



## Frontal Cortex

**Jonah Lehrer on science, imagination, and the mind.**

June 13, 2012

**Does All Wine Taste the Same?**

Posted by [Jonah Lehrer](#)



On May 24, 1976, the British wine merchant Steven Spurrier organized a blind tasting of French and Californian wines. Spurrier was a Francophile and, like most wine experts, didn't expect the New World upstarts to compete with the premiers crus from Bordeaux. He assembled a panel of eleven wine experts and had them taste a variety of Cabernets blind, rating each bottle on a twenty-point scale.

The results shocked the wine world. According to the judges, the best Cabernet at the tasting was a 1973 bottle from Stag's Leap Wine Cellars in Napa Valley. When the tasting was repeated a

few years later—some judges insisted that the French wines had been drunk too young—Stag’s Leap was once again declared the winner, followed by three other California Cabernets. These blind tastings (now widely known as the Judgment of Paris) helped to legitimate Napa vineyards.

But now, in an even more surprising turn of events, another American wine region has performed far better than expected in a [blind tasting](#) against the finest French châteaux. Ready for the punch line? The wines were from New Jersey.

The tasting was closely modelled on the 1976 event, featuring the same fancy Bordeaux vineyards, such as Château Mouton Rothschild and Château Haut-Brion. The Jersey entries included bottles from the Heritage Vineyards in Mullica Hill and Unionville Vineyards in Ringoes. The nine judges were French and American wine experts.

The Judgment of Princeton didn’t quite end with a Jersey victory—a French wine was on top in both the red and white categories—but, in terms of the reassurance for those with valuable wine collections, it might as well have. Clos des Mouches only narrowly beat out **Unionville Single Vineyard** and two other Jersey whites, while Château Mouton Rothschild and Haut-Brion topped Heritage’s BDX. The wines from New Jersey cost, on average, about five per cent as much as their French counterparts. And then there’s the inconsistency of the judges: the scores for that Mouton Rothschild, for instance, ranged from 11 to 19.5. On the excellent blog Marginal Revolution, the economist Tyler Cowen [highlights](#) the analysis of the Princeton professor Richard Quand, who found that almost of all the wines were “statistically undistinguishable” from each other. This suggests that, if the blind tasting were held again, a Jersey wine might very well win.

What can we learn from these tests? First, that tasting wine is really hard, even for experts. Because the sensory differences between different bottles of rotten grape juice are so slight—and the differences get even more muddled after a few sips—there is often wide disagreement about which wines are best. For instance, both the winning red and white wines in the Princeton tasting were ranked by at least one of the judges as the worst.

The perceptual ambiguity of wine helps explain why contextual influences—say, the look of a label, or the price tag on the bottle—can profoundly influence expert judgment. This was nicely demonstrated in a mischievous 2001 experiment led by Frédéric Brochet at the University of Bordeaux. In the first test, Brochet invited fifty-seven wine experts and asked them to give their impressions of what looked like two glasses of red and white wine. The wines were actually the same white wine, one of which had been tinted red with food coloring. But that didn’t stop the experts from describing the “red” wine in language typically used to describe red wines. One expert praised its “jamminess,” while another enjoyed its “crushed red fruit.”

The second test Brochet conducted was even more damning. He took a middling Bordeaux and served it in two different bottles. One bottle bore the label of a fancy grand cru, the other of an ordinary *vin de table*. Although they were being served the exact same wine, the experts gave the bottles nearly opposite descriptions. The grand cru was summarized as being “agreeable,” “woody,” “complex,” “balanced,” and “rounded,” while the most popular adjectives for the *vin de table* included “weak,” “short,” “light,” “flat,” and “faulty.”

The results are even more distressing for non-experts. In recent decades, the wine world has become an increasingly quantitative place, as dependent on scores and statistics as Billy Beane. But these ratings suggest a false sense of precision, as if it were possible to reliably identify the difference between an eighty-nine-point Merlot from Jersey and a ninety-one-point blend from Bordeaux—or even a greater spread. And so we linger amid the wine racks, paralyzed by the alcoholic arithmetic. How much are we willing to pay for a few extra points?

These calculations are almost certainly a waste of time. Last year, the psychologist Richard Wiseman [bought](#) a wide variety of bottles at the local supermarket, from a five-dollar Bordeaux to a fifty-dollar champagne, and asked people to say which wine was more expensive. (All of the taste tests were conducted double-blind, with neither the experimenter nor subject aware of the actual price.) According to Wiseman's data, the five hundred and seventy-eight participants could only pick the more expensive wine fifty-three per cent of the time, which is basically random chance. They actually performed below chance when it came to picking red wines. Bordeaux fared the worst, with a significant majority—sixty-one per cent—picking the cheap plonk as the more expensive selection.

A similar conclusion was reached by a [2008 survey](#) of amateur wine drinkers, which found a slight negative correlation between price and happiness, “suggesting that individuals on average enjoy more expensive wines slightly less.”

These results raise an obvious question: if most people can't tell the difference between Château Mouton Rothschild ([retail: seven hundred and twenty-five dollars](#)) and Heritage BDX (thirty-five dollars from the winery), then why do we splurge on premiers crus? Why not drink Jersey grapes instead? It seems like a clear waste of money.

The answer returns us to the sensory limitations of the mind. If these blind testings teach us anything, it's that for the vast majority of experts and amateurs fine-grained perceptual judgments are impossible. Instead, as Brochet points out, our expectations of the wine are often more important than what's actually in the glass. When we take a sip of wine, we don't taste the wine first, and the cheapness or expensiveness second. We taste everything all at once, in a single gulp of this wine is Mouton Rothschild, or this wine is from South Jersey. As a result, if we think a wine is cheap, then it will taste cheap. And if we think we are tasting a premier cru, then we will taste a premier cru. Our senses are vague in their instructions, and we parse their inputs based upon whatever other knowledge we can summon to the surface. It's not that those new French oak barrels or carefully pruned vines don't matter—it's that the logo on the bottle and price tag often matter more.

So go ahead and buy some wine from New Jersey. But if you really want to maximize the pleasure of your guests, put a fancy French label on it. Those grapes will taste even better.

Read more <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/frontal-cortex/2012/06/wine-taste.html#ixzz1xs0A1EYV>