



## Experts, Conformity and Peer Pressure in Food and Wine Tasting: an Experimental Analysis

Paolo Buonanno, Matteo M Galizzi, Paolo Vanin  
U. of Bergamo, U. of Brescia and CHE, U. of Padua

We investigate experimentally the role of authority and peer pressure on food and wine tasting. In particular, we aim at assessing whether individual blind tasting might be affected and biased by the judgements expressed either by peer reviewers or by experts. The hypotheses at test are the following: a) whether food and wine refereeing is a genuine elicitation of individual tastes or is rather affected by the presence of other subjects' judgements; b) if the latter is the case, whether could matter if an opinion is expressed by other peers or by a leading expert; c) by which behaviour, such as social conformity, imitation, contrarian behaviour, passive adaptation to field experts etc, are the individual opinions more affected; d) which differences and similarities emerge between food and wine blind tasting and assessing. To empirically test such hypotheses, we design a four-stages experiment in which a pool of representative non-expert consumers are called into a lab and assigned to either a food ( $f$ ) or a wine ( $w$ ) treatment and, for either treatment, to a variant in which, at the second stage, the expressed evaluation is announced either by all the subjects in the lab (*peer treatments*  $fp$  and  $wp$ ) or by an invited expert (*expert treatments*  $fe$  and  $we$ ). Previous to being exposed to the proper experiment, subjects are asked to answer a detailed questionnaire in which their individual preferences on an exhaustive list of foods, drinks and aromas are elicited. Subjects are also asked several psychometric tests controlling for salient behavioural individual traits, such as risk aversion, cognitive reflection and self-monitoring.

In the first stage, subjects are then presented either three small tasting plates of finely-cooked food involving the same sample of fresh ingredients ( $fe$  and  $fp$ ) or three glasses of the same type of wine, from three leading wine-producers in the same area in North Italy, having slightly different aromatic profiles ( $we$  and  $wp$ ). They are then asked to express their opinion on each of the plates (treatments  $f$ ) or on each of the wines (treatments  $w$ ) in a relative rank from the first to the third place, to evaluate each of them on a 0-100 scale and to express their willingness to pay, in euro, for a dish ( $f$ ) or a bottle ( $w$ ) of them. In the second stage, in the peer treatments ( $fp$  and  $wp$ ), subjects are announced the aggregate ranking and evaluations, and the average willingness to pay on plates ( $fp$ ) or glasses ( $wp$ ) computed from the expressed opinions by all subjects in the lab. On the other hand, in the expert treatments ( $fe$  and  $we$ ) an expert invited and presented into the lab communicates to the subjects his own ranking, evaluations and willingness to pay on plates ( $fe$ ) or glasses ( $we$ ). In the third stage, at any treatment, subjects are then told that they are going to be randomly selected to win either a 4-persons tray of the preferred food ( $fe$  and  $fp$ ) or a bottle of the preferred wine ( $we$  and  $wp$ ). They are finally asked whether they want to change or to review the ranking, the evaluation and the willingness to pay for the plates ( $fe$  and  $fp$ ) or glasses ( $we$  and  $wp$ ) expressed at the first stage and, if so, to correct them and to confirm the final choice. At the fourth and last stage, random selection takes place to determine which subjects is selected to win a tray of the preferred food ( $fe$  and  $fp$ ) or a bottle of the preferred wine ( $we$  and  $wp$ ), all the selected subjects receive their award, while the non-selected are paid a show-up fee.



We then carry on standard statistics and run micro-econometric analysis and a difference-in-difference estimation to assess whether subjects review their expressed evaluations, ranking and willingness to pay and, if so, at which extent and direction, and how subjects in the two paired treatments *fp-wp* and *fe-we* act comparatively. We argue that, while peer pressure and conformity seem to play some role on both food and wine assessing, imitation of experts' opinions is much more likely in wine tasting.