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IF IT'S FAMOUS, IT MUST
BE GOODThe social construction of brand value
in the US wine market

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Introduction

Two hundred years after the US declared its independence from its Old World rulers, a panel of distinguished wine experts met at the Intercontinental Hotel in Paris to taste and rate wines from Napa Valley and France in a blind tasting that has come to be known as the Judgement of Paris. To everyone's surprise, the panel of exclusively French judges declared two Napa Valley wines as winners. The judges' decisions sparked debate on both sides of the Atlantic about the true potential of California wines. While the debate raged, some French wine producers began quietly buying Napa Valley vineyards. Among them was famed Bordeaux winemaker Christian Moueix, who purchased the Napanook Vineyard in Yountville, California.

Like other Napa Valley vintners, Moueix began producing a wine based on cabernet sauvignon from his legendary vineyard. Unlike other California producers, however, Moueix rejected winemaking methods popular in California and, notably, refused to cater to consumers. How does he think about consumers when making wine? 'I don't', he says. 'I make what pleases me'. After Moueix's first vintage of Dominus Estate in 1983, critics praised it. Moueix's unique approach had, however, produced a wine they described as neither typically French nor typically Californian. Was it more French or more Californian, and was it really worth \$40? they asked. Five years later, a new perspective emerged that Christian Moueix was rewriting 'the definition of a Napa Valley reference point wine', according to wine's most influential critic (Parker 1997). With each vintage more critics agreed, and today a single bottle of Dominus Estate can command over \$300.

How do wine producers like Christian Moueix succeed so remarkably when consumers have thousands of excellent options below \$300? We explore that question, drawing on our ethnographic analysis of the US wine market (Humphreys and Carpenter 2018). In our analysis, we consider brands from both the consumer and producer perspective. From the firm perspective, we describe logics by which wine producers create brands. We find that some producers explicitly dismiss the preferences and tastes of consumers and reject financial gains as a measure of success. These artisanal firms can create high-status brands, but generating the resources necessary to sustain their operation is more elusive. Other firms cater to consumers and seek financial gain using a commercial logic. These firms, which could be described as market oriented, rarely create high-status brands, though they can enjoy greater financial stability.

Our analysis reveals that some firms play a status game. These firms create brands that achieve high status and enable firms to enjoy commercial success. At the same time, some consumers are drawn to high-status brands, which shape their preferences and enable them to signal their status to other consumers, building their own cultural capital. Such consumers seek out certain wine brands and pay premium prices for them. For the firms that own them, high-status brands are valuable commercial assets. In this chapter, we describe the social process through which firms play and win the status game. We explore the implications of our findings for research on market orientation and on status (e.g. Kohli and Jaworski 1990; Jaworski and Kohli 1993; Benjamin and Podolny 1999; Merton 1968; Washington and Zajac 2005).

The artisanal logic

Firms that embrace an artisanal logic start with a creative vision. Financial gains are secondary. 'We're not here to make big money in the short term', one winemaker told us. For firms that embrace an artisanal logic, wine offers a canvas for creative expression, originality and achievement. 'I want to make something unique, something different', a French winemaker told us. 'It's not by using recipes. I want to do something more, something exceptional'. Many consumers find such brands appealing, of course. This logic has elements of both the artisanal and artistic. On the one hand, producers explain at length how winemakers craft the product in a non-standard, non-industrialised way, improvising on the raw product of the grape and its origin. On the other hand, many producers also describe how the winemaker is an artist, conforming to a logic of creating a unique product to please oneself without regard to consumer tastes.

Winemakers

The actual production of wine, however, starts with the source of wine: the natural environment. Lorenzo, an executive with a centuries-old Italian wine producer described his firm's approach:

We don't create wine starting from the consumer need. . . . Wine is basically a product of nature. . . . [W]e cannot change the product only because a certain market is asking for this product. We start from the terroir, the vineyard, and we have to try to market the product that specific vineyard is able to give us.

Grapes are an agricultural product, but some people see them as ingredients in a creative endeavour. Like a chef, an artist or even a musician, a winemaker can be guided by a vision to create something original or exceptional. A French winemaker, Yves, described it succinctly:

You have your own vision, your own interpretation. It's like a musician. It has been written before us; the soil has done it. You can interpret it a little faster or a little slower with your own style, your own touch.

This artistic perspective has a strong aristocratic ambition, an intellectual, artistic pursuit with little role for consumer input. Yet this vision creates a paradox: how can winemakers create status – symbolic value – through the fermenting of grapes?

Critics

Critics play a powerful role in the US wine market. Karen MacNeil, Jancis Robinson, *The Wine Spectator*, *Wine Enthusiast*, *Wine and Spirits*, Vinous Media and *The Wine Advocate*, among hundreds

of others, review wines, assign scores and publish reviews. Robert Parker, founder of *The Wine Advocate*, is one of the most powerful critics. One additional point from Parker can generate €2.80 of revenue per bottle (Ali *et al.* 2008). Given the power of critics, some producers engineer wines to satisfy a critic and earn a high score. But for those pursuing an artisanal logic, doing so is out of the question. As Lorenzo said,

We have never produced a wine in order to get a rating, never. I wouldn't say [the winemakers] don't care. Of course, we're happy when we receive good ratings, but we have never been influenced by ratings during the production of the wine.

Distribution and retailing

Most producers rely on a small number of distributors who provide access to a broad network of retailers to reach consumers. Distributors select the wines to sell on a national or statewide basis. Phil, a wine distributor who selects a portfolio of wines for distribution, described the intensity of the competition:

Oh my God, the threat of substitution in the wine business, you know how high it is? I mean it's staggering and the amounts of Chardonnays that can fill in at twelve dollars. You know these buyers have choices so there's got to be a point of difference in how you break through that clutter.

Like distributors that limit access to retailers, large retailers exercise power by providing access to consumers. Gaining distribution and retail availability is challenging for artisanal producers, especially smaller ones. As a result, many smaller artisanal producers sell direct to consumers through a mailing list and a small number of restaurants.

Consumers

From the perspective of an artisanal logic, consumer tastes are not a pivotal consideration when crafting a wine. If, as Bourdieu (1993) suggests when considering the autonomy of the art world, winemakers are creating great works of art, the perspective of those who consume the art are not important – and, in fact, may hinder true artistic production (Hirschman 1983). And yet despite this lack of concern on the part of the producers, some consumers express a need for elevation, the social and symbolic distinction that wines offer. They value wine, but they value it for its ability to help them navigate social worlds and develop cultural capital that can be mobilised throughout life. Many consumers seek this distinction as they become adults. Matthew describes his introduction to wine:

And I didn't really get into wine, until I started working. At least that's what I remember. So, the first project that I was on as a consultant, there were some team dinners that we would go to, and that's sort of when I, one of my managers introduced me to gin, so I was a big Tanqueray fan for a while. And then wine was sort of the during dinner beverage consumed by the team. So, there were some people that were fairly knowledgeable about wine, and at one point I was sort of handed the wine list and asked to make a selection. And that's always for like, you know a new consultant. Like, that's the moment when you realize okay, I sort of need to know a little bit more about this.

Like many others, Matthew describes one of his first experiences with wine as associated with being adult. Wine plays a pivotal role in consumers' recognising and marking this life-stage transition. As Michele Lamont and others have noted, these types of symbolic boundaries can be important in marking one person from another and a former self from a current self (Kleine, Kleine III and Allen 1995; Lamont and Molnár 2002).

Wine and the status embodied in the wine send social signals related to a consumer's identity. Debra described that what a person drinks reveals something about that person in a very public way:

People assign the characteristics of a wine to themselves. . . . It's like the girls go around saying oh, I smoke cigars, I drink scotch, I do masculine things. You need to drink what you like – I think, I think people would look at that [an instance she described about a man asking for Riesling] as being strange. Like it's not manly to drink white, especially sweet Riesling.

Consumers often use brands to signal identity or social status (Arsel and Bean 2013; Holt 1998; Elder and Krishna 2010; Hoegg and Alba 2007). Wine is no exception. Among wine consumers, collectors sit atop the status hierarchy. Hosting dinner parties and charity events, collectors generously share their wine with friends and family, demonstrating their sophistication, knowledge about wine and resources. For example, Onathan, a collector from the West Coast, describes an event he hosted:

I actually started this charity event because of my obsession. One year I realized I had no more space in my house. . . . So I came up with the idea: How can we drink a lot of wine and do something really good with it in one evening? So, we started this thing in my house. I call it the wine charity event. Basically invite a lot of friends and family from around here. I open as much wine as anybody can drink and when everybody is sufficiently intoxicated people propose what charity all the money is going to go to. So, it initially started as something really light-hearted, but then we realized that sometimes we had ten or fifteen different proposals of charities, so we developed a voting system. And we've donated so far tens of thousands of dollars to different, mainly local charities and the only criterion me and my wine put on it is that all the money goes to one charity and that 100% of the money goes to charity.

By sharing wine with a large group of friends, Onathan gains status among the group (Mauss 1925/2000). Just as with sharing potlatch practices, plenitude – 'as much wine as anybody can drink' – and disinterestedness – that it be for charity or some other non-instrumental goal – are important.

Consumers use high-status wine brands as a way to cultivate cultural capital, building distinctions that both build community and distinguish themselves. Wine consumers distinguish themselves through their knowledge of wine. The cultural capital associated with knowledge is more than the knowledge of wine itself or the language to express that knowledge. Cultural capital is a disposition towards non-economic or instrumental parts of life, 'a sort of withdrawal from economic necessity' (Bourdieu 1984: 54). Indeed, echoing Veblen (1899/2007), Bourdieu explains that cultural capital signals one's removal or distance from economic subsistence. Those with cultural capital are admired by others for their unique knowledge and for their ability to appreciate the finer things removed from material existence. In short, the high-status brands created through the artisanal logic enable consumers to build cultural capital.

Success

Firms that embrace the artisanal logic succeed by achieving their vision and, through that vision, affecting how others think about wine. Satisfying consumers and commercial success are secondary.

One California winery states their ambitions simply: 'We're not here to break even, we are here to break the rules, break records and break through'. For some, commercial concerns are a sign of insufficient devotion to the creative endeavour. For the artists, achieving their vision and gaining recognition for it comprise the essence of success, and the success of firms enables consumers to gain distinction and build cultural capital using the brands firms create.

Employing an artistic logic to gain status is a well-worn path. For a poet, disinterest in commercial success builds symbolic capital – or status – the degree of recognition, 'prestige, consecration or honour' bestowed to an individual (Randal Johnson in Bourdieu 1993: 14; see also Holt 1998: 3; Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Veblen 1899/2007). 'The underlying law of this paradoxical game is that it is to one's interest to be disinterested: the advantage always falls to those who seek none' (Bourdieu 1993: 154). These two perspectives are, of course, apparently incompatible. 'The artist can triumph on the symbolic terrain only to the extent that he loses on the economic one, and vice versa' (Bourdieu 1993: 169). In this sense, wineries that embrace an artisanal logic reject commercial success. They must, however paradoxically, find the resources to sustain the business.

The commercial logic

For many producers, wine is a business first and foremost. Robert, a California wine executive, expressed it simply: 'Everybody gets into this business because it's a lot of fun. Making wine is a lot of fun. After a couple of years, you end up with a warehouse full of cases and you [realize] it is a tough business'. Another executive, Rachel, described the primacy of the commercial view:

The market's so competitive. There's been a lot of consolidation. . . . And so, for us to get our unfair share of attention, we need to add value in some way. Either the wines need to be so hot that they're just flying off the shelves. . . [or] we also have people on the street managing those distributors and working the street every day trying to sell the wine.

For firms like these, commercial success is a top priority.

Winemakers

In the commercial logic, firms monitor trends, and the firms' winemakers develop products in response. For instance, Clark, an executive at a large firm, describes the development of a very successful, high-volume red wine:

And so [our firm] decided they would create – they would create something to go against [a successful red wine], and they created a concept. They created a concept but then a lot of focus was done on the product because it was different. It needed a heavy mouthfeel. It needed a big mouthfeel but still needed to be incredibly smooth. It needed an elevated sugar because that's just what people like. And then at the same time they really did a lot of work that was smart to make sure that the wine style itself matched the label. So, the expectation was very clear.

For firms like Clark's, winemaking is similar to developing consumer products, classically market driven.

Critics

If consumer tastes are hard for wine producers to understand, critics have more clearly defined, consistent preferences. Producers may disagree with critics, but rather than battle powerful critics,

winemakers craft wines to please critics and earn high scores. According to Avery, the owner of a Napa winery, 'winemakers are trying to please the critics . . . with the idea being that the critic then influences the end consumer'. Firms have even emerged that, as one wine critic described, 'actually engineer wines for people. And they'll say well actually, if we make this style of wine, you'll get a higher score'.

Distribution and retailing

Distributors and retailers are powerful forces in the market, as noted earlier. Both are customers. Because there are so few distributors, they are especially powerful. Satisfying the trade buyer is critical to gain access to retailers and restaurants, according to the commercial logic, and ultimately to consumers. As one chief marketing officer told us,

We are primarily focused on the trade. . . . So there's an expression that I think I mentioned that we often have to sell the wine three or four times before it even gets to an end consumer. . . . So we are keenly focused on those people that are between us and the consumer first because they are integral to our success, and in many cases they are the evangelists and they hand sell or recommend or get excited about it which helps consumers get excited about it.

(Barbara)

Distributors specify characteristics of the wines they will consider. As one executive told us: 'It's really all about providing a product that is, from a price-value relationship consistent with other competition and checking boxes'. Without distribution and access to retailers, producers struggle to even catch the attention of consumers.

Consumers

Seeking commercial success, firms focus on understanding customers, but consumers' understanding of wine may be limited. Seeking to understand wine consumers can be frustrating. As one executive remarked, 'People don't know what they're drinking, basically'. Consumers may readily admit a lack of expertise. One consumer, Susan, described her experience in a wine class:

I started attending a [wine class], got embarrassed because they poured the wine [and asked us to discuss the colour, aroma, taste]. I happened to get aroma for that wine. . . [but to me it] just smells like wine. . . . It was fun. I had nothing I could say. I was like – it tastes like, it smells like wine. And he [said] you should try when you get like cherry, bright fruit, dried fruit, cooked fruit. I'm like I don't.

To learn more about wine, consumers often attend tastings. Hosted by a wine shop or producer, tastings are opportunities to promote specific wines, including new releases, or to introduce the winery to consumers. For consumers, tastings are an opportunity to sample an old favourite or try something new. Tastings also provide consumers with a rich social and personal experience to enhance their wine expertise and knowledge. As one consumer described, wine is

overwhelming, and I can't process that so this was really cool to actually sit in a room and go, okay, these 11 wines are all from the same place. . . [so] at least you had some foundation that was the same and I, I felt like, oh, good I can process this because I can do 'one of these things is not like the other'. Like I – but if you hand me a glass of wine and say 'Taste

this. What do you think it is?’ I couldn’t tell you. I can make guesses, but nine times out of ten I’m not right in that department, but if you tell me these four wines are all Bordeaux or these four wines are all cabernet from California or from wherever, I can compare and contrast them for you and pick out the differences.

(Allison)

As Allison describes, a tasting is a setting in which she can explore a range of wines and gain knowledge about her own judgements. Although firms may see consumers as having well-established preferences, research suggests that consumer judgements depend on the context and the field of alternatives (Ariely 2008; Bourdieu 1984). Consumers use tastings to help navigate that complex array of situations and contexts. Given the complexity created by thousands of options, consumers may enjoy exploring wine through tastings and curated retail experiences. However, most consumers remain inexpert and lack well-defined tastes, posing a challenge to commercially driven firms that try to align their products with those tastes.

Without clear guidance from consumers, firms look to trends for insight about consumer tastes. ‘There’s a lot of following what’s hot, varieties, segments, regions that are robust and hot’, said one executive. By following trends, firms often develop similar rather than distinct wines. A wine executive, Aron, summarised a view we heard from many others: ‘The top 15 chardonnays all look exactly the same’.

Overwhelmed with the number of similar choices, consumers rely on experts. Critics are especially influential. Critics review wines and typically score them on an easy-to-understand 0-to-20 or 0-to-100 scale. According to Chris, a critic himself, ‘What we’ve done by making [Robert] Parker the most influential critic in the world for anything, we have basically created an objective opinion’. Despite questions about the objectivity of these scores, critics do nevertheless influence consumers. As Clark, a retailer, said: ‘People sometimes buy only on ratings’ and ignore the description or tasting notes that typically accompany the score.

Success

According to the commercial logic, firms seek to understand consumers, select target customers and develop wines to meet their needs. Firms also produce wines to appeal to critics and satisfy price points established by a small number of powerful distributors, which produces a sea of similar wines. For many consumers, the array of choices is confusing, creating fear and frustration. Some consumers navigate the options through tastings, wine clubs and direct purchase from wineries, gaining status as they gain knowledge about wine. From this process, a small set of successful brands emerge as appealing and distinct from competitors. For producers, the measure of success is consumer acceptance and financial returns.

Socially constructing brand value

The differences between the artisanal logic and the commercial logic create tension within firms. The two logics differ in term of the motivations of firms; the roles of winemakers, critics and retailers; and even how firms measure success. Table 39.1 summarises these differences.

Rejecting the artisanal as impractical, some firms produce wine using a commercial logic; the wines they make are often described by critics as industrial. Other producers reject the commercial logic and embrace the artisanal approach. Our analysis suggests that some firms pursue a third option, seeking to satisfy both logics simultaneously by playing status games. For example, Mike, a California wine executive, described the tension between the commercial and artisanal aspects:

Table 39.1 Artisanal logic and commercial logic in the US wine market

<i>Commercial</i>	<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Artisanal</i>
Commercial enterprise	<i>Vision</i>	Creative expression
Well-defined, consistent, discoverable preferences	<i>Consumer tastes</i>	Lack expertise, mercurial
Engineers	<i>Winemakers</i>	Artists
Screen products, identify high-quality wines	<i>Critics and media</i>	Interpret wines and convey meaning
Powerful customers and gatekeepers	<i>Distribution and retail</i>	Powerful with buyers, a stage to reach consumers
Consumer acceptance and financial success	<i>Success</i>	Achieving a vision with impact

‘Naturally we want [our winemaker] to produce wines that are the best in the world. So, we don’t want to put a lot of financial constraints on the winemaking team, yet we’re a business’.

Given that the logics are contradictory and inconsistent, seeking to satisfy both logics is a challenging path. As Pablo Picasso remarked, ‘It is often said that the artist should work for himself, for the love of art, and scorn success. An artist needs success. Not only in order to live but primarily so that he can realize his work’ (Muniz *et al.* 2014: 71). How can a firm satisfy consumers while ignoring them and become financially successful if doing so compromises the firm’s legitimacy?

First, firms playing the status game begin with a vision. Crafted without input from consumers, the vision becomes the primary road map for the firm and for the education of consumers. As Alain, an executive said,

One has to be a visionary to succeed in the wine industry because one has to see what other people don’t see. . . . You have to see 5, 10, 25 years down the road. . . . I’m not going to be asking the market what it wants because they don’t know what they want until I’m going to show them.

Winemakers invoke their magic, crafting wines to reflect their vision and sharing them with the world.

Second, rather than seeing critics as judges or as customers to be satisfied, firms playing the status game view critics as potential allies. Winemakers cultivate relationships with critics, sharing their knowledge and persuading critics of the wisdom of the winemaker’s vision. As one executive told us, ‘Education is essential for the success of wine in the market’. More than just rating wines, critics provide consumers with a language to understand and describe the sensations of consuming wine. Critics establish benchmarks and provide language and structure to enable consumers to develop preferences (West *et al.* 1996).

Relatedly, some winemakers attain celebrity status, allowing them to wield influence much like critics. As Alain recounted,

Listening to a winemaker is basically like listening to an artist; once the work has been released, whether this is a painting or book or a bottle of wine, it’s all about what’s behind the work of art. What’s your intent? How did you do it?

The goal, as Alain describes, is to ‘help the consumer discover the soul’ of the wine. Through experiences and conversations, firms shape how critics and the press interpret a wine, and critics and the press shape how consumers understand and interpret wines.

Third, the winery and retail stores provide opportunities for firms to advance their vision and bring their magic to life. In tasting rooms, consumers visit, taste and purchase wines and attend seminars and events. During these events, the winemaker takes centre stage, shares his or her vision of the wines, offers a broader perspective on wine in general and conducts a tasting. A wine executive, Alain, describes his approach:

Backstage we study in minute detail our sales in each of our key markets to focus and scale our marketing efforts in the most efficient manner, but on-stage we look immune from marketing. We are the proud artisans of great wines not a financial institution or a money machine. . . . Like a successful recording artist, an iconic wine needs to come to life in 3D once in a while to entertain its magic and stir the heart of its worshippers.

Thus, some firms use retail stores in the same way theatre directors use the stage: as a platform on which they can advance their unique vision not only to retail staff but also to consumers, both those new to the brand and those devoted to it.

Winners and losers emerge from these status games. Winners can define categories, set benchmarks within categories, and influence consumers' price sensitivity. Consumers covet high-status brands and pay premium prices for wines from a lauded producer. The price difference between a low- and high-status win can be substantial (Beverland 2005). With strong demand and high prices, high-status producers thrive financially, satisfying both the commercial and artisanal logics.

For winners of the status game, success can be remarkably enduring (Beverland 2005; Merton 1968; Washington and Zajac 2005). Unlike product features that can be copied, status must be earned, making it difficult to duplicate. Some high-status producers retain their advantage for decades or longer – while rejecting consumer input and feigning disinterest in financial success.

Conclusion

Our results suggest that rather than a single logic reflected in the concept of market orientation, some firms pursue multiple institutional logics, which can create tension and conflict within the firms. Status, however, can play an important role in resolving conflicts in organisational logics and become the basis for a firm's valuable brand. Our results differ from previous work on status in three ways. Scholars have examined the process through which firms influence the structure of markets (e.g. Humphreys 2010; White 1981) and how producers signal status through affiliation (Benjamin and Podolny 1999). Our results suggest that firms rely on status to build relationships with retailers, distributors, critics and consumers, influencing the structure of the market itself. By doing so, firms create a hierarchy of brands that influences the choices of consumers and the flow of resources through the system in fundamental ways. Second, research on market orientation suggests that firms can create competitive advantage through shaping consumer thinking, but empirical support has been lacking (e.g. Jaworski *et al.* 2000). Our study provides empirical evidence about how firms use status to shape consumer thinking, ultimately building valuable, high-status brands. Third, based on the concept of institutional logics (Thornton *et al.* 2012), scholars identified that firms often pursue multiple logics simultaneously (e.g. Besharov and Smith 2014). Research is beginning to explore how firms resolve inconsistencies in logics (e.g. Gümüşay *et al.* 2020). Our results suggest that status can be an effective mechanism to resolve inconsistencies between commercial and artistic logics. Here, we see how the market provides a space for the mutual shaping of consumer tastes and market offerings. As a result, the interrelation of wine and culture can be used to better understand how both firms and consumers in the market behave and change over time.

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