

**Country-of-origin effect and millennials' wine preferences—A comparative
experiment between France and Italy**

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Abstract

For wine consumers, the country-of-origin effect still exerts significant influence, even though probably differently from what it was earlier, especially for newer consumer segments. Among these, millennials represent the most interesting segment of the present and future, even though studies on millennials' behaviour are insidious and newer consumer segments are emerging (Generation Z). This study focuses on this parameter through a comparative analysis of French and Italian wines—first, on the country-of-origin effect on millennials' wine preferences, and second, on the possibility of managing this influence by adopting a wine marketing mix based on the innovative 4Es model. The outcomes of the experiment on 121 millennials, despite the limitations of the study, highlight interesting changes—compared with the wine consumption behaviours of the past—regarding the country-of-origin effect and the possibility of managing it. The results confirm, similar to the literature on the 4Es model, the possibility of wide areas of action for wine educational marketing initiatives that can change or enhance the country-of-origin perception.

Keywords

millennials; wine markets; country-of-origin effect; marketing mix; 4E model; experimental marketing.

This paper is in compliance with ethical standards

Conflicts of interest

None

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Introduction

France and Italy have always been vying for the world leadership in volume of wine production, which has an estimate of around 292 million hectolitres for 2018 (OIV, 2019). For several years, Italy has held the record for wine production, and its 2018 harvest is about 55 million hectolitres, or about 19% of the global production (OIV, 2019).

If Italy leads in wine production in terms of quantity, France holds the record commercially—the average price per litre of French wines on the international markets is much higher than that of Italian wines. In exports, the average price per litre of French wine is around 5.84 euros, while it is around 2.67 euros for Italian wine (Nomisma, 2017). This gap widens even more in the case of sparkling wines (*ibid.*): 16.87 euros for the French bubbly against 3.52 euros for the Italian ones (this comparison is simplified, though not exhaustively, by the competition between Champagne and Prosecco).

The situations of Italy and France have been taken into careful consideration: Italy produces the most wine globally while France best enhances the wine (e.g., the average price per litre). Italy and France are global 'extreme cases' (Eisenhardt, 1989), and therefore, this study conducts a comparison between the two.

Moreover, in several 'blind' tastings by experts, French wines have not always been the winners. For example, in 1972, the success of Sassicaia (an Italian wine) in the Cabernet Sauvignon segment, in London and in 2016, the success of Nyetimber (an English wine) in the sparkling segment (competing against several champagnes) in Paris. Nevertheless, as it always happens in the world of wine, the categories of 'experts' (less than 5% of the potential market: Moulton and Lapsley, 2001) and 'non-experts' (over 95% of the potential market: *ibid.*) must be distinguished.

In general, however, it is reasonable to imagine that the history, tradition, and reputation of France in the world of wine generates a considerable effect, especially at the international level, in the appreciation of the overall quality of French wines (Vrontis and Pappasolomou, 2007). Consequently, that translates into a higher average selling price per litre (Brooks, 2003; Schamel, 2003; Capitello et al., 2015).

It is not yet clear whether and how the reputation of the country-of-origin affects newer consumer segments in wine consumption and hence, the focus is now on millennials, the segment on which wineries are investing the most, knowingly or unknowingly. Considering that they were born in the early 80s and later, millennials as consumers:

- are of legal age to drink (from 18 to 35 years)
- (probably) have a job (more likely than Generation Z—those born in the late 90s and later) and, thus, disposable incomes (unless there are macroeconomic problems of a single country or a single geo-political-economic area)
- are on average more educated (compared to the previous generations)
- are on average more frequent international travellers (e.g. purchase of low-cost tickets for travelling)
- are more interconnected (use of smartphones, tablets, and other devices that can be connected to the internet)

This study aims to investigate if and how millennials' French and Italian wine preferences are influenced by the country-of-origin effect. Additionally, this study strives to verify whether an increase in knowledge (through educational marketing) of non-expert consumers (Aqueveque, 2015) influences the perception of the reputation as it does in the other consumer/market segments (Bruwer and Buller, 2012).

Literature review

The country-of-origin effect is relevant in many aspects of marketing, as studies on the subject seem to confirm (Winit et al., 2014; Cleveland et al., 2016). Some product categories are significantly affected by it: food, in particular, and especially wine (Felzensztein et al., 2004; Sjostrom et al., 2016; Rodrigues and Parr, 2019).

Moreover, the *terroir* concept, which has been extended to other products/markets also, is typical for wine (Festa et al., 2015). The country-of-origin effect seems to maintain some appeal for wine consumers (Dogan and Petkovic, 2015), though with different specifications (Bresciani et al., 2016), mainly due to the evolution of the sector itself, from the Old World (Europe in general) to the New World (US, Chile, Argentina, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand) and Third World (China, India, Brazil, Russia, and others) (Hussain et al., 2008; Banks and Overton, 2010; Sam and Thompson, 2012; Saenz-Navajas et al., 2013).

Furthermore, as is the case with other products/markets, the wine market also deals with the consumer segment of millennials—a segment that is difficult to understand in depth because they are motivated by factors not often related to traditional consumer behaviour (Pomarici and Vecchio, 2014; Spielmann et al., 2016). The wine industry will continue to increasingly focus on this segment because of the promise it holds for wine consumption in terms of number of consumers and income (Thach, 2013; Villanueva et al., 2015).

This study answers two questions. First, the question of a possible country-of-origin effect on millennials' preferences as wine consumers and second, the question of a possible change in that influence through improved knowledge (McClung et al., 2015; Rodrigues and Parr, 2019). These questions become more important considering that the global wine consumption is at around 240 million hectolitres, with a steady decline in the Old World consumption and a steady growth in the New World and Third World consumption (OIV, 2018).

Research design: objectives and methodology

The literature has theorised and successfully verified an innovative formula of wine marketing mix. It is not structured as 4Ps (product-price-promotion-place) but as 4Es (expertise-evaluation-education-experience) (Festa et al., 2016) because it is based essentially on the approach to wine consumption from a sensory perspective, depending on the technical level of consumer information/awareness. Therefore, to verify whether the perception of the country-of-origin effect using more appropriate knowledge can be modified, we adopted the 4Es model as our methodological approach (Festa et al., 2016).

We aim to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. Is the country-of-origin effect, with specific regard to French and Italian wines, active in millennials' perception?

RQ2. If so, can the 4Es model of wine marketing mix modify millennials' perception of the country-of-origin effect, with regard to French and Italian wines?

Any study investigating the possible answers to these questions will inevitably be qualitative and exploratory, as it tries, after the essential 'Yes/No' answers, to bring out the 'how' through a (possible) 'why'.

We conducted a field survey using an experimental marketing approach—applying an experimental action that constitutes the marketing action under study to small groups of subjects (later calculated all together)—and then measuring the 'before' and 'after' results of the experimental action. This methodological infrastructure is a causal research technique, focusing in particular, on a single experimental group and, even more in particular, to the 'before and after' category.

This technique has one limitation: apart from the sampling accuracy, which is discussed later in a specific analysis of the experimental groups, in the absence of a control group, the experimental technique on a single group with the 'before and after' measurement is vulnerable to the interaction of the experimental action with other causes, which could vary in number and uncertainty. Nonetheless, the technique in question is considered sufficiently reliable: first, because the design of the experimental action process has sought to contain, as much as possible, any potential distortion resulting from other causes and second, because the experimental action is clearly the prevalent source of influence in any differences between the 'before' and 'after'.

The wine marketing experiment

The participants were recruited and selected using a two-step sampling process. Participants were initially recruited through mailing lists and the Facebook page of the postgraduate course in 'Wine Business' of the University of Salerno (convenience sampling). The subsequent selection procedure was based on three criteria (purposive sampling): the subjects had to be born after 1980, they were neither French nor Italian, and they had no technical expertise in wine tasting. The motivation for these three criteria is as follows.

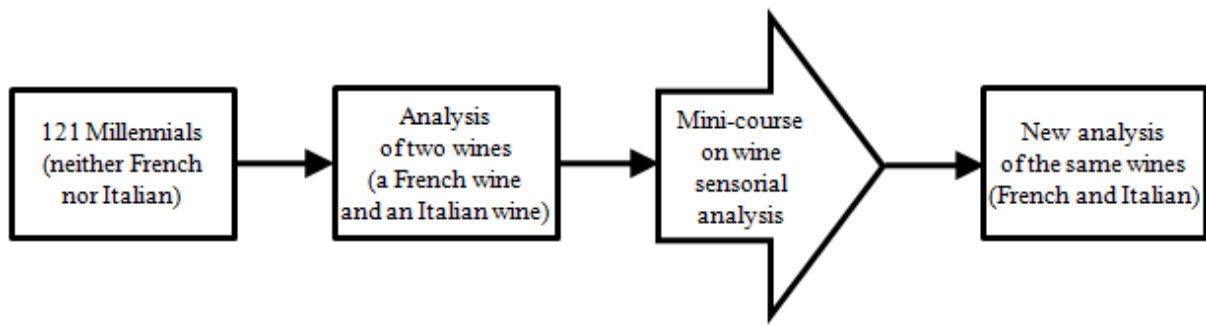
- a) Being born after 1980 is a personal condition to qualify the participants as millennials.
- b) Being neither French nor Italian is a cultural condition to ensure the participants are not influenced by any 'patriotism' in the reputational comparison between France and Italy.
- c) Having no technical expertise in wine tasting is a technical condition to verify the possible effects deriving from the experimental action (Wiedmann et al., 2014).

After verification of the above, 121 subjects were admitted to the experimental sessions. The final number of participants in the experiments can be considered satisfactory for obtaining reliable results because:

- 1) The study in question is an exploratory research, whose main aim is to investigate the 'how' and 'why' of a possible 'if' (Creswell, 2009).
- 2) For any type of population, '... the sampling distribution of the mean [...] becomes normal for $n = 30$ or greater' (translated from Barile and Metallo, 2002, p. 92).
- 3) A sample greater than 30 is considered reliable by many scholars (Morse, 1994 and 1995; DePaulo, 2000; Latham, 2013) to reach saturation, which is the main challenge for sample size in qualitative researches (Malterud et al., 2016).
- 4) Studies on consumer behaviour in wine marketing in the last decade have mostly adopted a qualitative approach, using surveys of small samples of consumers or focus groups (Capitello et al., 2015, p. 118).
- 5) The three abovementioned criteria for sample selection are very stringent, giving strong information power to the sample and reinforcing the qualitative research reliability (Malterud et al., 2016).

In practice, the experimental action took place over several sessions, as shown in Fig. 1. The main contents of the global wine marketing experimental action are discussed below.

Fig. 1 - The structure of the wine marketing experiment (several sessions)



In each session, the researchers gave participants a ritual welcome to the experimental environment (a conference room without distractions). In addition to two goblets, the participants were given a document containing three questionnaires: questionnaire no. 1 for the initial classification, questionnaire no. 2 to be filled before the experimental action, and questionnaire no. 3 to be filled after the experimental action (the questionnaires had been previously tested in a pilot study with 8 participants).

After completing the first questionnaire, the participants were served the two wines by a sommelier—the French and the Italian (in alphabetical order), with the labels (and, therefore, origins) clearly visible, so that the participants could be exposed to the possible influence of the country-of-origin reputation. Here, two completely different wines with structural or qualitative conditions would have sufficed for this experiment: hence, two wines of the same colour (white) were chosen, with similar characteristics from a sensory point of view (Sauvignon Blanc and Fiano).

The choice of the individual wines was entrusted to an master taster (i.e. recognised at the national level) from the Italian Sommelier Association (AIS), the largest sommelier association in the world. Another sommelier from the AIS (a third level sommelier, who is also the Marketing Director of the territorial association of sommeliers and fluent in English) was also engaged in the experimental sessions.

In the ‘analysis of the two wines’ part of the experiment, the participants were free to interact with the wines they were served. After giving them a reasonable amount of time, they were asked to fill in the second questionnaire (after the tasting but before the experimental action).

The experimental action 'mini course on wine sensory analysis' coincided with a mini course (lasting 1.5 hours) on the organoleptic examination of wine using visual, olfactory, and taste-olfactory investigation (to provide substantive knowledge for better understanding of the wine under analysis), with subsequent application of the wine marketing mix model based on the 4Es (Festa et al., 2016)—where product is replaced by expertise, price by evaluation, promotion by education (for pairing), and place by experience. After the experimental action, the participants were invited to taste both wines again (with continuous service) and fill in the third questionnaire (after tasting and after the experimental action), accomplishing a 'new analysis of the same wines'.

Results and discussions

The first piece of evidence that emerges from the experiment concerns, almost surprisingly, the research intuition. Of the 121 participants, only 15 consider the French reputation for wine better than the Italian (12.40%) and 106 chose the Italian wine (87.60%). Therefore, for drastic results, the experiment could have been stopped at this stage because the starting point of the investigation seems to contrast with this evidence but two considerations allowed us to continue and consider the results useful.

Firstly, the experiment investigates if there is country-of-origin reputation in wine for millennials and if so, whether this perception can be manipulated by adopting the 4Es model (not necessarily with Italian wines getting better 'after' but maybe also with French wines getting better 'after'). Secondly, millennials perhaps do not care so much about French wines' reputation (the fact that it is higher in reality is testified by its higher average price per litre in the international markets) and in this comparison, they could have perceived the Italian wines' reputation as younger, easier, and more accessible (on accessible goods for millennials, cf. Mundel et al., 2017). Obviously, it is not possible to generalise this hypothesis on the basis of only 121 subjects but given the exploratory role of the study, these considerations seem important to be explored in future research.

In truth, 'normality' seems to get re-established after the two wine tastings, without the experimental action (i.e. the first tasting, without the mini course on wine sensory analysis). At this point, 105 of 121 participants (86.77%) chose the French wine (most likely because they liked the French wine more).

The situation changes after the experimental action (i.e. the wine tastings that take place after the mini course on wine sensory analysis) as a preliminary step for applying the 4Es model (i.e. in the presence of probable effects of the experimental action). At this point, 75 of 121 participants (61.98%) chose the Italian wine and 46 (38.02%) chose the French wine. An in-depth analysis of the experimental dynamics provides two crucial results. The first is that the experimental action (the mini course on wine sensory analysis as the preliminary step to applying the 4Es model) further confirmed the model reliability, disregarding the possible interaction with the country-of-origin reputation. This can be inferred based on four circumstances:

A.1) The judgment regarding the French wine after the experimental action increased in 106 out of 121 cases (87.60%).

A.2) The judgment regarding the Italian wine after the experimental action increased in all 121 cases (100.00%).

B.1) The price range assigned to the French wine increased in 91 out of 121 cases (75.21%).

B.2) The price range assigned to the Italian wine increased in all 121 cases (100.00%).

After ascertaining the efficacy of the experimental action, the second finding concerns the possible interaction of the 4Es model with the country-of-origin effect. The results show that, after the experimental action, 61 out of 121 participants (50.41%) changed their opinion/judgment on the preferred wine. In other words, 61 participants, who started off with a preferred wine before the experimental action and before tasting the two wines, changed their opinion after the experimental action (probably under the influence of the country-of-origin reputation).

Even with all the limitations described below, it is possible to affirm with certainty that a significant number (50.41%) of current or potential millennial wine consumers, if involved first in learning wine sensory analysis and later being exposed to the 4Es approach, might change their initial opinion, due to the country-of-origin reputation, regarding the wine to purchase/consume.

Research limitations

The first and most important limitation of this study concerns its very nature: it is an exploratory research and is not designed and implemented to allow for statistical generalisation. The sample under investigation is not representative of the large population of reference (millennials who are neither French nor Italian) for at least two reasons: the limited number of participants (121) and the nature of the sampling procedure (non-probability sampling, because it was done purposely on the basis of convenience).

Another possible limitation is the experimental environment. The participants were Erasmus students in Italy and the experimental sessions were all conducted in an Italian environment, although the experimental action was carried out completely in English. It is, therefore, possible that some distortion, due to a 'hospitality' effect, could have taken place. In our opinion, however, such distortion is very unlikely, especially because at the beginning of the experiment, it was clearly, repeatedly, and politely explained that the answers have to be sincere in the interest of the experiment (and of the host environment).

Scientific implications

Theoretically, the use of the 4Es model in wine marketing mix is an interesting methodological approach, continuously providing empirical evidence. Presenting wine as a cultural good and decoding it commercially using a deeper knowledge of wines seems essential for wine marketing mix in international markets and for newer market segments (millennials).

Further, the cultural experience of discovery because of the accumulation and management of new knowledge, also seems to contribute to overcoming prejudices, positive or negative, on the country-of-origin reputation. In the case of this study, this effect was analysed in the comparison between two (positive) national reputations that are 'extreme'.

It seems possible, therefore, that this approach can be successful in other circumstances too, when the quality of the wine is accompanied by a country-of-origin reputation that is not optimal or even negative. This can facilitate research in infinite scenarios, to verify if and how the 4Es model can contribute to individual product attractiveness, while also improving the country-of-origin reputation when it is not immediately successful—as could be the case for Third World wine producers (mainly China, followed by Brazil, Russia, and India).

Other studies could primarily address the influence of country-of-origin reputation on the opportunities of wine as a product, which, due to different perspectives on nutrition, culture, investment, and so on, acquire a trans-contextual value, considering that there may be different impacts of country-of-origin reputation for different use situations, especially for millennials. Further, to bring out the common or different traits among the different cultural perspectives, more qualitative investigations, based, for example, on the 'words' used by millennials to describe the country-of-origin effect of wine, should be considered potential lines of research.

Managerial implications

Practically, the difficulty of precisely understanding the deeper aspects of millennials' motivations is confirmed, as regards their behaviour in general (Twenge et al., 2012) and wine in particular (Atkin and Thach, 2012). Nevertheless, this consumer segment is important for wine managers and professionals: millennials are already today's consumers, but they will be above all tomorrow's consumers. Therefore, it would be short-sighted to abandon the effort to understand them even though, objectively, it is difficult to understand their personality.

From this study, for example, one sign emerges, maybe not definitively, given the limits of the sample but surely worth exploring: the participants gave greater importance to the Italian reputation (and not to the French one) probably because of the reasons already discussed. Millennials are generally more educated, more well-travelled, and more connected; not always in the best way, but much more than their parents. In other words, they seem more susceptible to cultural contamination, more curious (even if superficially) because of various knowledge sources (especially smartphones), and less prone to be impressed by what 'has been' (partly because they do not know that).

In the case of wine, as it emerges from this investigation, they seem less influenced by the past and more interested in new knowledge, which they can retrieve from different sources, including labels (Galati et al., 2019), and this characteristic can be used by entrepreneurs/managers/wine professionals to communicate their internal resources (Galati et al., 2017). They could also be willing to become involved in training/learning paths, even if virtually (given their high level of digital connectedness), a possibility that should be considered seriously by wine managers.

The effects of the experimental action are clear: all participants increased, in a very short time, their appreciation, particularly for the Italian wine, which—before the experimental action—had been preferred by only 15 participants (12.40%), while after, it was preferred by 76 participants (62.81%). Therefore, a wine manager, who cannot use the country-of-origin effect alone (where the traditional effect is not so obvious for newer consumers) and/or unable to build a national branding program, could organise a virtual community basing it on dynamics, phenomena, and the process of cultural development of the participants.

Conclusion

The country-of-origin effect has a significant importance in wine markets, considering the evolution of wine from the Old World to the New World and the Third World. If this effect is important in particular for the Old World, for the country in general and the region in particular (Pucci et al., 2017), it is also relevant for the New (Agnoli et al., 2014) and Third World countries (Hu and Baldin, 2018). However, the increasing use of data, information, and knowledge, through information and communication technologies and social media (Capitello et al., 2014; Galati et al., 2019), requires a global rethink for the wine markets that have traditionally been more sensitive to the country-of-origin reputation, most of all for small and medium-sized wineries (Cadima Ribeiro and Freitas Santos, 2008), which constitute the majority of the wine sector.

This change seems especially true for millennials, who are generally more educated, more interconnected, and more frequent international travellers than the previous generations. Further, they represent current and future wine consumers, on whom more attention should be bestowed in terms of social (Li et al., 2011), cultural (Thach and Olsen, 2006), environmental (Galati et al., 2017), territorial (Resnick, 2008), institutional (Novak and Newton, 2008), and commercial (Barber et al., 2008) communication.

The results of this study are objectively a proof because in the investigated group of millennials (which provided also clear numerical evidence), many participants (50.41%), who had preferred a particular wine at the beginning of the experiment—essentially only on the basis of the country-of-origin reputation—shifted their preference to another wine by the end. Therefore, an increase in knowledge could help change (at least partly) a former prejudice of non-expert millennials—the majority of the wine market—even though wine marketing through education and training remains a research topic to be developed further (Cliff et al., 2016). This is true in the case of wine producers with positive reputations, but it can be even more useful for overcoming negative reputations.

The theoretical and practical consequences of these results seem very important. Firstly, the efficacy of the wine marketing mix model based on the 4Es (expertise-evaluation-education-experience) is confirmed once more; secondly, this model can also be used for modifying, with regard to millennials, the influence of country-of-origin effect, given adequate commitment to organisational, commercial, and cultural terms.

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Annexure 1 - The questionnaire

Dear Friend,

Welcome!

You are participating in this experiment because you were born after 1980, your nationality is neither French nor Italian, and you have no knowledge of wine technical tasting. If any one of these conditions is not applicable, please abandon the experiment. If you are eligible to continue, please answer the following questions carefully. Your information will be treated anonymously and/or aggregately. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

CLASSIFICATION (1)

Field 1

Name and surname:

Field 2

Contacts (e-mail):

Field 3

Nationality:

Field 4

Age:

Field 5

Study qualification:

Field 6

Profession (if any):

Field 7

How often do you consume wine?

- Never
- Only sometimes
- Often, having the opportunity
- At least one glass per day
- More than one glass per day

Field 8

Do you consume more bulk wine or bottled wine?

- Bulk
- Bottled

Field 9

How would you define your relationship with wine?

- Non-existent
- I drink wine sporadically (aperitif, toast, and so on)
- I drink wine only when I eat
- I am curious about the world of wine
- I consider myself a lover of food and wine

Field 10

What is your main intention when buying wine?

- I buy it as an ingredient for cooking
- I buy it to drink
- I buy it to celebrate special moments
- I buy it to give it as a present
- I buy it for collecting it
- Other (i.e. _____)

Field 11

In your opinion, considering France and Italy as nations of wine, which one has a better reputation?

- France
- Italy
- I do not know

Field 12

From a very personal point of view, and generally speaking, if you **must** choose between a French wine and an Italian wine, which one would you choose?

- France
- Italy

INVESTIGATION (2)
before the experimental action

Field 13

Did you like the wines that you just tasted?

- Yes
- No
- I do not know

Field 14. A

If yes, why?

Field 14. b

If not, why?

Field 15

Which one do you prefer?

- The French wine (the first sample)
- The Italian wine (the second sample)
- I do not know

Field 16

How would you rate the French wine that you just tasted? (1 = very bad, 10 = excellent)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Field 17

How would you rate the Italian wine that you just tasted? (1 = very bad, 10 = excellent)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Field 18

In your opinion, what is the most appropriate price range for a bottle of the French wine that you just tasted?

- less than 3 €
- 3 to 5 €
- 5 to 7 €

- 7 to 14 €
- 14 to 150 €
- more than 150 €

Field 19

In your opinion, what is the most appropriate price range for a bottle of the Italian wine that you just tasted?

- less than 3 €
- 3 to 5 €
- 5 to 7 €
- 7 to 14 €
- 14 to 150 €
- more than 150 €

Field 20

Would you buy, as a personal choice, the French wine that you just tasted?

- Yes
- No
- I do not know

Field 21

Would you buy, as a personal choice, the Italian wine that you just tasted?

- Yes
- No
- I do not know

Field 22

After this tasting, from a personal point of view, if you **must** choose between a French wine and an Italian wine, which would you choose?

- France
- Italy

INVESTIGATION (3)
after the experimental action

Field 23

After the mini course on wine tasting techniques, did you like the wines that you just tasted?

- Yes
- No
- I do not know

Field 24. A

If yes, why?

Field 24. b

If not, why?

Field 25

After the mini course on wine tasting techniques, which one do you prefer?

- The French wine (the first sample)
- The Italian wine (the second sample)
- I do not know

Field 26

Now, rate the French wine that you just tasted? (1 = very bad, 10 = excellent)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Field 27

Now, rate the Italian wine that you have just tasted? (1 = very bad, 10 = excellent)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Field 28

Now, in your opinion, what is the most appropriate price range for a bottle of the French wine that you just tasted?

- less than 3 €
- 3 to 5 €

- 5 to 7 €
- 7 to 14 €
- 14 to 150 €
- more than 150 €

Field 29

Now, in your opinion, what is the most appropriate price range for a bottle of the Italian wine that you just tasted?

- less than 3 €
- 3 to 5 €
- 5 to 7 €
- 7 to 14 €
- 14 to 150 €
- more than 150 €

Field 30

After the mini course on wine tasting techniques, would you buy, as a personal choice, the French wine that you just tasted?

- Yes
- No
- I do not know

Field 31

After the mini course on wine tasting techniques, would you buy, as a personal choice, the Italian wine that you just tasted?

- Yes
- No
- I do not know

Field 32

After the mini course on wine tasting techniques, from a personal point of view, if you **must** choose between a French wine and an Italian wine, which would you choose?

- France
- Italy

The experiment is complete.

We thank you again for your cooperation.