Contemporary lifestyles: the case of wine

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In the study of alimentary changes and of their relationship to taste, wine can be analysed sociologically as one of the most complex and heterogeneous types of food. Yet despite the vast outpouring of literature devoted to the analysis of food consumption, it is a subject that has largely been ignored, even though wine stands out as a distinct object of sociological inquiry because of its syncretic nature. Wine has long been reputed for its nutritional values and has frequently been defined as a potent, spiritual substance and a masculine beverage. As bread and wine are among the principal elements of Christian theology, the consumption of wine relates to the tensions between excesses in alcohol consumption and the Judeo Christian religious belief of self-control. Historically, the cultivation of wine was inextricably linked to the religious uses of wine and it cannot just be understood as an ordinary commodity. Yet if its production was intrinsically linked to religious communities, its consumption was from the earliest times

an object of intense social exchanges and conveyed a real sense of prestige. Wine can be described as a food for hierarchy, and it contributes to the hierarchization of society.

This phenomenon is revealed within the increasingly wide range of wines available to the consumer which responds, in part, to the growing diversification of drinkers and their desires, contributing in turn to changes in tastes. Unlike almost any other type of alimentary product, wine requires the use of the five senses to fully appreciate its qualities. It is one of the rare products in which the correct way to taste it has been codified through guides or literary works. This was illustrated perfectly by the French oenologist, Jean Lenoir, who created in 1985 a box 'Le Nez du Vin' with 54 different aromas that are supposedly essential to successful wine-tasting, demonstrating the extreme sophistication of tastes in wine consumption.

If we want to understand the nature and the influences on contemporary culinary taste expressed in commercial restaurant settings, it is necessary to acknowledge the economic, cultural and social dimensions of wine drinking. Major changes in these factors have shaped the way we think about consuming wine. As a result, it is essential to examine to what extent taste is influenced by social conditions or whether personal taste is less constrained and can be considered an expression of individualism. Three major areas of discussion are identified to help us to understand the nature of the changes between taste and wine consumption in a public and commercial space such as the restaurant, in contrast to the private setting of domestic consumption:

- The tensions between homogeneization and diversification of tastes in wine consumption at an international level.
- Eating and drinking out as a social, occasional and festive space where tastes and all manners of food are inextricably linked.
- The construction of the wine drinker and his/her desires as an object of social enquiry.

Changes in wine consumption and culture have had a major impact on definitions of taste. At an international level, it has followed some of the major processes affecting the food sector

more generally. Tensions between globalization and localism combined with homogenization and differentiation define the contrasting trends at the core of wine consumption and tastes. Firstly, the international wine industry has experienced a concentration at an economic level with ever larger companies whose size, branding, distribution channels and general marketing play an ever more important role in determining success. International companies such as Gallo or Orlando Wyndham are major players in the global wine sector. The Australian wine industry, for example, is dominated by just three large companies (BRL Hardy, Southcorp and Forster's). The growth of multinational and transnational corporate enterprises is a powerful force for global convergence of values and behaviour, especially in relation to taste. Secondly, these economic transformations have permitted a substantial increase in the quantity and the quality of wines produced, and one of the effects of growing competition has been the transformation of wine into a high quality product that is increasingly sold through chains or supermarkets. It is equally true to say that restaurants now have closer contacts with the wine industry through wholesalers and intermediaries or even directly to the producers. The idea of access to a wider choice is an integral part of the tasting experience. As the multiple retailer must cater for the widest taste and achieve a high inventory turnover, the restaurant has to acknowledge the different needs of the modern consumer.

The process of globalization has, however, privileged the market for premium wines which dominate the international wine sector, while it has become difficult for small producers to have access to the wider economic market. Wine is now associated with brands, marketing and standardization, which are among the principal advantages offered by well-managed companies. In this globalization of the wine economy, the New World has a lot to offer. Its formula – sun plus technology equals great wine – has captured the hearts and minds of a public that finds it hard to come to grips with the concept of *terroir*, by which the French and other world producers signal their excellence. A war seems to confront *terroir* against grapes or variety of vines. *Terroir*, which is almost untranslatable in another language, could be defined today as an ongoing

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construction of a collective representation of the past through the work of the producers and it refers, for the consumer, to an area of terrain, usually quite small, whose soil and microclimate impart distinctive qualities to food products. *Terroir* could be identified as an area that produces a *grand cru* (high premium) or a particularly distinctive wine in which European producers dominate the market. It could also be said that a certain wine has a *goût*, or taste of its particular *terroir*. Specific gustative characteristics will be associated to its taste. A *Volnay Premier cru* for instance will be described as fruity, astringent, rich and flowered.

In the global marketing war, *terroir* represents certain standards of quality often linked with artisanal principles of craftsmanship (Bell and Valentine, 1997). Moreover, *terroir* relates back to greater diversity in tastes by putting emphasis on the combination between places, producers and diversity, while New World wines concentrate on the standardization of tastes in relation to specific grapes and on modern production techniques that permit the production of a consistent quality of wine over the years. According to French scholars Chiva (1985) and Puisais (1987), one of the consequences is an impoverishment of taste which means that only three basic tastes are today recognized (saltiness, sweetness and sharpness).

Without going so far, the question of the changing nature of tastes in wines is also largely dependent on the debates about diversification and differentiation in the context of the so-called globalization of tastes. First and foremost, wine production has greatly diversified not only following the recognition at a European level of a greater number of *appellations* (denomination of origin) which functions as a kind of trademarks, but also through the creation of new types of wine such as Wicked Wines which aim at young people or organic wines responding to specific segments of the market. It is undeniable that wine is a product category where variety is valued. Accompanying this increasingly diversified wine market, there has been a clear need for more information relevant to the consumers. Wine culture since the 1980s has boomed and has transformed wine into a popular cultural object not confined solely to the consumption of the wealthy. Most commentators agree on the increasing power of education in wine consumption and the

necessity to educate the wine drinker from an early age. From wine guides to items devoted to wine consumption, the wine industry has proliferated and penetrated into other sectors. It has also emerged as a place of passions and expression of identity. A telling example is offered by the library *Atheneum* devoted to wine literature and artefacts and located in Beaune (Burgundy) which claims to have passionate wine customers from all over the world, especially from America.

This wine culture is defined as part of a growing codification of 'all manners of food' (drink) and all manners of taste. Various schools of tastes have established themselves through the publication of specific guides such as the Guide Hachette in France or that of the American wine guru Robert Parker, and it is interesting to see that they reproduce to some extent, the divide between the rivals in the wine war. According to the editor of the Guide Hachette which sold 150,000 copies in France in 1990, the guides aim at different publics. Parker's book (circulation 60,000 in 1990 in France) is allegedly the work of a man with a school of thought and a very personal approach to wine; it is what we call an art book whereas the Guide Hachette does not have an '*esprit d'école*'. According to this analysis, French taste seems to obey to a more rigid framework as it seems that battles of tastes are also part of the process of legitimizing a codified rule of tasting. In the same vein, taste has become the object of intense debates which attest to the increasingly evanescent nature of the drinker who needs some landmarks. It is also recognized that notion of what constitutes a decent wine is judged very differently by each consumer or group of consumers.

The relationship between consumption and taste is central to any explanation of the changes affecting wine drinking culture. Greater affluence, increased leisure time and travel, and the development of common trade areas have changed and modified traditional drinking patterns. According to Smith and Soolgaard (1997), the modernization of societies has created a convergence in wine consumption. As traditional boundaries become blurred, the traditional north/south divide in the European alcoholic beverage market has declined and consumer preference for wine appears to be driven less by long-standing local and regional traditions, and more by growing

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acceptance of a wider choice. This analysis has been challenged by a number of scholars who have argued that modernization has taken different paths in different countries and that cultural factors should be taken into account when attempting any identification of wine consumption patterns. A recent report (2001) by Thor Norström concludes that today, despite modernization, there is still a wide variation between countries in most aspects of drinking patterns even if the Nordic countries are today 'former spirits countries' as beer and wine have become increasingly popular. In these changes, however, it is evident that modernization, homogenization and increasing self-awareness and self-control in health behaviour have played their role in the decline of alcohol consumption in Southern European countries.

However to argue that there is a clear convergence in patterns of consumption is going too far. Historical, economic, political, cultural and social factors all play an important role in relation to each national wine drinking culture and for every example of convergence, there are other signs of continuing distinctiveness. Attempts to identify new patterns of consumption or the 'new wine drinker', when differentiation within society has increased and when post-modern sociology keeps reminding us of the elusive nature of the consumer, are likely to be in vain. It is clear that the economic conditions of the 1980s and 1990s, the changes in taxation on alcohol, the ageing population, long-term government control over alcohol consumption, changes in women's lifestyle and growing public concerns over health have all challenged the position of wine as a national beverage in some of the traditional European countries. Yet a new wine drinker has emerged in different parts of the world and it seems that a moderate wine drinking culture and quest for variety is what defines him/her. The results of market research suggest that the new drinker can be identified as part of specific tribe with niche markets of certain customer type characterizing it. However, the new drinker's profile is still perceived as stable and specific in the context of an increasingly fragmented society and the democratization of wine drinking could be seen as the broad denominator in all these changes. Thus both differentiation and homogenization can, in part, explain changes in wine tastes.

A crucial element associated with wine drinking is the context in which it takes place. The key question is the extent to which the changes described above have affected the nature of the relationship between taste and wine consumption in a public and commercial space such as the restaurant, where taste is culturally shaped and socially controlled. First and foremost, eating out remains a public, out of the ordinary, visible and controlled social activity which can be more or less formalized, but is very often coupled with pleasure and sociability. Unlike beer and spirits, wine is usually consumed at the table, and wine consumption is associated with a variety of contexts, where sociability, celebration and taste stand out as extremely important motivational variables that are common to all cultural groups. It seems therefore that there is a certain consensus in relation to wine consumption when dining out. Wine can enhance the enjoyment of the meal and increase the overall satisfaction of the experience. It is thus part of this specific cultural experience. Indeed even if eating out symbolizes a socially significant temporally specific occasion, according to Warde and Martens (2000), the informal character of this ritualized activity has generally developed which means that different meanings have been given to wine consumption in relation to the various contexts. For example, drinking a glass of Barolo to accompany a pizza in the local restaurant does not have the same social connotation as tasting the same wine in the formal atmosphere of a fashionable Italian trattoria in New York.

If eating out has been democratized, it has nevertheless become an object of a wider differentiation in terms of the activities attached to it. From a night out with a cheap meal to a gourmet event, the variety of restaurants has increased with new strategies attached to the sector. This differentiation has to be emphasized through a pronounced symbolic and economic formalization, a greater variety, a higher quality combined with a more original and varied wine list. Food and restaurants have diversified to meet the challenge of the range of consumer demands (Cousin et al., 2001). In their typology of restaurants and cuisine, Cousin, Foskett and Gillespie identified 13 different types of eating out experience, which it could be argued, are matched by the same number of wine-tasting experiences. It is clear that there are a number of implications for how the

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restaurant is perceived and the extent to which its symbolic capacities are recognized by different social groups. Depending upon the nature and the emphasis put on the eating out experience, different strategies will accompany the choice of the setting, of the food and drinks to be ordered. It could be argued that the formalization of the whole experience of food and wine consumption will be in proportion to the quality, the prestige and the reputation of the restaurant. The tasting experience will, by the same token, have been enhanced. It is essential to take this differentiation into account as the tasting experience will take place in a more formalized environment and will require a sound knowledge of wine drinking culture. The contrast between everyday and festive food will also be strongly reinforced and the consumer will confirm this difference through consumption in his/her choice of wine.

As food and wine should complement each other, the wine list plays a major role in exploring the variety of tastes and in enhancing the quality of the tasting experience. Wine is more often considered as a food product than other beverages containing alcohol, and it is more readily paired with various food items. Matching food and wine remains above all the privilege of the gourmet and the gastronome. Mitchell and Greatorex (1989) noted that wine consumption in the UK occurs in the top socio-economic groups. Per capita consumption is, however, rapidly increasing in the middle group and the democratization of wine drinking is an increasingly established pattern. Good wines are still seen as a status symbol and tasting wines are part of this process of distinction. Experienced wine drinkers with a high cultural capital will have a sophisticated knowledge of the tastes associated with wine consumption and will be aware of the rules dictating the *bon goût*. Exploring the variety of tastes in wines will be part of the same experience as tasting food. Several different wines may accompany a meal, and a reputation for having an outstanding wine list can be a significant attraction on its own (Dodd, 1997). Some of today's best chefs have taken great care in the selection of their wine list as they want to make sure that their choice of wines will complement their cooking. To help them to achieve this, they are able to call upon the services of wine waiter, whose growing professional status and qualifications have made him/her the main

actor in the combination of tastes advising chefs and consumers in their choice. Responding to increasing sophisticated tastes is a challenge for the wine waiter. The broadening of supply with the increasing availability of wines has all impacted on the modern wine list with the diversification in the range of consumer demands. The content and presentation of the wine list says a lot about a restaurant, and if buying wine in a restaurant setting is very often an impulse purchase, the wine list plays a major role in convincing consumers that they have made the right choice. Promotional and sales techniques are necessary to reinforce the customer's choice as wine is very often the product with the highest profit margin for the restaurant and it is important to have the cultural knowledge necessary to advise the customer.

In the setting of the restaurant, the *homo culinarius* has to obey to a codified set of rules concerning the combination of tastes in food and wine. Again, depending upon the type of setting, rules will be more or less reinforced or imposed upon the individual. A hierarchy of restaurants refers in general to a hierarchy of wines and thus a hierarchy of tastes. Our societies have more or less commonly agreed on the principles regulating the association of tastes in wine and dishes. However, the increasingly informal nature of the experience of eating out has challenged some of these pre-conceived ideas about the correct combination of food and wine. In general, food is selected first and then wines will be ordered to complement the meal. The main objective is to ensure harmony between the food and the beverage (Gillespie, 2001). Temperature, the palate, matching weights, intensity of both food and wine, flavour dominance, texture, cooking method, garnishes, sauces and accompaniments are all cited as characteristics to consider when creating such associations. However, it is very often the case that personal taste, price and experience are the key factors in the final choice. In this context, and despite the wide and detailed literature on each wine produced year after year, scholars agree in defining wine tasting as a subjective and individual experience where senses prevail. The palate being the mediator in grasping the four elements detected when drinking wine. Sweetness, saltiness, acidity and bitterness are all parts of this sensorial experience. If they are all used in various evaluations of wines, it

could be said that they are not all of equal weight. Saltiness remains quite uncommon in wine and modern consumers have demonstrated a growing aversion towards strong tastes in wine, which refer to game, flesh or untamed natural or earthy flavours.

This could be interpreted in terms of what Norbert Elias (1978) has described as the 'civilizing process': our societies have entailed a strong and conscious effort to remove the distasteful from the sight of society. Even if it has developed differently from one country to another, this has been accompanied by an attraction for the softness of flavours and aromas, the discretion of smells and tastes. It could be said that the same process has affected wine consumption. The success of New World wines confirms that consumers have a preference for wines with 'fruity, light, easy to taste, quick to appreciate' characteristics while more traditional European wines are sometimes perceived as more complex to grasp. This division of tastes opposes the industrial and standardized wine which is characterized by its reliability and consistency in taste – referring to the grape and the vintage – to the more crafted traditional wine in which diversity and the unexpected prevail – place, age and nature of the grapes, name of the producer and vintage make it a less reliable product. Today, French wines, for example, have been challenged by American and Australian wines on the UK market attesting to the growing homogenization of tastes. Following the 'civilizing process', it could be argued that wines traditionally described as too 'animal' in their taste have been out of favour. The wine producing sector has witnessed the growing importance of fruity, light, new oaked wines for specific segments of the market. However, a minority of experienced drinkers still appreciate this type of wines and the recent auctions organized by Sotheby's demonstrate that there are still connoisseurs who are ready to spend substantial amount of money to obtain them. As the restaurant has been democratized, tastes in wine have become more homogenized, but they remain a space for the expression of differences.

When eating out, wine drinking appears to be the object of all manners of tastes for specific groups of individuals, while for others, it could be transformed into an intimidated and

socially challenging experience. It seems that those with high cultural resources construct what they perceive to be a unique, original style through consumption of objects. They are more energetic in their attempts to individualize their consumption through authenticity and connoisseurship. By contrast, those with low cultural resources do not fear mass consumption because they embrace collective interpretations of taste. The category of innovators which has been identified in several publications on wine marketing corresponds to some extent to Holt's description. Innovators in the wine product category tend to drink wine more frequently, spend more money on wine and use different sources to obtain information about it. Their tastes are also more varied and complex. Two types of consumer can be defined: those highly involved in the choice and consumption of wine and those with lower involvement. As wine is complex compared to many other products, consumers with existing knowledge about wines in general are more likely to adopt a new wine and to follow advice.

For restaurateurs, wine innovators, who are defined as young and knowledgeable consumers, represent a possible market segment. Innovators are willing to spend more in a restaurant for wine than the non-innovators and they can be targeted to help increase a restaurant's profit from wine sales. However, they also need to be given more information as regards to which wines to taste. Despite the homogenization of tastes in wine drinking, specific types of wine are related to specific group profiles. In a recent article published in Harpers (2001), Jo Burzynska reported that six groups of consumers were identified: the classic connoisseur, generally being older with good knowledge of wine and a serious interest in the more traditional Old World wines; the enthusiast who buys into the traditional image of wine, is socially aspiring but lacking in confidence and knowledge and wants to buy the right wine, relating price to quality; the easily pleased who falls into the mass-market category and is often an older female wine drinker with no pretensions or ambitions and who sticks to familiar and often cheaper wines; the entertainers broach the more modern, mass-market spectrum who enjoy experimenting with New World wines while remaining price and promotion conscious; the younger chardonnay girl who tends to

choose white wine for its healthy and social aspects and who is open to experimenting; finally, the adventurer at the premium end of the spectrum is a self-confident drinker who tends to value flavour and New World wines. Even if we might have some doubts about the general applicability of these categories, it is clear that wine drinkers are increasingly fragmented even if there is a pronounced trend in favour of New World wines.

Following a number of social commentators, the *neophilic* search – defined as a desire for variety to compensate anxiety – for new taste sensations, new combinations and mixtures, remains as the dynamic principle of innovation and characterize the *homo culinarius*. As the restaurant is part of the entertainment industry in Westernized societies and is concerned with the marketing of emotions, desires and states of mind (Beardsworth and Keil, 1997), wine drinking appears to be more informal than was historically the case, but more controlled than in any other social context. Unlike the professional wine-taster, the drinker in a restaurant has no other possibility than to swallow his/her wine and the mouth acts as an organ of sensory and sensual experience, and of censorship as well. The sensorial experience is at its peak and the control of emotions and moderate alcohol consumption are an integral part of this social act. Taking possession of certain foods and 'all the manners' involved in their use, grants the individual a certain status, and in the case of wine drinking, most of the time, it is socially unacceptable to become drunk after immoderate wine consumption. Even in restaurants where the informal dominates, wine drinking remains a strong marker of identity and difference where taste is culturally shaped and socially controlled. The wine waiter subdues the diners and establishes boundaries and hierarchies. Wine is ultimately bound up with social relations, including those of power, of inclusion and exclusion, as well as with cultural ideas about classification, the human body and the meaning of health. The importance of taste in the decision to drink wine is therefore the key attitudinal factor in the studies of food and drink choice.

It is undeniable that consumers are becoming better educated in their wine selection and for instance in America, wine consumers have become receptive to wines from all over the

world. National prejudices do, however, remain strong elsewhere and it is difficult to ask a French or Italian to drink New World wines. The shaping of tastes is largely defined by the cultural experience of each individual. The choice of wine is influenced by several factors: price, brand, region, vintage year, wine-maker, variety of grape and style, and this array may exceed 50–100 choices in a typical restaurant. The individual profile and the context of the situation all play an important role. It is equally true to say that the degree to which a consumer has existing experience and knowledge of a wine will influence the adoption rate (Dodd, 1997). Traditional European wines will be ranged in this category where a preliminary contact with the product is needed in order to establish a positive appreciation of its taste. New World wines offer a simple and straight forward pleasure as their taste is very often associated with values which fit our modern societies: they are good value, easy to drink and to taste, and offer permanence of stable characteristics. On the other hand, French wines are more complicated due to the rigid and costly French system of *appellations* (AOC), always changing in relation to the vintage and the art of the wine-maker in that particular year, quite expensive and very complex to decrypt. It has to be said that the majority of consumers privilege the New World type of wines as it reduces their anxiety about choices and desires of tastes.

For many restaurants, wine, beer and spirit sales can substantially increase the final bill for the customer and by the same token the total revenue for the restaurant. In addition, the margins on these beverages are frequently higher than food items. It is why the wine list ought to be considered as a major selling technique to increase impulse wine purchases in a restaurants setting (Dodd, 1997). In relation to the choice of wines, it is essential to take into account the variety of wine drinkers with their own and specific cultural knowledge of the product. Various marketing strategies have to be deployed to embrace the wide range of drinkers from the unfamiliar and intimidated individual who needs some help with the purchase of a wine to accompany his/her meal to the knowledgeable and experienced wine drinker who wants to demonstrate his ability to evaluate the product and combine it with the food. The type of restaurants and the way wine is presented either as a wine list

or attached to the menu will influence the drinker. It is equally important to make sure that the wine list responds to the wide range of tastes by enabling individuals to find a price and quality level to suit themselves. It is why the training of the staff plays an important role when advising on what to drink. The wine list must also be created in relation to the menu and must reflect changes in the menu. Restaurants are seen as a more ephemeral market and they have to offer greater choice in terms of age and quality of wine than in retail stores. Finally, as wine remains a complex object of distinction, it is necessary to adopt a clear and well-informed discourse when presenting the different wines. Grape variety, country of origin, promotion and brand are among the features required to illustrate the distinction features of the wines. At the end of the day, the consumer is king. To facilitate his/her experience of wine drinking, the restaurant has to ensure that its selection meets the expectations and desires of its customers.

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