



How Young Adults Perceive and Consume Wine: An Exploratory Comparison of French and American Consumers

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In recent years, the wine industry has faced many difficulties including oversupply, harsh competition and profound changes in terms of consumption. In traditional wine-producing countries, for instance, consumption is constantly decreasing while it is steadily increasing in others. Given these worldwide changes in wine consumption patterns, many wine marketers are beginning to show interest in new segments of consumers such as young adults.

Although statistics indicate limited wine consumption by this category of consumer, relatively little is known about young adults and what they think about wine: How do they perceive wine in general? Do they actually like wine? How does it compare to other beverages? What cognitive associations are made in respect to wine? How does the transition from non-consumer to consumer take place? What criteria are used by young consumers when choosing to purchase a wine? Are the consumption patterns of young adults becoming homogeneous around the world or do important cultural differences between international wine markets remain?

The goal of this exploratory research is to investigate these questions using the focus-group method. Four different groups of young adults, French and American students aged 18 to 25, were studied and compared. The research process is characterized by a four-step approach. First, to gather initial impressions and to avoid strong group pressure, a free expression and word association phase took place. Then, students were invited to discuss various aspects of wine: personal and family history, drinking habits, benefits sought, cultural influences, etc. In the next phase, the groups were asked to identify criteria used when choosing a wine. Finally, a test was conducted to see how the young adults perceived and evaluated two different wines adopting different marketing approaches.

The data obtained from the group interviews is analyzed from both cultural and marketing perspectives. Although some findings show similarities between French and American consumers such as the importance of family influence and tradition, other results suggest strong cultural differences concerning for example health issues and consumer behavior. Furthermore, different choice criteria are used by the two groups of students. French students tend to focus on the occasion or consumption context, the type of meal and the region of origin while Americans place more importance of price, word-of-mouth and expert opinion. In both groups, marketing criteria such as packaging, labels and brands appear to have a limited influence on behavior and the product tests even suggest some hostility towards the use of marketing techniques in the wine industry, suggesting the need for wine marketers to better understand and communicate with this essential target market of young consumers.