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New Study Reveals How Non-Experts Judge Wine Quality Without a Sip

Consumers Redefine What “Good” Wine Means

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It's clear that most consumers look for good value for their money. With many other products, you can tell right away or check if they are good, but with wine, it's not that simple. How can we tell if a wine is good without tasting it?

Vinetur on Wednesday, November 5, published a study that examines how most non-expert consumers decide what counts as "quality" in wine when they cannot taste the product before buying it. The report arrives in a market under pressure, with the International Organisation of Vine and Wine estimating 2024 global production at 225.8 million hectoliters and consumption at 214.2 million hectoliters, both multi-decade lows. The study frames this environment—defined by inflation and weaker purchasing power—as the context in which "value for money" becomes the decisive trigger and in which consumers fall back on shortcuts, or heuristics, to select a bottle.

The central divide the study identifies is between trained tasters and everyone else. Experts judge intrinsic cues such as aroma, structure, and texture and can verify quality through experience. Non-experts, who make up the majority of buyers, do not have that option at the point of sale and instead rely on extrinsic cues—price, label, packaging, region, brand name, ratings, and reviews—to build an expectation of the liquid inside. The report argues that this expectation is the real battleground for the industry as volume declines and competition intensifies on the shelf, on the screen, and at the table.

Price sits at the top of the decision tree. The study reiterates that for most shoppers the rule of thumb remains "price equals quality," and it cites neuroeconomic research showing that when a wine is presented as more expensive, the brain's pleasure centers respond more strongly, increasing the drinker's reported enjoyment even when the liquid is identical. But the study also warns that this effect has limits. A high price sets a reference point. If the wine fails to meet that expectation in the glass, consumers judge it more harshly than a cheaper bottle of similar quality. The authors call this the "reversal" and say producers need a "plausible floor" of intrinsic quality for any price they set.

Beyond price, the report walks through the signals consumers actually see and interpret. Bottle shape and color act as quick hints about style—Bordeaux for Cabernet and Merlot, Burgundy for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, Alsace flutes for aromatic whites—while bottle weight continues to carry a legacy association with premium status. The authors describe this as a sustainability paradox because heavy glass is a major contributor to wine's carbon footprint, but they note recent research suggesting

weight may be less decisive at the moment of purchase if other cues are clear. Closure choice is presented as a settled question for most use cases. Natural cork still signals tradition and longevity, but screw caps have shed their stigma, especially for whites, rosés, and reds meant for near-term drinking, where they deliver reliability without a perceived quality penalty in many markets.

Labels are described as the lead salesperson in retail. The paper points to eye-tracking and neuroscience studies that show design elements capture attention and forecast choice in seconds. It highlights a sustained shift toward playful or humorous brand names in the United States that reduce intimidation and signal approachability for younger buyers. At the same time, the label's semiotics continue to sort bottles into "traditional" and "modern" personalities that consumers read quickly and often subconsciously.

Origin remains a durable marker, but the study argues that its usefulness depends on the buyer's knowledge. Old World appellation-first labels require the consumer to already know what a place implies in terms of grape and style, while New World varietal-first labels lower the cognitive load and help novices navigate quickly. The authors link this difference to long-run commercial advantages for varietal-forward branding and caution that high–cognitive load regions require more education and hand-selling.

Trust, according to the study, has shifted from centralized authority to peer consensus. Critics' scores still anchor pricing and velocity in the premium tier, but consumer medals are described as weak signals due to a "pay-to-play" perception. Peer reviews on platforms like Vivino and CellarTracker are presented as the dominant trust mechanism online, with academic work showing social influence from fellow consumers outweighing expert ratings and price in shaping evaluations. The authors advise producers and marketers to move budget from competitions to structured review generation and management.

Channel is presented as the variable that reorders all these cues. In supermarkets, the fight is visual and locational. Labels, price points, shelf height, and promotional displays drive decisions in a time-pressured environment. In restaurants, the bottle is often

offstage and the deciding cues become the server's or sommelier's recommendation, the by-the-glass list as a low-risk trial, and food-pairing guidance on the menu, with digital wine lists favored by younger guests. In e-commerce, the "infinite shelf" makes filters—price, region, and varietal—the primary tools, and the sort-by-rating function turns peer scores into the new middle shelf. In direct-to-consumer channels, the tasting room experience and the brand story collapse the gap between extrinsic promise and intrinsic proof, converting discovery into wine club loyalty and higher-margin repeat sales.

Two growth currents are singled out as emerging quality heuristics of their own. Certified organic and biodynamic cues have become strong signals of health, authenticity, and responsibility, with Millennials driving demand and the global organic wine market projected to expand rapidly through 2030. The no- and low-alcohol category continues to grow on health and moderation trends, especially among Gen Z, but the report says its future hinges on delivering mouthfeel and flavor that meet wine drinkers' expectations while clearly signaling sophistication in the absence of alcohol.

The study's strategic advice follows its diagnosis. Producers are urged to align price, packaging, and palate so the wine tastes like its price, to shift from heavy glass toward lightweight formats while reframing the signal around sustainability, and to use closures pragmatically rather than dogmatically. Marketers are told to abandon one-size-fits-all plans and build channel-specific toolkits, to reallocate spending from competitions to social proof and influencer partnerships with credible voices, and to codify and deploy the brand narrative across back labels, digital storefronts, and social platforms. Distributors are encouraged to segment portfolios by the problems they solve in each channel, to price in the education required for high–cognitive load regions, and to deliver assets that win the filter-based battles online.

Vinetur positions the work as a response to a market that has become both more cost-sensitive and more complex. In its view, most consumers are not assessing tannin grain or acid balance at the shelf. They are reading signals, weighing trust, and managing risk. The report treats those signals as the true currency of competition and argues that, with volumes falling and budgets tight, mastery of cues rather than medals will determine who earns the next scan, click, pour, and case.