

AND YOU COULD WIN* 1 OF 3 MACBOOKS
ORDER NOW
SUPER, NATURAL BRITISH COLUMBIA* HelloBC.com/escapes
Feedback - Ads by Google

THE POUR

Wine's Pleasures: Are They All in Your Head?



Lara Klove for The New York Times

By ERIC ASIMOV
Published: May 7, 2008

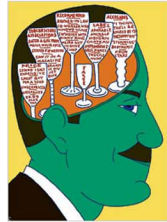
THE mind of the wine consumer is a woolly place, packed with odd and arcane information fascinating to few. Like the pants pocket of a 7-year-old boy, it's full of bits of string, bottle caps and shiny rocks collected while making the daily rounds of wine shops, restaurants, periodicals and the wine-soaked back alleys of the Internet. It's harmless stuff, really, except to those within earshot when a wine

The Pour

A blog about wine, beer and spirits.

Go to Blog >

Enlarge This Image



Seymour Chastet

Readers' Comments

"I look for wines from smaller, family-run wineries, particularly from unusual regions. There are some excellent wines, and often some great bargains." *Jibrom, New Hampshire*
Read Full Comment >

Yet in recent months American wine drinkers have taken their turn as pop culture's punching bags. In press accounts of two studies on wine psychology, consumers have been portrayed as dupes and twits, subject to the manipulations of marketers, critics and charlatan producers who have cloaked wine in mystique and sham sophistication in hopes of better separating the public from its money.

One of the studies was devised by Robin Goldstein, a food writer, to try to isolate consumers from outside influence so they could simply judge wine by what's in the glass. He had 500 volunteers sample and rate 540 unidentified wines priced from \$1.50 to \$150 a bottle. The results are described in a new book, "The Wine Trials," to be published this month by Fearless Critic Media.

The book wraps the results in a discussion of marketing manipulations and statistical validity, but a brief article in the April 7 issue of Newsweek magazine, naturally, seized on the book's populist triumphs: a \$10 bottle of bubbly from Washington state outscored Dom Pérignon, which sells for \$150 a bottle, while Two-Buck Chuck, the cheap Charles Shaw California [cabernet sauvignon](#), topped a \$55 bottle of Napa Valley cabernet.

"Their results might rattle a few wine snobs, but the average oenophile can rejoice: 100 wines under \$15 consistently outperformed their upscale cousins," the article exulted.

Two caveats are in order here. First, it turns out that the results of the tastings are more nuanced than the Newsweek article let on. In fact, the book shows that what appeals to novice wine drinkers is significantly different from what appeals to wine experts, which the book defines as those who have had some sort of training or professional experience with wine. The experts, by the way, preferred the Dom Pérignon.

Second, there is, of course, no such thing as the "average oenophile," as Newsweek put it. Most people in the wine trade understand that consumers have any number of reasons for their buying decisions, whatever their psychological and financial state. Some are reassured by easy-to-understand labels with friendly animals. Others want only naturally produced wines or bottles with a modest carbon footprint. Some are status-seekers and score-chasers, while others are contrarians, or only drink red wine.

But assuming for the moment that it's true that most drinkers prefer the cheap stuff, why does anyone bother buying \$55 cabernet? One answer is provided by a second experiment, in which presumably sober researchers at the [California Institute of Technology](#) and the Stanford Business School demonstrated that the more expensive consumers think a wine is, the more pleasure they are apt to take in it.

The researchers scanned the brains of 21 volunteer wine novices as they administered tiny tastes of wine, measuring sensations in the medial orbitofrontal cortex, the part of the brain where flavor responses apparently register. The subjects were told only the price of the wines. Without their knowledge, they tasted one wine twice, and were given two different prices for that wine. Invariably they preferred the one they thought was more expensive.

More Articles in Dining & Wine >

Breaking News Alerts by E-Mail

Sign up to be notified when important news breaks.
Sign Up
Privacy Policy

ANTHONY BOURDAIN
All New Mondays 10 pm e/p
Travel Channel
Anthony Bourdain Blog
Click Here
Get your fill at [travelchannel.com/bourdain](#)

MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED | BLOGGED | SEARCHED

1. Thomas L. Friedman: Flush With Energy
2. Maureen Dowd: Keeping It Rielle
3. Gail Collins: Ken Doll in Lust
4. Personal Health: Sorting Out Coffee's Contradictions
5. Charles M. Blow: Racism and the Race
8. Is Obama the End of Black Politics?
9. Comic-Book Idols Rally to Aid a Holocaust Artist
10. Study Finds Settling Is Better Than Going to Trial

Go to Complete List >

The New York Times OLYMPICS
nytimes.com/olympics
Continuous coverage of Olympics 2008
Also in Olympics:
• Highlights from the opening ceremonies
• Follow the schedules of your favorite sports
• "Inside the Rings" video report

ADVERTISEMENTS

Need to know more?
Get 50% off home delivery of The Times.



The New York Times
nytimes.com/health
ALL THE NEWS THAT'S FIT TO CLICK

THE XPS™ M1530
LEARN MORE
XPS DELL
Advertise on NYTimes.com

Ads by Google

what's this?

What does Decanting do?

Gary Vaynerchuk host of WLTV will show you exactly in this video
[tv.wineinlibrary.com/](#)

Learn How to Make Wine

Learn by doing. Make your own custom wine, wherever you live.
[www.orushpadwine.com](#)

Wine Refrigerator Sale

Free Shipping On Select Wine Refrigerators. Dual Zone From \$199.
[CompaqAppliance.com/WineCooler](#)

Big surprise. Sommeliers all over know that the hardest wine to sell in a restaurant is the cheapest bottle on the list. "Yeah, clients don't want to be embarrassed in front of a date, so they don't order the cheapest wines," said Fred Dexheimer, the wine director of the BLT restaurant group. The fact is, the correlation between price and quality is so powerful that it affects not just our perception of wine but of all consumer goods.