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The Effect of Tasting Sheet Sensory Descriptors on Tasting Room Sales¹

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Naïve wine shoppers often have difficulty selecting or purchasing wines, pouring over wine descriptions to help them decide what wines to buy. But shoppers in stores might act differently than shoppers in tasting rooms. This study describes how tasting sheet descriptors used in wine tasting rooms might actually be detracting from wine sales there.

Studies have established that consumers consider simple taste and smell descriptors to be important label information for choosing wines (Charters et al., 2000). And they find elaborate back-label taste descriptions to be valuable when purchasing wine for a special occasion (Mueller et al., 2010).

Additional studies have shown a positive impact of descriptors on sales of food and wine products while other studies support the idea that not only sales but also overall perceived quality of a product are enhanced by descriptors. If these studies hold true, smaller wineries, such as those in New York, that have little to no national marketing and rely on direct-to-consumer tasting room sales to return a profit, may be able to use smell and taste descriptors to improve their tasting room sales.

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Tasting sheets, or tasting notes, are used in tasting rooms to list information about featured wines. These notes often include sensory descriptors as well as other supplemental information (Bender, 2008), such as awards, food pairings, price, discounts, and wine club membership options (Held, 2012). But are these description tasting sheets affective at providing useful information to tasting room visitors and increasing purchases?

In 2012, nine wineries in central New York participated in a study to find out how descriptions on tasting sheets influence wine sales in tasting rooms. This is particularly important to wineries that rely on direct-to-consumer sales to sell the majority of their wines, such as many of those in New York’s wine country.

| Wine | Tasting Notes | Pairings |
|--|--|---|
| Elios Mediterranean White (under \$11) | Crisp, fresh, dry with ripe citrus on nose | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bonhomme Brie from Isigny Ste. Mère Grilled Tempeh Kabobs |
| Innovación Torrontés Pinot Grigio (under \$10 for 1 liter) | Floral, tart with hints of lush peach and apricot | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seaside Cheddar, aged 15 months Farfalle with Roasted Chicken and Sun-Dried Tomato Cream Sauce |
| Perrin Nature Côtes du Rhône (under \$13) | Cherry, blackberry and earthy notes with hint of black pepper; elegant tannins | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fourme d’Ambert cheese Grilled Tuna Niçoise Salad |
| Evodia Old Vine Garnacha (under \$11) | Complex and big with flavors of strawberry preserves, black raspberry and a hint of violet | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manchego Turkey Sausage-Stuffed Grilled Portobellos |
| Vitiano Cabernet Sauvignon Sangiovese (under \$11) | Dark berry, plum sage, toffee | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> P’tit Basque cheese Grilled Salmon with Mediterranean Salsa |
| Presto Moscato Dolce (under \$11) | Honeyed peach and apricot flavors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brillat Savarin Drizzled over fruit Strawberry Fool |

Tasting rooms alternated tasting sheets by weekend, one including sensory descriptors and one omitting sensory descriptors. At the end of each weekend, tasting room managers compiled information on daily wine bottle and (in the case of seven wineries) dollar sales. Researchers measured the impact of tasting sheet with or without descriptors on wine sales. They found that both bottle volume and dollar sales were higher when tasting sheets *without* sensory descriptors were used. Other variables that impacted wine sales included the specific tasting room, the day of the weekend, and festivals occurring in the area. These impacts were accounted for when assessing the impact of tasting sheet descriptors.

Why did researchers find this effect? One possibility is that complex and unfamiliar sensory descriptors may be intimidating to inexperienced consumers, who may face further frustration if they try a wine based on its sensory description but cannot recognize the same attributes, or if their expectations are not met. Descriptors that are unappealing to certain consumers may deter those who connote the descriptor with a negative sentiment, which result in less liking of the product (Wansink et al., 2000).

Many tasting sheets give lengthy descriptions of each featured wine, which could be contributing to information overload and poorer purchase decisions (Jacoby et al., 1974). By removing these descriptors, there are fewer terms on the tasting sheet and less information that consumers must process. In a tasting room environment with staff to guide tasters, the extra and often repeated sensory information may not be necessary. The intimate tasting room experience and the idea of tasting room staff as guides may also contribute to the increase in sales without sensory

descriptors provided on a tasting sheet. The wine tasting experience, particularly satisfaction with service, has been reported to increase consumer liking and wine purchases (Dodd and Gustafson, 1997). Thus, removing sensory descriptors may allow tasters to become more interactive, resulting in a greater chance of liking and wine purchase.

Many tasting rooms, particularly in New York, rely on the tasting room for the majority of wine sales. Determining factors that affect sales can help tasting room managers/owners optimize the tasting room experience for maximized profits.

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