

ARTICLE

Tastings at Tea Time: The Princeton Wine Group

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Abstract

This is the story of the Princeton Wine Group, a group whose membership has been relatively constant for almost 40 years. This group has enjoyed 244 blind tastings involving 1,708 different wines. A statistical analysis was performed at each tasting examining whether participants ranked the quality of wines similarly and whether the preferences of the group were correlated with several variables including professional wine ratings and the prices of the wine. The article concludes with a discussion of lessons learned from a lifetime of wine tastings.

Keywords: tastings; ratings; pricing; correlations

JEL classifications: C49; E17; G12

I. Introduction

It is said that drinking good wine with good food and with good friends is one of life's most civilized pleasures. This aphorism perfectly describes the beginning of one of the longest running wine tasting groups in the country. Three friends with different backgrounds and professions decided during the 1980s to spend at least one late afternoon each month socializing over glasses of wine and a variety of meats and cheeses. Today the group includes eight friends, the majority in their 80s and 90s, who agree that wine improves with age: the older they get, the better they like it. This group of dedicated individuals has spent nearly 40 years drinking some of the world's great wines, debunking myths with an intellectual and hedonistic curiosity, seeking to gain a better understanding of wine. The group is enriched over and over again by the pleasure of sharing among friends wines from their cellars, often built up over many years. This is their story.

II. The composition of the group

Two of the original members of the group were Princeton University professors. Orley Ashenfelter, a noted labor economist, was an early champion of experimental research

in economics, both in the lab and in large-scale social experiments. Orley conducted a seminal empirical study to show how rainfall and summer heat influence the quality and price of wine (Ashenfelter, 2008).

In general, high-quality vintages correspond to the years in which the harvest seasons are dry, the summers are warm, and subsurface moisture is abundant from wet conditions during the previous winter and spring. His results were roundly criticized by professional wine tasters. Robert Parker, one of the most influential wine critics, called Orley's method "Neanderthal," "ludicrous and absurd." Today, Orley's work is widely accepted. In 2023, he was given an honorary doctorate from the Université de Bordeaux. The university cited his empirical work on the wine market and noted that he has "made wine economics ... emerge as a complete discipline at the international level."¹

Orley is also an owner of vineyards in California and New Jersey. He has treated the group to delicious tastings of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc from his New Jersey vineyards. It is easy to see why the establishment of a wine tasting group would have considerable appeal to him. It is also clear why the Princeton wine tasting group was so unique.

How many tasting groups include a real-life grower and vineyard owner? And while there are wine tasting groups all over the world, there are none to our knowledge that have existed for almost 40 years with reasonably stable membership and who publish their results on a website named liquidasset.com.

Richard Quandt, the second founding member of the group, is a noted econometrician. Many elements of the economist's standard statistical analytic toolkit have their origins in his work. Dick, the senior member of the group, now in his early 90s, strikes a dramatic presence with his impressive head of wavy white hair, his Hungarian accent, and his very large Labrador Retriever, Stormy. On more than one occasion, waitresses in restaurants he frequents have asked if they could run their fingers through his hair. Dick developed the methods by which the wine tasting group could judge the quality of the wine tasted as well as the software to do the analysis of the statistical results. Perhaps the most significant was his analysis of the wine group's retesting of a famous 1976 Paris wine tasting, the Judgment of Paris (Ashenfelter and Quandt, 1999). In this original iconic tasting, wines that were produced in France (including first growths such as Mouton Rothschild and Haut Brion) were compared with similar wines from California. The judges were French enophiles. The unthinkable happened: Wines from the Napa Valley bested those from France, and thereafter California was catapulted to the top of the fine wine conversation.

The Judgment of Paris was the brainchild of Englishman Steven Spurrier, the owner of a wine shop in Paris who set up the tasting with his American associate Patricia Gallagher. Not only did unheralded wines from California "David" best the "Goliath" of Bordeaux first growth kingpins, but the French judges were unable to identify the provenance of the wines. One wine expert declared that one of the storied French wines was "definitely California. It has no nose." Judge Odette Kahn, editor for the *Revue du Vin de France*, was so incensed about the results (and her ranking of the American

¹<https://www.u-bordeaux.fr/en/about-us/honoris-causa/orley-ashenfelter-princeton-university> (accessed January 28, 2024).

wines as best in their categories) that she unsuccessfully demanded that she could have her rating sheet returned so she could alter her preferences. As Jim Barnett, the owner of the vineyard that produced one of the winning California wines, put it, “Not bad for a kid from the sticks.” Organizer Spurrier got his comeuppance: He became a *bête noire* in Paris and was ejected from cellars, where he had previously been welcome, for organizing France’s humiliation. This classical tasting inspired a movie entitled “Bottle Shock.” But according to George Taber, the reporter who wrote the book about the tasting, the movie took great liberties with the story and did not give credit to the actual winning winemaker, Mike Grgich (Taber, 1976).

Dick and Orley organized a repeat of the Paris tasting in 2012 in the Judgment of Princeton. Some of the most prestigious French wines were compared with wines produced in New Jersey, selling for a tiny fraction of the French prices. Nine tasters were involved, three Frenchmen, one Belgian, and five Americans. Quandt performed the statistical analysis (Quandt, 2012). The results indicated that the rank order of the wines was indistinguishable. Interestingly, the French judges preferred the New Jersey offerings and were incredulous that they could not identify the provenance of the wines. Now we Princetonians can dismiss the stigma of the Sopranos and the Jersey Turnpike, confident in the realization that the best from the Garden State can compete with the first growths of Bordeaux.

The third member of the original group was a good friend of Dick and Orley. The late Frank Vannerson had been a graduate student in economics at Princeton. His PhD thesis comprised a thorough statistical analysis of grain markets. In that study, he developed a remarkably successful model for the prediction of wheat prices. Frank was a cofounder of Commodities Corporation, a company that was a principal trader of commodities and a pioneer in developing institutional interest in these markets. He later cofounded Mount Lucas Management Corporation and served as the company’s chairman until his untimely death in 2008. His curiosity and enthusiasm extended to the wine market, where predicting prices was not nearly as interesting as participating in wine tastings.

During the Iraq war in the first decade of the 2000s, the U.S. intervention was vigorously opposed by many Western nations, especially France. What followed was a widespread anti-French sentiment in the United States, with fierce backlashes against French products and French nomenclature. French fries were renamed “freedom fries” and French toast became “liberty toast.” A restaurateur in Palm Beach, Florida, was shown on national television pouring French wine into the gutter in front of his establishment.

Frank wondered whether, with all of the negative publicity, there would be a sharp drop in the sales of French products in the United States. What he found from his empirical analysis was that there was, in fact, no effective French wine boycott. U.S. consumers continued buying French wine in a manner consistent with pre-boycott patterns. Undoubtedly, Frank and the rest of our wine group contributed to this result. Frank’s paper, “Wine, Francophobia and Boycotts,” was delivered at a conference in Dijon in 2004 (Vannerson, 2004).

While tastings with three friends were certainly enjoyable, the original group decided that with more members, a much larger variety of wines could be investigated and enjoyed. So a number of new participants were invited to join. The next

member of the group was Robert Easton, the chairman and chief executive officer of Commodities Corporation. Bob Easton was a logical addition to the group. He was a good friend and associate of Frank Vannerson, and he possessed a magnificent wine collection. Bob was one of the most visionary leaders of the commodities futures trading industry. He held numerous leadership positions on futures exchanges as well as in government and industry regulatory organizations. He deserves considerable credit for the subsequent growth of the commodities trading industry. He was also a visionary in how he collected wines. When they were selling at prices as low as \$10 and \$20 a bottle, he accumulated many cases of the best Burgundies such as those from *Domaine de la Romanée-Conti*. He treated the group to delightful tastings of these wines. When prices of these wines rose to exceed \$10,000 a bottle, Easton sent part of his collection for sale at a Hong Kong wine auction, where he realized an extraordinary capital gain. But while his highly profitable trade appears to demonstrate the “truism” that economists and financial executives know the price of everything but the value of nothing, just the opposite was true of the wine tasting group. The greatest delight came from the tasting and enjoyment of great wine with friends.

The next member of the group was the late John Lowrance. John was a noted astrophysicist who was active in the tastings until his death in 2011. He founded Princeton Scientific Instruments Company to develop and build microcomputer-controlled television camera systems for scientific applications. He was a collector of oriental rugs and wine. After purchasing a large, diverse wine collection, he was able to treat the group to several memorable tastings. A delightful, gentle person, John was a true southern gentleman.

When John died, the wine group realized that John's widow was not a wine drinker and not likely to make use of the wine collection. So the group categorized his extensive cellar and sent the inventory listing to Sotheby's auction house for an estimate of its market value. The group then purchased the cellar from John's widow and divided it up equitably among the members.

By 2023, there were eight members of the group. I joined soon after the original founders had established the tasting society. I am a financial economist, best known for my view that investment professionals are usually unable to select a portfolio of individual stocks that can outperform the broad market averages. Hence the best investment strategy is to rely on low-cost broad-based index funds that simply buy and hold all the stocks in the broad stock-market averages (Malkiel, 2023). My own love affair with wine was slow in developing. While growing up my only experience with wine was during Passover, where Manischewitz wine was served during the Seder ceremony. I thought at the time how curious it was that many people liked to drink such a sickeningly sweet beverage. Later in life, after traveling to Europe and the Napa Valley, I came to realize what a delightful experience drinking good wine could be.

Another early member of the group was Edward Bergman. Ed has been a practicing attorney and mediator in Princeton for almost 50 years. (He has been drinking wine with great pleasure for 60 years.) In addition to his work as an attorney, he has taught at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business and the Perelman School of Medicine. His teaching follows from his professional experience with highly successful courses in negotiation and dispute resolution as well as mediation of healthcare disputes. His recreational travels have focused on food and wine

with Italy as a favorite destination. The group has benefited from those interests with some memorable tastings of Tuscan and Piedmont wines.

The next two members of the wine tasting group trace their wine tasting origins to the United Kingdom. Zaki Hosny, of Egyptian descent, was raised in India. He cultivated his interest in wine as an undergraduate at Cambridge University, and it has been maturing ever since. In his career with the global pharmaceutical firm Merck & Co., he has had the good fortune to have lived in major wine-producing countries including France, New Zealand, and South Africa. Zaki is a true polymath. A lover of music, history, cricket, and good conversation, he has a particular affinity for Provence (and its sturdy, long-lived reds), having owned a vacation home there with his wife for 20 years. Still active in retirement as a senior advisor to the Albright Stonebridge Group, he has lived in Princeton since 1996 and has been a member of the wine group since 2011.

Mike Head's first introduction to wine was at lunch at a UK college friend's home, where the friend's father shared bottles from a well-stocked cellar. Drinking his first old Bordeaux as well as a German Trockenbeerenauslese, he was both astounded and hooked. The idea of sharing old vintages with one's children and friends was such a great joy that Mike has repeated the experience throughout his life. Like Zaki, Mike's business experience was in the pharmaceutical industry, his with Johnson and Johnson, where he traveled the world collecting wine and sharing special bottles with family and friends. As a hobby he found it sure beats collecting stamps. Retired from J & J, he now serves as a strategic consultant at the Fearless Group. Later in this essay, we will see how Mike's healthcare industry experience played a central role for the group during the COVID pandemic.

Frank Lorenzo, the eighth member of the wine tasting group, joined in early 2012. Born to Spanish immigrants, Lorenzo grew up in Queens, New York. He first was exposed to wine by his father, who made his own wine in the basement of their house and grew some of his grapes in a backyard arbor, although he also bought higher quality grapes in Manhattan.

Frank's interest in airlines was spawned by watching the planes that flew over his backyard *en route* to landing at LaGuardia Airport. He was a major airline executive in the 1970s and '80s, running Continental Airlines, among other companies. He earned a reputation for challenging the existing cost structure of the airline industry after it had been deregulated and, in the process, becoming the embodiment of the newly deregulated aviation era. He was also known for building Continental and its new Houston and Newark hubs, which have formed a key part of the since merged United Airlines. Since leaving Continental in 1990, Frank has been chairman of Savoy Capital, an asset management and venture capital firm. The firm has analyzed several wine businesses for potential investment and has concluded that wine production is far better suited for enjoyment than for profitable investment.

III. How the tastings are conducted

The three original group members (Ashenfelter, Quandt, and Vannerson) decided on firm dates and times for what they expected to be regular monthly meetings. It was agreed that the tastings would take place from 4:30 in the afternoon to 7:30 in the evening on the first Monday of each month from October through May. No tastings

were held in the summer. While late afternoons were not natural times for savoring different vintages as well as cheeses and meats, there was a special reason for the specific timing. Attendance at Princeton University faculty meetings was “strongly recommended” for Princeton professors, and these were held at 4:30 p.m. on the first Monday of each month. Since Ashenfelter and Quandt found such meetings incredibly tedious and boring, having an “unbreakable prior commitment” provided a handy excuse for their absence.

Each of the eight members of the wine group organizes and hosts one tasting a year. A limousine is ordered to pick up the members of the group and then return them to their respective homes after the tasting is over. Driving oneself after these events is inadvisable, since the liquified participants resemble extremely happy, severely brain-impaired 2-year-olds. Babies can drink a bottle and fall right to sleep. So can the members of our group at the conclusion of our tastings. The host picks the theme (type of wine and provenance) for the tasting and procures the wine and food. All of our tastings are “blind”: The bottles are wrapped with foil or placed in paper bags so that their identity is obscured. They are labeled from “A” through “H.” The tastings almost always involve red wines. The wines are poured into eight glasses (with wine A to the left) at the places of each of the eight tasters. The dining room table, set with 64 glasses of red wine, is truly an awesome sight to behold. Bread, cheeses, and charcuterie are placed on separate tables, and people help themselves to plates of food. Usually, a glass of white wine is offered prior to the official tasting. By the end of the tasting most, if not all, of the wine is consumed. For our group, “drinking responsibly” means “try not to spill your wine on the table.”

Each of the members of the group tends to have a specialty in selecting the meat and cheese served at the tasting events. Dick Quandt always includes some *paté de foie gras*. Bob Easton serves *filet mignon*. Ed Bergman’s signature offerings are warm and cold *antipasti*. Zaki Hosny’s wife, Liz, delights us with her succulent sausage rolls. I have always obtained some of Paul Prudhomme’s *andouille sausage*, direct from New Orleans, for my tastings.

The smelling, sipping, and tasting (together with increasingly exuberant conversation) proceeds for about an hour until the participants are ready to rank the wines. One signal that it is time to do the ranking is when Dick Quandt says, “the wines are changing on me.” Each taster is then asked to do a forced ranking of each of the eight wines—no ties are allowed. The individual is asked to rate the wines based on how they are tasting at this moment in time and each participant must report his assessment according to the following example: “Wine A is ranked 5th, wine B 2nd, wine C 8th, etc.” This is all recorded in real time using a wine tasting app based upon Dick’s original software. The votes are tallied, and a table is produced of “votes against.”

If all eight raters ranked a particular wine first, it would have a “votes against” tally of 8 (the sum of the 8 ranks). If everyone ranked a wine “8”, it would have a “votes against” total of 64. The wine ranked best by the group has the lowest total votes against. Of course, if there is little agreement among the tasters, many of wines will have votes against totals in the mid-30s, with little difference in the sum of the ranks. The individual with the least correlation with the group is celebrated and given a special mention for his individuality.

The identity of the wines is then revealed and a quick statistical analysis is conducted and reported to the group. Did the members of the group tend to agree on their rankings? Was the agreement statistically significant? Did pairs of tasters tend to agree? Was there agreement with the numerical ratings of professional tasters such as Robert Parker? How did the group's rankings correlate with the prices of the wines? Did we like the more expensive wines more than wines that cost a good deal less? Did the wines in the tasting come from different countries as in the Judgment of Paris? If so, did we enjoy cabernets from the Napa Valley as much as those from Bordeaux? In such comparison tastings the tasters were asked if they could identify the provenance of the wine before its identity was revealed. The real delight comes from debunking myths and finding wines that are beating their more expensive peers.

Next comes a vigorous discussion period concerning the group's judgment of the quality and taste of the wines. By convention, participants refrain from discussing the wines being tasted until this moment. How did the results comport with our prior expectations? What if anything have we learned from the experiment? Notes from the discussions are recorded and later all the statistical analysis and summary of the discussion is recorded. The extent of agreement among the tasters as well as with professional wine analysts is measured by correlating the different rankings. At the end of the tasting, usually some sweets are served as well as an additional wine such as a Sauterne and an espresso for those who are sure they would have no trouble sleeping even after drinking coffee so late in the day. The group leaves with the knowledge that while too much of anything is bad, too much wine is just right.

Perhaps the best illustration of the durability and persistence of the Princeton Wine Group was their adaptability to adversity. When COVID was especially virulent, group meetings of older participants were inadvisable, even for such important gatherings as Tastings at Tea Time. But the group persevered and found a brilliant way to overcome the obstacle.

The architect of the solution was Mike Head, who used his healthcare industry background to create an innovative resolution to the problem. Mike ordered 60 100 ml glass flask bottles from a company that provides vials to the pharma industry. There were enough bottles (and caps) for each host to share up to eight wines with the remaining seven members of the group. The bottles were marked A, B, C, etc., and sturdy boxes were created to hold eight bottles. The host could then fill the bottles with the different wines and deliver the boxes to the outside door of each participant's home. The tasting and evaluation of the wines was then accomplished over Zoom. Necessity born out of adversity is again shown to be the mother of invention. Not even a pandemic could interrupt the group from its important mission.

Nor could a weather emergency keep the group from attending its scheduled event. On one winter Monday, central New Jersey was hit by a massive blizzard. Snow was falling at the rate of several inches per hour. The only limousine driver willing to attempt the task of picking up the group members and delivering them to the host's house had a Prius that was a less than robust vehicle for the weather conditions. To fit everybody in we had one person in the trunk and, inevitably, the vehicle was unable to make the climb up an incline to one of the passenger's homes. The picture of a group of determined octogenarians pushing the limousine through some hilly Princeton streets

as well as a final assault up a steep driveway to the host's house is no less remarkable in its own context than Edmund Hillary's ascent of Mount Everest.

Ed Bergman hosted a special tasting on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the posting of our tasting reports. The tasting was held outdoors on a beautiful day in May in Ed's garden, the table surrounded by glorious blooming flowers. The event featured a vertical tasting of Chateau Léoville Poyferré wines from various years within the 2001–2012 period (a horizontal tasting would feature different wines from the same vintage year). An extraordinary selection of pâtés, jambon, and saucisson was provided from an artisanal French charcuterie in addition to a variety of cheeses. Ed prepared a delicious warm French potato salad. The piece de resistance was a decadent chocolate cake served at the end of the tasting. The Princeton Wine Group certainly knows how to celebrate.

IV. The analysis of the results with some illustrations

The degree to which individual tasters agreed with each other or with professional numerical rankings or with the price of the wines was measured by Spearman's rank correlation coefficient.

Spearman's rank correlation coefficient

$$1 - \frac{6 \sum d^2}{n(n^2 - 1)}.$$

Here, n stands for the number of wines being ranked and d is the difference between the ranking of one taster with another or with professional rankings or prices. In evaluating the degree of agreement, the following table provides an interpretive guideline.

Range	Strength
0.00–0.20	Negligible
0.21–0.40	Weak
0.41–0.60	Moderate
0.61–0.80	Strong
0.81–1.00	Very strong

The degree to which the ranks of the different tasters agreed was measured by Kendall's coefficient of concordance, defined as follows.

Suppose that wine i is given the rank r_{ij} by judge number j , where there are in total n wines and m judges. Then the total rank given to object i is

$$R_i = \sum_{j=1}^m r_{i,j}$$

and the mean value of these total ranks is

$$\bar{R} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n R_i.$$

The sum of squared deviations, S , is defined as

$$S = \sum_{i=1}^n (R_i - \bar{R})^2$$

and then Kendall's W is defined as

$$W = \frac{12S}{m^2 (n^3 - n)}.$$

As in the interpretation of Spearman's rho, the table above can be used to interpret the results.

We believe the best way to judge whether it is possible to distinguish between the quality of different wines is to examine whether a group of sophisticated tasters can make a reliable ranking of the wines. While our group makes no claim to being "professional," it contains several members who have participated in expert studies. And all members of our group have spent years both drinking wine and exhibiting an intellectual curiosity about what makes a particular wine especially high quality. The Kendall's W statistic gives a good account of whether our group is able to determine dependable differences in wine quality. The results over years of tasting suggest that it has not been possible for our group to do so.

In the Bergman vertical tasting of Chateau Léoville Poyferré referenced above, the total "votes against" were approximately equal for each of the different vintages. Kendall's W was calculated as 0.04, a result indistinguishable from zero. There was no statistically significant difference among any of the wines. The results of this tasting were quite similar to those of other tastings, raising the question of what we learned other than spending a highly enjoyable late afternoon and early evening in each other's company.

It is plausible that for a vertical tasting of the same wine, it is particularly difficult to discern differences in quality. But similar results were recorded in horizontal tastings of different wines of the same vintage. For example, we did a horizontal tasting of 1995 Bordeaux wines. There was no statistically significant winner and essentially zero correlation of our rankings with professional ratings or the prices of the wines. Kendall's W was 0.06, again indistinguishable from zero. Interestingly, the average rankings of the first growth wines (Chateau Margaux, Mouton Rothschild, and Lafite Rothschild) were exactly the same as the more moderately priced, lower classified wines (Clinet, Lynch Bages, and La Mission Haut Brion).

A similar result was recorded when the group did a repeat of The Judgment of Paris with somewhat different wines. Again, there were no statistical differences among the four French wines and the three wines from the United States and one from Canada. The average votes against for the most expensive three French wines (Chateau Mouton Rothschild, Lascombes, and Pichon Baron) were essentially the same as the average of two California wines (Stag's Leap and Phelps Insignia) and one Canadian wine (Oculus Mission Hill).

The results from other tastings were quite similar to the three described above. Kendall's W was not significantly different from zero in virtually all of our tastings.

But to be fair, there was one outlier where the group did agree and where the correlation of the tasters with price was strongly positive. It was a Champagne tasting where two 1995 French Champagnes (Taittinger Comtes de Champagne and Dom Perignon) were judged by the group to be significantly better than a \$2 sparkling wine labeled Champagne of Russian origin and a \$10 “Champagne” from upper New York State. The Kendall’s *W* from this tasting was highly significant at 0.61. No other tasting revealed any similar agreement.²

V. Some general reflections

What can be concluded about the lessons learned by a group of friends who have spent almost 40 years drinking wine together? If the best way to learn about wine is by drinking, we all have certainly had sufficient education. It would be presumptuous to conclude that we all learned the same lessons. In total over the years, based on the tastings going back to 1993, there have been 1,708 different wines in the 244 tastings. Indeed, the divergences revealed in our ratings of the different wines shows how personal and idiosyncratic the judging of wine can be. As Dick Quandt reminds us, there are good reasons for disagreements: “People do not necessarily value the same attributes in wines: some people dislike tannin in the wine while others don’t, some dislike acid while still others are relatively more sensitive to sugar, and still others care particularly about aroma and fruit in the taste. Two wines could be objectively quite wonderful, yet tasters could form very differing opinions about them.”

Perhaps the most important lesson I have learned is modesty. I realize how ephemeral my judgments have been as well as those of other members of the group. It is striking to me how little agreement there so often is during our tastings. And even when there is some conformity of views, usually the “best” in terms of the fewest “votes against” does not pass the test of statistical significance. In all of our tastings, there was only one time when the group was unanimous in its ranking. We all believed a \$2 bottle of a Russian sparkling wine bought at a Moscow airport was undrinkable. As someone who has often believed in the randomness of life, my experience with blind wine tastings confirms my view that my own ranking, the rankings of my wine group colleagues, and above all the ratings of experts need to be evaluated with multiple grains of salt.

One question we might ask is whether our stable group of wine tasters (with only minor changes in membership) has gotten better at judging wines over time. The best measure of agreement within the group is the correlations among the rankings of the tasters. If the agreement among the judges were seen to be more solid over time, one might say that they have “learned” and have generally become better at judging wines. But, in fact, the opposite has been true. The correlations among the tasters (Kendall’s *W*) actually fell over time. Not only did we not get better at forging agreements among ourselves, but over time we became less secure in our agreements. While none of this diminished the pleasure of tasting large numbers of excellent wines with good friends, this clearly shows that wine judging is a highly uncertain process.

²All tasting reports of the Princeton Wine Group are available at www.liquidasset.com/index.html

I am also impressed how my preferences and those of the group are at times inconsistent. When I was faced with the same forced rankings of the same wines during different periods, my preferences were not the same over time. The same was true for the group as a whole. We once had tastings of exactly the same wines, separated by several years. The group came up with an entirely different set of preferences the second time around. The rankings of each taster were all dissimilar in the two periods. And so often I have enormous difficulty at our tastings coming up with a satisfactory ranking. While I can smell and taste differences, I am unable to say with any confidence that the quality of one wine is better than another. The same has usually been true for all of us in our decades of tasting. The quality of most wines was indistinguishable from others. And correlations of our group rankings with the price of the wines and with the ratings of experts were generally low or nonexistent.

It is also often the case in blind tastings that it is difficult if not impossible to identify a wine by its taste. We often ask in our tastings to identify some of the wines before their identity is revealed. As often as not, mistakes are made. The same is true for “professional” tasters. In the Judgment of Paris, the French tasters were unable accurately to distinguish the “new world” Cabernets from those grown in Bordeaux. When Harry Waugh, the legendary British connoisseur, was asked the last time he had mistaken a French Bordeaux for a Burgundy in a blind tasting, he responded, “What time was lunch?”

Wines are often described by professional critics in terms of scents and fragrances. Consider the following:

The wine has a nose of blackberry, cassis, tobacco, cedar and gravel. There are also hints of licorice, forest floor, pencil lead, cinnamon and truffles, The wine gives galactic vibes.

It appears that the taster liked the wine, but I for one do not find the description helpful. And our group was unable to match the descriptions used by the experts to our tasting experience.

A delightful set of academic studies supports the skepticism about how difficult it is to make firm judgments about the quality of a wine. The studies were performed by a professor of economics and accounting at the University of Chicago, the late Roman Weil. Weil also was an oenophile with an incredible cellar.

Weil was a perpetual teacher who always relied on a rational approach to understanding the world. He would give his three young daughters math problems to solve as bedtime stories. The children would fall asleep struggling over prime factorization. The cost accounting methods of last in, first out and first in, first out were repurposed for deciding which child was to go first and last out of the bathroom.

In one study, Weil offered a blind tasting of three unmarked glasses of wine to large numbers of both amateur and experienced tasters. The same wine was poured into two of the glasses and a different wine in the third glass. It turned out that neither novice nor highly sophisticated wine tasters could reliably identify the unique singleton from the two identical wines.

In another highly cited study, Weil addressed the propensity of professional critics to describe wine in terms of their characteristic aromas. He published the results in a

2007 article (Weil, 2007). Weil found that consumers were unable to match the critics' descriptions of the wine with the wines themselves. He concluded that the words used by wine critics contain zero information.

It would be a mistake to conclude that all one reads about wine is useless. But it is fair to say that many of the expert opinions about wine are specious, and many of the opinions of experts tend to be arrogant and pretentious. Very often our wine group has had enormous difficulty at our tastings coming up with a satisfactory ranking. While we can smell and taste differences, we are usually unable to say with any confidence that the quality of one wine is better than another. The quality of most wines is indistinguishable from others. As Dick Quandt, who has performed statistical analyses for our group as well as for other tastings, has remarked, "The wine trade is intrinsically bullshit prone and therefore attracts bullshit artists." (Quandt, 2007, 135). Never mistake the numerical ratings of wine experts for dependable guides to evaluation. And never assume that you can always judge the quality of a wine by its price.

The late moral philosopher Harry Frankfurt has opined that one of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit (Frankfurt, 2005)! The essence of bullshit is not that it is false but that it is phony. It is impossible for people to lie unless they know the truth. Producing bullshit requires no such conviction.

We would not conclude, however, that we learned nothing from our decades of monthly tasting. There is one conclusion on which there is unanimous agreement. The tastings have greatly expanded our knowledge and appreciation of wines on a global basis. As Zaki Hosny put it, "Having grown up in England, the Clarets (Bordeaux) were my old friends. But they were my only friends. What the wine group gave me was the opportunity to savor new discoveries from all over the world that have now attained 'best new friend status.'" Bob Easton opined, "The main lesson I learned is that there are many areas around the world where excellent wines are produced and often overlooked." Ed Bergman admits to abandoning his prior "Francophilic approach and learning to appreciate wider expressions of excellence and wines made from unfamiliar varietals in various climates and soil types." He also notes that a broadening of the wine spectrum is similar to what has happened in the art and music worlds, where we have seen a similar shift to inclusiveness from the provincialism of past curatorial approaches.

Frank Lorenz has delighted us with tastings comparing the great wines of Spain with those of Argentina, Chile, and the Napa Valley. Ed Bergman has produced memorable tastings of wines throughout Italy and Sicily. We have enjoyed many tastings of wines from California as well as from South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and Germany. The delicious Pinot Noirs from the Willamette Valley of Oregon and the Santa Cruz mountains of California were a revelation to many of us. Bob Easton has recently introduced us to Oculus, a fantastic Bordeaux-style wine from British Columbia. Orley Ashenfelter has introduced the group to a number of excellent wines from New Jersey, including delicious Cabernets from his own vineyards. And we all would agree that the broadening of our wine horizons has been a major benefit of our membership in the tea-time tasting group.

The opportunities to taste different wines from distinct regions of the world have made us appreciate the astonishing variety of great wines that are available. I am sure that Paul Giamatti in the movie "Sideways" would not have said "If anybody orders

merlot, I'm leaving. I am not drinking any f ... g merlot" had he been offered a glass of Chateau Pétrus. D. H. Lawrence would not have suggested that Spanish wine "is the sulphurous urination of some aged horse" had he sipped a glass of Vega Sicilia Tempranillo. In our tastings, we have sampled delicious wines of every type from every wine-growing region of the world. Without our wine group and a tasting of Chateau Musar, we would never have considered that excellent wines are produced in Lebanon. Nor would we have imagined that delicious Cabernet Sauvignons and Cabernet Francs could be produced in New Jersey.

We have also learned that wines do not have to be expensive to be delightful. To be sure, a tasting of Romanée Conti La Tâche, Richebourg, and Echézeaux alongside the top Leroy Grand Crus was one of the most memorable experiences of our lives. We have enjoyed a similar experience drinking first-growth Bordeaux wines. But we have also had magnificent drinking experiences with far more modestly priced wines. And we have sometimes been fooled in blind tastings in not being able to distinguish the "second" wines of a producer from the primary vintage.

Second wines or second labels come from individual plots from a vineyard not chosen for the house's top wine. For example, the second wine might be made from grapes harvested from the youngest vines. The practice of bottling second wine became very popular in the 1980s when wine consumers learned that they could enjoy wines from an estate at affordable prices without paying a premium for the top wine with the estate's prestigious label. Many of these "second wines" from a producer can be just as enjoyable as the more expensive "grand vin." For example, I have preferred the far less expensive "de Brane" Margaux wine to a Chateau Brane Cantenac of the same vintage. And in one of our favorite tastings, several of the tasters, including myself, preferred the second wine, Overture (available at one-third the price) to California's Opus One. A simple Montepulciano can taste as good as a far more expensive Super Tuscan. One does not have to be wealthy to enjoy great wine.

And it is even possible to have a delightful wine tasting experience with wines priced between \$10 and \$20 a bottle. Never underestimate the joy that can be achieved from a simple Chianti. I would not complain if I could not afford any more expensive wine than a \$15 Spanish Rioja or a \$20 Italian Chianti or a \$15 Montepulciano. And nothing can bring a smile to my face more readily than the pleasure of a glass of Beaujolais and a cantal sandwich on a French baguette.

Our wine group has also learned that false beliefs about wine tend to get enshrined as unquestionable truths. It is wise to be skeptical. It is commonly believed that when it comes to wine grown in Bordeaux, older vintages are better. The results of our tastings, especially over time, suggest that very often we have more recently liked the younger wines best. Another shibboleth often perpetuated by wine "experts" is that Burgundies do not age well. Our group could not confirm this maxim. One widely believed trope that we are convinced is false is that the average rating scale given to a wine by experts is a reliable guide to its quality. Nor would our group agree that price is a reliable indicator of quality. As Zaki Hosny has opined, "I have learned that when it comes to wine wisdom, as Porgy sings to the dockworkers on Catfish Row, "It ain't necessarily so."

Tastings at Tea Time has been more than a seminar for the enjoyment and discussion of wines from all over the world. Our meetings have often become a forum for the consideration of worldly matters both great and small. And the camaraderie of the

group in convivial settings has almost always encouraged perfect attendance. We have grown old together around a shared passion that has kindled enduring friendships well beyond the bonhomie of tasting superb wines and food. And who knows? Perhaps the myth that drinking wine is good for your health and longevity might actually be true.

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