

Debunking Critics' Wine Words
Can One Distinguish the Smell of Asphalt from the Taste of Cherries?
(No Accounting for Taste)

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I report my tests of the hypothesis that wine consumers cannot match critics' descriptions of wines with the wines themselves. My results suggest that testers' ability to match the descriptions with the wines is no better than random. I report on more than two hundred observations of wine drinkers who engaged in the following experiment.

The drinker faces 3 glasses of wine, two of which contain identical wines and the third contains a different wine. I record whether the drinker can distinguish wines—whether he can tell the singleton from the doubleton and, if the drinker can distinguish, which wine he prefers. I present the testers with descriptions of the two wines written by the same wine critic/reviewer. I find that 51 percent of the testers who can distinguish the wines correctly match the description of the wine with the wine itself. The percentage matching does not significantly differ from the expected-if-random half.

I have recorded the sex of the testers and I can find that men can distinguish the wines better than random, but women cannot. The differences are so small, even though significant, however, that the exact F-test detects no significant difference between the ability of men and women in these experiments. The results span tests of wines from Bordeaux, Burgundy, the Rhone, Spain, Germany, and Australia; the tests use only still wines, all less than ten years old.

¹ Also, V. Duane Rath Professor of Accounting, Graduate School of Business, University of Chicago, 1101 East 58th Street, Chicago IL 60637; 773.702.7261; fax 206.202.2114; roman.weil@gsb.uchicago.edu. I prepared this paper for the 11th Oenometrics Meeting of the Vineyard Data Quantification Society, Dijon, May 21-22, 2004. Some past attendees asked, "Why does an academic accountant do such work?" I respond as follows. First, note that accounting is an intellectual discipline even though you probably think of it as bookkeeping and tax reporting. Accounting records in aggregating numbers information about complex transactions. Then, it attempts to enable users of that information to deduce from the numbers the underlying reality and how to use the data in decision making. Similarly, wine reviews and ratings record in aggregating numbers useful information about complex sensory experience. This paper attempts to help the user decide how to use the reported data in making decisions. Natasha Tantsura assisted in the compilation of the data for this research and in the writing of this paper. Neither she nor I can distinguish better than random.