

In May, 2005, **CAWG** commissioned a study of consumer views on vintage dating of wine conducted by *Wine Opinions*, a research provider to the wine industry. The project was undertaken to ascertain the degree of knowledge among U.S. core and marginal wine consumers on the meaning of a vintage date on a wine label.

Definitions

Core consumers are defined as adult residents of the U.S. who consume wine, on average, at least once per week or more often. This group of consumers numbers 25.4 million, approximately 13 percent of the U.S. adult population. This group is responsible for the consumption of 86 percent of table wines consumed each year in the U.S.

Marginal wine consumers are defined as adult residents of the U.S. who consume wine on average less often than once a week, but at least as often as once every 2-3 months. As a group, marginal wine consumers number 28.2 million and are responsible for the remaining 14 percent of table wines consumed each year in the U.S.

Methodology

The project design began with an online survey form. Consumers were directed to the survey via links in an email sent in response to their expressed willingness to participate in the survey. Consumers were recruited both from a large representative online consumer panel and from the Wine Opinions consumer panel. Results from the surveys were coded, cross-tabulated and analyzed. This report focuses on those results and the relationships that were both statistically significant (at a 90 percent confidence level) and distinctive.

The respondent groups of these surveys are comprised of U.S. core and marginal wine consumers. Two survey flights were conducted. In the first flight, a commercially sourced email respondent panel of 178 marginal wine consumers completed the online survey. In the second flight, members of the Wine Opinions consumer panel completed the online survey, yielding responses from 251 core wine consumers. This resulted in a total of 429 respondents before weighting.

As is frequently encountered in the online survey environment, the respondents to this survey skewed more heavily male than the national ratio, and therefore the results were weighted to achieve a 58 percent female and 42 percent male composition in the data tabulations. This is within 1 to 2 percent of the national distribution, according to Wine Market Council's most recent surveys. The gender weighting also had a balancing effect on the ratio of core to marginal consumers, with the final group consisting of 52 percent marginal consumers and 48 percent core consumers, which is within 1 percent of the national norm.

The age distribution of respondents in the weighted tabulation also generally conforms to the national norm, with the greatest concentration of respondents in the 40 – 49 and 50 – 59 age segments.

Segmentation

Apart from consumption frequency, core and marginal wine consumers in the surveys are most differentiated by their general preference for wine over beer and spirits. Among core consumers, wine is strongly preferred by 59 percent of the group and somewhat preferred by 25 percent. Marginal wine consumers are significantly less dedicated to wine, with 25 percent strongly and 26 percent somewhat preferring wine to beer or spirits. These figures are similar to the national averages derived from Wine Market Council studies.

Both core and marginal consumers most frequently purchase wine in the 750ml bottle, with 82 percent of core consumers and 62 percent of marginals making the 750ml bottle their most frequent purchase. Among marginals, 20 percent most frequently purchase 1.5 liter bottles, an indication that for this subset of marginals, their most frequent consumption occasions are linked to entertaining. Slightly more than twice as many marginal consumers as cores (9 percent to 4 percent) also purchase wine in any box package size.

Among consumers who most frequently purchase wine in the 750ml bottle, core consumers most often purchase wines in the \$10 - \$20 price range, followed by purchases in the \$5 - \$10 range. Marginal consumers buy wine in the \$5 - \$10 price range slightly more often than they buy wine in the \$10 - \$20 range.

As would be expected, the percentage of marginal consumers citing “occasional” purchase outweighs “frequent” purchase in every price category – a confirmation of their overall less frequent purchase of wine, in comparison to core consumers.

In the \$5 - \$10 category, marginal consumers show their greatest percentage of frequent purchases (30 percent) and also their greatest percentage of occasional purchases (46 percent).

The \$10 - \$20 range is the second most frequent purchase category among marginals.

More than half (60 percent) of core wine consumers cite frequent purchase in the \$10 - \$20 price range, and 33 percent say they occasionally purchase wine in that price category, making it by far the most popular price segment among the core group.

Frequent purchasers also outnumber occasional purchasers among core consumers in the \$5 - \$10 price category (with 41 percent of cores citing frequent purchase and 34 percent citing occasional purchase in that range).

In assessing their degree of wine knowledge, 56 percent of core consumers stated that their friends considered them “very knowledgeable” about wine, while only 13 percent of marginal consumers felt the same. Both groups, however, stated that wine quality is important to them, with 95 and 73 percent of core and marginal consumer, respectively, in agreement.

Survey respondents were asked to rate the relative importance of a number of possible motivating factors that influence their wine purchases. In their ranking of the importance of these factors in motivating purchase, there were only slight differences between the core and marginal consumer groups, except that the core group gave greater weight to nearly each factor.

Key Findings

In a question to assess purchase motivation, by a significant margin, the type or varietal of wine (96 percent) and price of wine (92 percent) were the most important factors. After these, the brand of wine (80 percent) was the next most important consumer consideration. Closely behind brand and nearly equal in importance to the survey respondents were the fact that the wine is vintage dated (71 percent) and the appellation of origin of the wine (69 percent). Only 31 percent of the survey respondents stated that the design or attractiveness of the wine label or package was an important factor in their purchase decision.

In the survey, only one in three U.S. wine consumers believes that a vintage date refers to the year the grapes were harvested. A plurality of consumers (37 percent) believes that the vintage date is the date the wine was bottled. Taken together with the widespread notion that “older is better,” these are active deterrents to more frequent and casual consumption of wine. In fact, a very real negative effect could be that the notion wines must be aged in order to be their best may foster unpleasant taste experiences for many consumers who may well blame a wine and not its age for a disappointing taste experience. This may be especially true with regard to white wines growing rapidly in popularity on the U.S. market (e.g., Pinot Grigio and Sauvignon Blanc).

Consumers were even less certain of the issue of the proportion of grapes from a vintage year that must be included in a wine to merit vintage dating. Asked to choose from 100, 95, 85 or less than 50 percent as the correct answer, more than half of all respondents (52 percent) instead chose “Don’t know.” The next most common answer was “100 percent” with 23 percent of respondents. Only 6 percent of marginal consumers and 11 percent of cores correctly stated “95 percent.”

When asked to focus on the issue of vintage dating, consumers state that vintage dating is important for a variety of reasons (all the better wines are vintage dated, and vintage dating helps determine when to drink a wine). Consumer participants in this survey strongly exhibited the opinions that both quality and truth in labeling are important to them. Core and marginal respondents together mostly agreed if vintages are blended, that information should be on the wine label.

Consumers are unlikely to believe that any advances in grape growing and winemaking have or will render vintage dating unimportant. While survey respondents generally believe that quality wines are made each year in California because of its favorable climate, they nonetheless believe that each vintage yields wines of different quality and flavors, or at least differing flavors.