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Wine industry rethinks gendered language as inclusivity becomes a priority amid declining global sales

Experts urge use of clear, descriptive terms to make wine more accessible and welcoming to diverse consumers

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At a recent wine tasting at Grand Cata, a shop in Washington, D.C.’s Shaw neighborhood, a producer described his wine as “masculine.” Pedro J. Rodríguez, the shop’s co-founder, remembers pulling him aside to suggest using different language. Rodríguez explained that wine should be for everyone and that classifying it in gendered terms could alienate people from different backgrounds and orientations. He emphasized the need for sensitivity and understanding of the audience.

The use of gendered language in wine is not new. Across the industry, sommeliers and salespeople often describe bold, tannic reds as masculine and lighter white wines as feminine. This binary approach is common in marketing and conversation, but it has become increasingly controversial. Some professionals find these descriptors helpful for explaining differences in style and mouthfeel. Others argue that such terms are outdated and may discourage people from exploring wines outside of perceived gender boundaries.

Eric Teasley, a certified wine specialist and educator in Wyoming, Michigan, acknowledges the challenge. In 2023, he wrote a blog post for his wine shop using gender binaries to help customers understand wine’s weight and texture. He asked readers to consider whether a wine was “BIG (masculine)” or a “little girl of a glass.” Teasley says his intention was to simplify complex concepts for shoppers, not to reinforce stereotypes. He did not receive complaints but recognizes that this language can be sensitive and divisive.

Teasley also points out that the masculine-feminine framework does not capture the full range of wine styles. He recalls tasting a rosé of pinot noir that he described as “androgynous,” defying easy categorization. This highlights the limitations of using gendered terms to describe something as nuanced as wine.

Many experts now advocate for more straightforward language when talking about wine. Chris Taylor, a professor at the University of Houston’s Conrad N. Hilton College, suggests focusing on clear descriptors like aromas, flavors, and food pairings rather than arbitrary human qualities. For example, describing a cabernet sauvignon as having red fruit and leather notes that pair well with lamb provides more useful information than calling it “manly.” Taylor believes this approach makes wine more

accessible and less intimidating for consumers.

The impact of gendered language goes beyond individual preferences. Valentina Di Camillo, a winemaker at Tenuta i Fauri in Chieti, Italy, warns that dividing wines along gender lines can limit choices and discourage people from trying new styles. She shares the story of a male friend who enjoys rosé—often labeled as feminine—and questions whether he would continue to order it if repeatedly told it was not meant for him.

This issue comes at a time when the global wine industry faces significant challenges. Wine sales are declining worldwide. In response, governments in France have spent over 200 million euros destroying surplus wine, Australian growers have uprooted millions of grapevines, and California winemakers have been advised to remove tens of thousands of acres of vineyards. With market pressures mounting, few businesses can afford to alienate potential customers through exclusionary language or marketing.

Rodríguez at Grand Cata believes the solution is greater inclusivity. He argues that everyone should feel welcome in the world of wine, regardless of background or identity. As the industry adapts to changing consumer expectations and economic realities, many professionals agree that moving away from gendered descriptors is an important step toward making wine more approachable for all drinkers.