The Legacy of Gurus: The Impact of Armin Diel and Joel Payne on Winery Ratings in Germany
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Gault Millau, undoubtedly the most important wine guide in Germany, has been published annually since 1994. The 2018 edition of what has often been considered the “bible of German wine” is, therefore, the guide’s 25th anniversary issue. During this period, the publisher and the editors experienced at least two “shocks” that can be used to analyze the impact of “wine gurus” on the consistency of winery ratings. First, Armin Diel – one of the co-editors of the guide from 1994 to 2009 – stepped down in the latter year due to massive protests by leading wine makers against a highly controversial “voluntary fee” of € 195 suggested by the publisher. Second, Joel Payne, the remaining co-editor, in June 2017 announced that he would leave Gault Millau and start a new wine guide “Vinum”, the first edition of which appeared on Nov. 24th 2017 (Gault Millau followed three days later on November 27th 2017 with a new team of editor and tasters).

The “Critical Events” From the beginning of his editorship, Armin Diel was criticized for his “dual role” as a wine critic on the one hand and as a wine maker on the other. Apart from writing extensively on wine, Diel is the owner of “Schlossgut Diel”, one of the most prestigious estates in the nahe area. Although his winery was never rated – but always listed and favorably described – in Gault Millau as long as he was one of its editors, he has always been accused of being “biased.” In the summer of 2009, some of the leading German wine producers “declared war” on Christian Verlag, publisher of the German Gault Millau, in a widely distributed open letter. The producers were upset by the publisher’s re- quest to pay a “voluntary marketing fee” of €195 to cover the production costs of the guide. Since the relations between some of the leading wine producers and the Gault Millau’s editors had been reported to be strained for some time already, the former took this request as their reason to “revolt” against the publisher’s course of action. What made this move particularly credible – and threatening to Gault Millau – was the fact that the 14 producers had in previous years always been praised and honored by the guide’s editors. Following a heated debate, Armin Diel announced that he would step down as co-editor of Gault Millau.

In the summer of 2017, Christian Verlag sold the license to publish Gault Millau to Zabert + Sandmann, presumably due to financial distress. Joel Payne – along with his new deputy Carsten Henn – decided to stay with Christian Verlag and start a new project. He managed to bring on board “Vinum”, a Swiss-based monthly wine journal whose editors wanted to expand their portfolio to include an annual wine guide. He was able to convince the majority of the tasters that he had been working with for quite some time to stay with him (13 out of 18) and made clear that he sees the 2018 Vinum wine guide as an update of the 2017 Gault Millau and in a row with its previous 24 editions. The 2018 edition of Gault Millau was put together by a newly established team of tasters led by editor-in-chief Britta Wiegelmann, who was, ironically, previously the editor of Vinum wine journal. Only two of Payne’s former collaborators joined forces with Wiegelmann and stayed with Gault Millau.

1 Although selling about 20,000 copies every year, the guide has always been reported not to be profitable.
2 In the 2010 edition of the guide – the first one after Diel’s departure – Schlossgut Diel received the second highest possible rating (4 out of 5 grapes) and has retained that appreciation since then.
3 The average reputation of the 14 producers was 3.79 (out of a maximum of 5) while that of the remaining 883 producers included in the guide in 2009 was only 1.51 (this difference is statistically highly significant).
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Since Diel and Payne have often been considered “Siamese twins”, I do not expect to find an impact of Diel’s departure on subsequent winery ratings in Gault Millau (Hypothesis 1). However, since Payne took with him to Vinum most of the tasters that he had been working with at Gault Millau already, I expect to find a stronger effect of the 2017 Gault Millau ratings on the 2018 ratings (the first edition) published in Vinum than on the 2018 ratings in the most recent edition of Gault Millau (Hypothesis 2). Moreover, since Payne had to replace some of his tasters, I can distinguish between teams whose composition has remained unchanged and teams with one or two new tasters (each of the 13 wine growing regions in Germany is usually covered by 2 or 3 different experts). Since the two tasters that stayed with Gault Millau have been and continue to be in charge of the same region (Baden) under the new editor, it is possible to make the same distinction for the latter guide too. It is plausible to assume that the rating behavior of newly formed teams is more restrictive/less gen- erous than the behavior of experienced teams (Hypothesis 3).

Data

The data sets I use to test my hypotheses have been compiled from the 2008 to 2010 and the 2014 to 2018 editions of Gault Millau as well as the 2018 edition of Vinum4. Each of the two guides uses a similar rating system to distinguish between five different levels of reputation (grapes in Gault Millau and stars in Vinum):

1. producer of consistent quality (around 30 percent of all listed wineries)
2. producer of high quality (around 25 percent)
3. producer of very high quality (around 20 percent)
4. producer belonging to national elite (around 8 percent)
5. producer with worldwide recognition and appraisal (about 2 percent).

In each of these five categories, the best producers are awarded another “half star/grape”, indicating that they are already close to the next higher reputation level (about 15 percent of all listed wineries). In addition, half a star/grape can be awarded to promising newcomers, whose future performance is carefully monitored by the respective guides’ experts. It appears that the distribution of the reputation scores is virtually identical in the two guides. The mean (standard deviation) is 2.05 (1.17) in the 2018 Gault Millau and 1.96 (1.15) in the 2018 Vinum guide (the full table is available from the author upon request).

4 The 2018 edition of Gault Millau covers 963 wineries and the respective edition of Vinum 950 estates (862 are listed in both guides). Currently, the number of independent estates is about 7,3000, suggesting that roughly 13 percent of them are listed in at least one of the two guides.