without eroding a governing logic of distinction has generated a significant body of literature on omnivorous taste. Elite consumers do not simply gain distinction through consumption of highbrow cultural objects (Peterson & Simkus, 1992), making homologous relationships between class and standard categories of high, middle, and lowbrow culture tenuous (Holt, 1998). Instead, the ability to judge and consume cultural objects across the full range of consumer goods through transposable criteria of valuation (i.e. an omnivorous disposition) is, in and of itself, a basis for distinction (Johnston & Baumann, 2007, 2010; Peterson & Simkus, 1992). In some ways, distinction becomes more salient as a relatively narrow set of appropriate goods must be consecrated out of seemingly endless arrays of cultural products (Johnston & Baumann, 2007:169).

Food has long been recognized as a status good, and dietary taste serves as an arena for intense status competition (Bourdieu 1984; Johnston & Baumann 2010; Mennell 1985). However, contemporary “foodies” consume differently than the Francophile gastronomes of the past (Johnston & Baumann, 2007, 2010). Foodie discourse is omnivorous, and a breadth of appropriate tastes beyond the French culinary canon is now requisite for distinction (Holt, 1998; Johnston & Baumann, 2007). The importance of broad yet *appropriate* taste cannot be understated, for it is central to the functioning of the omnivore’s stratagems of distinction. Omnivorousness does not imply that consumers will like every cultural object (Van Eijck, 2001). Rather, omnivorousness suggests that status is gained through displaying discerning aesthetic judgment across a broader field of goods (Johnston & Baumann, 2007:200).

Like rosé, many cultural goods can travel up and down the status spectrum. An almost mirror image is the case of synthetic fabrics. Embraced as trendy, first for their ease of maintenance and later for their bright neon colors, such fabrics ultimately became maligned as inauthentic, environmentally harmful, and uncomfortable (Schneider, 1994). In other cases, there isn’t a dramatic reversal in a cultural object’s status writ large. Unlike examples where a consecrated field opens up to more democratic taste criteria, the low-status field of greeting cards is rendered distinctive through selective consumer practices and appeals to discourses of authentic, tasteful sentiment (West, 2010; cf. Johnston & Baumann, 2007, 2010).

Taste-based approaches often point to such constructions of authenticity as a critical component of transformations in the value of cultural objects. Constructions of authenticity are a driving force in contemporary consumer culture (Brown-Saracino, 2007; Gibson, 2014; Grazian, 2003, 2004; Johnston & Baumann, 2007, 2010; Lindemann, 2010; Lloyd, 2010). Overwhelmingly, the consensus in the literature is that authenticity does not take a singular form: it is variously defined by different stakeholders (Brown-Saracino, 2007), tied to field dynamics (Carfagna et al., 2014; Lindemann, 2010), and often strategically produced and manipulated (Grazian, 2003). Authenticity is also intimately tied to omnivorous taste (Johnston & Baumann, 2007, 2010); as a *seemingly* objective characteristic, authenticity lends air of objectivity to distinguishing judgments concerning cultural worth (Johnston & Baumann, 2007, 2010).

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