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Study Finds Opportunity for Smoke-Impacted Wines Amid Wildfire Challenges

Research highlights consumer openness to smokey flavors, suggesting marketing strategies for winemakers facing wildfire-related losses.

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A recent study reveals that some consumers are open to trying smoke-impacted wines, presenting new opportunities for winemakers facing challenges from wildfire smoke. Conducted by researchers at Oregon State University and in New Zealand, the study found that individuals who enjoy smokey flavors in food and beverages are more likely to accept smoke-impacted wines. The research also highlighted the influence of label information on consumer acceptance. Elizabeth Tomasino, an enology professor at Oregon State, emphasized the significance of these findings for the wine industry, noting the potential market among certain wine drinkers.

The increasing frequency and intensity of wildfires globally have significantly affected the wine industry. An economic analysis estimated that the 2020 wildfires on the U.S. West Coast resulted in losses of up to $3.7 billion for the wine sector. In response to these challenges, Oregon State scientists received a $7.65 million grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to study smoke's impact on wine. Their research has led to several breakthroughs, including identifying compounds that contribute to smoke impact in grapes and developing spray-on coatings to prevent off flavors in wines exposed to wildfire smoke.

The latest study, published in Food Research International, explores consumer attitudes toward smoke-impacted wine, a relatively unexplored area. Tomasino and Jenna Fryer, a doctoral student, sent both smoke-impacted and non-smoke wine made from Oregon pinot noir grapes to New Zealand. Collaborating with Amanda Dupas de Matos and Joanne Hort at Massey University, they recruited 197 participants for the study. New Zealand was chosen as the research site because its winemaking industry has not been significantly affected by wildfires, allowing for unbiased consumer responses.

The study identified two consumer groups: one that favored smoke-impacted wine (110 participants) and another that did not (87 participants). The smoke-liking group rated the wine at an average of 6.86 on a nine-point scale, while the smoke-disliking group gave it a 3.26. Interestingly, the introduction of labels increased the liking of smoke-impacted wines among the dislikers from just over three to more than five on the scale. One label explicitly referenced wildfires with the phrase “Smoke Stack, experience the 2020 vintage with this unique, lightly smokey wine.” The labels had little effect on the smoke-likers, whose scores remained above six.

These findings suggest that winemakers have potential strategies to market smoke-impacted wines effectively. Blending, a common winemaking technique, could involve mixing smoke-impacted wines with non-impacted ones. Additionally, targeted labeling and marketing could appeal to the smoke-liking consumer group. Tomasino noted that consumers might be more forgiving of smokey wines than winemakers anticipate, indicating that winemakers have more options for selling wines made from smoke-affected grapes.