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Understanding restaurateurs' wine list design strategies in Croatian restaurants

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to get an understanding of restaurateurs' strategies when choosing wines to be offered on wine lists in Croatia, namely in Dalmatian restaurants of Dubrovnik and Split. Since similar studies have been done in France, Australia, the US, and China, the main idea was to compare those findings with the situation in Croatia. The results of the quantitative best-worst research study that included 110 restaurants in Dubrovnik and Split, showed that restaurant owners in Croatia have a set of strategies in mind when designing their wine lists including: 'high reputation brand', 'tastes good', and 'preference for local wine'.

Key words: Wine list, Restaurants, Strategy, Best – Worst

INTRODUCTION

Wine list as a differentiation strategy

One of the differentiation factors for restaurants is the supply of wines. The reason why good food is accompanied by suitable wines is that it can considerably increase the gastronomical experience (Aune, 2002). Since wine sales are crucial for restaurants' success, restaurant owners must select the right ways of promoting the restaurant's wines (Manske & Cordua, 2005). Wine plays a critical role in the gastronomical experience in today's competitive market (Yuksel & Yuksel, 2002). Nowadays, the wine market is facing a high rise in competition and more demanding consumers. For instance, there is a trend towards an increase in the consumption of wines with "designation of origin", because of greater consumer knowledge and interest in wine (Ruiz et al., 2004). Consumers choose the drink or brand that is associated with their social life and which represents their personality. Since alcoholic drink has become an element for group integration but also the differentiation of individual personalities, the brand in the wine market has a big influence on consumer purchasing decisions (Diez, 2007). Literature suggests three most common ways of promoting wines. First, adding a wine selection to the menu (Dodd, 1997), second, improving the wine list (Aspler, 1991; Brown, 2003) and, third, training waiters in wine knowledge (Granucci, 1994; Brown, 2003).

A research conducted in France has shown that restaurant owners employ a set of strategies when selecting wines to be offered on wine list. Some of them are the following: choosing wines that taste good, matching food with wine, the presence of a sommelier and competitive pricing. Market-driven strategies like popular wines or highly reputed brands are not considered to be very important (Sirieix & Remaud, 2010).

Food and wine pairing

Wine list is a very personal tool that restaurant owners use for projecting the restaurant image (Gil, Ruiz, & Berenguer, 2008). The wines may be selected to reflect the restaurant's style of food and

personality (Corsey, 2006) . An important factor affecting wine sales is the recommendation of food and wine pairing. Wine is an ideal complement to the food and it raises up the taste of food to the highest level (Gagic & Ivkov, 2013). People working on the preparation and serving of food need to have strong culinary knowledge, but also need to be familiar with wine varieties and characteristics. Enology and gastronomy are closely connected. The real appreciation for wine does not exist in the absence of gastronomic passion (Ivkov et al., 2012). Good food and wine pairing will increase the flavors of both the food and the wine. A good pairing occurs when the food and wine do not overshadow each other (Gagic & Ivkov, 2013). According to research conducted in 52 upscale Spanish restaurants in Valencia, food and wine pairing recommendations have increased wine sales of the targeted wines by 44.5% (Wansink et al., 2006). As food and wine pairing form a harmonious relationship to boost the gastronomic experience, recommending food and wine pairing can reduce the uncertainty that customers may have while selecting a wine (Wansink et al., 2006).

Wine list design

Wine list is considered to be an important tool in increasing customer satisfaction, improving restaurant value, and providing prestige to the restaurant (Wansink et al., 2006). An exceptional wine list should be renewed regularly (Gil, Ruiz, & Berenguer, 2008). Since many consumers see the consumption of wine as an aesthetic process, wine list appearance may also play a significant role in differentiating from competitors. For instance, colors, illustrations, fonts, paper quality, all of these factors can increase sales and strengthen the restaurant's image (Charters & Pettigrew, 2005). However, another study has suggested that the wine list appearance has little influence on customer decisions (Bowen & Morris, 1995). Offering well known or highly reputed wine brands can also increase customer satisfaction. Some customers do not like experimenting with some unknown wines and therefore tend to order wines that are popular worldwide (Hall, Lockshin, & O'Mahony, 2001).

Training staff in wine knowledge

In the hospitality industry, the quality of service is critical and linked with customer satisfaction (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). Customer satisfaction affects post-purchase perceptions, future purchase

decisions and long-term customer loyalty (Donovan & Samler, 1994; Heskett et al., 1997). To create a loyal customer, a restaurant/wine bar needs to give the customer a reason and means to be loyal. For those who want to succeed in the wine industry, it is critical to understand what a wine consumer demands. Knowledge and friendliness of the staff are considered to be the most important attributes in customer decision making whether to purchase the wine or not (O'Neill, Palmer, & Charters, 2002). That is why training is mandatory and significantly important in maintaining and enhancing the quality of the wine experience (Carlsen, 1998). In the 1970s, the Court of Master Sommeliers was founded to improve beverage knowledge and service in hotels and restaurants. Nowadays, several organizations have been established to improve the education of wine knowledge and service (Aspler, 1991).

Sommeliers

Restaurants that employ sommeliers tend to have clients who spend more on wine (Dewald, 2008). A research conducted in 14 restaurants in Texas has established that the average sales per square foot for restaurants with wine stewards or sommeliers was \$142.00 per square foot, in comparison to \$84.00 per square foot for restaurants without wine stewards (Manske & Cordua, 2005). In research conducted in the US, 250 sommeliers were asked to share their views on what makes a good wine list. More than 95% said that the most important factor when selecting wines to be offered on the wine list are price, customer requests, restaurant food offer and brand reputation. Moreover, value for money and vintage are considered important by over 91% of sommeliers. Finally, 88% of sommeliers rated purchasing customer trends, profitability of the wine, personal preference and type of variety as important (Dewald, 2008).

Competitive pricing

However, the ability to maximize profit is a crucial factor for restaurateurs. (Sirieix, Remaud, Lockshin, Thach, & Lease, 2011). Wine is an important profit-center for restaurant owners, because it normally has a higher mark-up than food (Walker, 1998). A significant part of a wine list's profitability correlates to the wine price mark-up, which is the amount that the restaurant manager

will charge in extension to the cost of the wine that has been purchased. A percentage mark-up (the mark-up expressed as a percentage over the purchase price) tells us how the profit is obtained (Livat & Remaud, 2018). Restaurants usually tend to overprice wine, because they know the customers will underestimate the percentage of mark-up (Cuozzo, 2015).

The basic pricing rule is that the mark-up applied to “cheap” wines is largely opposed to the one for “expensive” wines. For instance, if a restaurant buys a bottle of wine at 5€ and sells it at 15€, it means that the mark-up equals 10€ ($15 - 5 = 10$). In percentage, this equals 200% (Livat & Remaud, 2018). Another survey, conducted by Amspacher (2011), has shown that the average mark-up per cost of wines bought at 50€ or higher equals 111%.

Perceived risk

In reality, many different factors are affecting customers’ wine-purchasing decisions. One of them is the level of uncertainty and anxiety consumers feel regarding the purchase decision, better known as perceived risk (Lacey, Bruwer, & Li, 2009). According to a study conducted in the UK, there are four types of risk customers are facing when purchasing wine: functional, social, financial and physical risk (Mitchell & Greatorax, 1989). The level of social risk is closely related to the dining situation. For business dining, the need to impress others by buying an expensive bottle of wine is pretty high. Moreover, some consumers tend to buy unfamiliar wines even against their personal preferences to preserve uniqueness within the group (Ritchie, 2007).

The level of uncertainty when selecting wines arises due to lack of information, price and customer experience (Batt & Dean, 2000). A study suggests three most important risk-reduction-strategies to help customers with their purchasing decisions: opportunity to taste wine, sommelier's personal recommendations and offering free samples to the customers (Mitchell & Greatorax, 1989). According to Ruiz-Molina et al. (2010), the presence of a waiter and the use of wine sales techniques can increase wine sales by 10% to 25%.

Wine list design strategies

A research conducted in France has shown that restaurant owners have eleven potential strategies in mind when selecting wines for a wine list, but within restaurateurs' strategy classification, the only strategy that is considered unimportant is maximizing profit. According to the research, the larger the restaurant, the higher the preference for local wines. If a restaurant has a cellar to stock the wine, the scores for the following strategies matching food with wine menu, preference for local wines and wines that taste good, might be higher. The restaurant-style does not affect the ranking of the strategies (Sirieix & Remaud, 2010)

In another study conducted with Australian, UK, and French wine consumers, respondents have chosen "match with food" and "already tasted it" as the most important criteria when selecting wines (Cohen, d'Hauteville, & Sirieix, 2009).

Research Aim

From the above literature review, it is safe to conclude that wine lists are an extremely important factor of restaurant's differentiation strategy and that, in order to be successful, restaurateurs must make the wine list design as one of their important priorities. Wine and food pairing only enhance this importance, since wine and food complement each other in augmenting the customer experience. Wine lists must therefore be comprehensive, elegant and presented by the knowledgeable staff, since sommeliers greatly influence restaurants' wine sales and overall profitability. Profitability is further influenced by scrupulous pricing which must include the perceived risk on the behalf of the buying customer. All the above elements must be taken into consideration when the wine list is designed.

The aim of this study is to better understand restaurateurs' strategies when choosing wines to be offered on a wine list in Croatia, i.e. Dubrovnik and Split. Since similar studies have been done in France, Australia, the US, and China, it would be very beneficial to know where the local market stands when it comes to the established benchmarks.

METHOD

Research design

From the literature review, a number of potential strategies for wine list design were identified as restaurateur driven and/or market driven. In the end, the decision was made to use a slightly modified method of that one used by Sirieix & Remaud (2010). The main idea was to compare their findings in France with the situation in Croatia in 2019/2020. Consequently, the same potential strategies were used in their paper and presented in Table 1.

| Restaurateur's preference | Market driven or supplier driven choice |
|--|---|
| 0. Matching wine with food menu | 5. Well-known brand |
| 1. Tastes good | 6. High reputation brand |
| 2. Competitive price fit for the price range of food | 7. I rely on my supplier recommendation |
| 3. Maximize profit | 8. Balance of varieties |
| 4. Preference for local wine | 9. Not available in retail stores |
| | 10. Popular wines (can sell a lot) |

Table 1: Strategies underlying restaurateurs' choice of wines for wine list

A Youden type of balanced incomplete block was designed including 11 above presented strategies. Eleven questionnaires were designed according to the Youden incomplete block calculation that were subsequently given for completion to restaurateurs in Dubrovnik and Split. In the total number of questionnaires each strategy appeared the same number of times as every other. The respondents had to choose from a set representing a choice of strategies by choosing one strategic option they considered the most important and one that they considered the least important. A sample questionnaire is presented in Table 2.

| Least important | Choice criteria | Most important |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| X | 1. Tastes good | |
| | 2. Maximize profit | |
| | 3. Preference for local wine | |
| | 4. Well known brand | |
| | 5. Not available in retail stores | X |

Table 2: Example of a choice task

Only the “best” or the most important strategies were analyzed, because the analysis of the least important options seemed impractical. In this sense, the “worst” strategies provided simply a visual balance for the respondents so that they have a frame of reference for their decision-making when completing the questionnaire. However, the one least important strategy (the absolutely “worst”) was calculated to be compared with the least chosen “best” strategy in order to check whether the assessment of the model was correct. In the event that they are the same, our model will be confirmed.

Raw scores have been converted into a 0-100 scale with the highest best score and this scale was used to rank the strategic wine selecting options from the most to the least important one.

Sample

In this study, 110 restaurateurs from Dubrovnik and Split were included as compared to Sirieix & Remaud (2010) who included 68 respondents from four French towns, i.e. Montpellier, Toulouse, Paris and Lyon. From the literature review it was apparent that no study of this kind has ever been conducted in Croatia. The questionnaires were collected from October 2019 until March 2020.

RESULTS

Across the restaurants in this study conducted in Croatia, three strategies have been identified as the most important for restaurateurs when designing their wine lists. Scores attained for these three strategies are not significantly different.

The ‘high reputation brand’ strategy has the highest standardized score of 100% probability to be chosen as the most important while the other two strategies, ‘tastes good’ and ‘preference for local wine’, have a probability of 94.1% to be chosen as the most important. All other strategies, such as ‘competitive price fit for the price range of food’, ‘popular wines’, ‘matching wine with food menu’, ‘maximize profit’, ‘balance of varieties’, ‘I rely on my supplier recommendation’ and ‘well-known brand’ are considered unimportant.

According to the analyses and as presented in Table 3, ‘not available in retail stores’ is the least important strategy for restaurateurs when designing their wine lists (the absolutely ‘worst’).

To confirm the correctness of our assessment, another test was conducted using frequency data analyses to calculate the least important factor. The frequency analyses showed that the strategy with the highest frequency, also known as mode, is strategy number 9, ‘not available in retail stores’. This data supports the calculations presented in the table and confirms that our assessment of the model was correct.

| Strategies | Frequency | Mean | Standardized score |
|---|-----------|------------------|--------------------|
| 6. High reputation brand | 22 | 1.70733118 | 100 |
| 1. Tastes good | 19 | 1.280498385 | 94.11112471 |
| 4. Preference for local wine | 19 | 1.280498385 | 94.11112471 |
| 2. Competitive price fit for the price | 9 | -0.1422775983 | 46.37812089 |
| 10. Popular wines (can sell a lot) | 9 | -0.1422775983 | 46.37812089 |
| 0. Matching wine with food menu | 8 | -0.2845551966 | 40.57990363 |
| 3. Maximize profit | 8 | -0.2845551966 | 40.57990363 |
| 8. Balance of varieties | 8 | -0.2845551966 | 40.57990363 |
| 7. I rely on my supplier recommendation | 5 | -0.7113879915 | 24.9364079 |
| 5. Well-known brand | 3 | -0.9959431881 | 16.69653576 |
| 9. Not available in retail stores | 0 | -1.422775983 | 8.095278173 |
| Average | | $\frac{110}{10}$ | |
| Standard deviation | | 7.028513356 | |

Table 3: Most vs least important strategies

DISCUSSION

The results have shown that restaurateurs in Croatia employ the following strategic choices when designing their wine lists: ‘high reputation brand’, ‘tastes good’, and ‘preference for local wine’. These particular strategies are being both restaurateur-driven and market/supplier driven: ‘high reputation brand’ is a market-driven strategy while ‘tastes good’, and ‘preference for local wine’ are being driven by the restaurateurs’ preference. This data suggests that Croatian restaurateurs are being driven by their perception of the market trends and consumer purchasing decisions when making selections for their wine lists. It is encouraging to see that, while focus on market trends, which is completely understandable given the high-seasonality of restaurant business in the restaurants on the

Dalmatian coast, they also are strongly focused on differentiation in terms of their cultural authenticity.

The findings of this research validate some of the findings done by previous studies, but also show differences in the strategies supporting wine list design. The results of the study by Sirieix, Rемаund, and Lockshin (2011) conducted with French, Australian, American, and Chinese restaurateurs show that the most important criteria for selecting wines across most countries were ‘matching wine with the food menu’, ‘wine that tastes good’, ‘competitive price fit for the price range of food’, and ‘balance of varieties’. On the other hand, ‘preference for local wine’, ‘popular wines’, and ‘maximize profit’ are viewed as less important and suggest variations in different countries or restaurant styles. The idea of ‘relying on supplier recommendations’ has a quite low score across all four countries, as well as ‘well-known brands’ and ‘not available in retail stores’.

The main area of agreement between Croatia and these four countries seems to be associated with the least important strategies. Restaurateurs across all five countries feel more comfortable making their own choices when designing their wine lists rather than relying on supplier recommendations or choosing well-known brands just because these are not available in retail stores. These results support the theory from the literature review, saying that the wine list is a very personal tool for projecting the restaurant image (Gil, Ruiz, & Berenguer, 2008), the restaurant's style of food, and personality (Corsey, 2006). Another area of agreement seems to be choosing the wine that tastes good. This again demonstrates the importance of the restaurateur’s “personal touch” when making selections for his/her wine list, but can mean different things in different contexts.

The Sirieix and Rемаund (2010) study has shown that French restaurateurs have a high preference for local wines, which is a differentiation strategy based on high quality of local wines, promotion of French culture and supporting local winemakers. When choosing wines for their wine lists, French restaurateurs pay close attention to ‘food and wine pairing’ and ‘competitive price fit for the price

range of food'. This set of strategies shows that French restaurateurs are mainly driven by their own preferences and are confident in their knowledge, as opposed to relying on external validation.

Although Croatian restaurateurs also have a high preference for local wines and select wines that taste good, matching wine with food menu does not seem to be very important for them. The reason may be associated with a lack of knowledge and insufficient focus on quality, since most of their guests, being tourists, are not regular. According to the literature review, enology and gastronomy are closely connected, and the real appreciation for wine does not exist in the absence of gastronomic passion. It is important for hospitality professionals, especially restaurateurs, to have a basic knowledge of food and wine pairing in order to create a good restaurant image as well as increase profits (Ivkov et al., 2012). This must be further investigation in the particular context of the Dalmatian coast.

In Croatia, the result with the highest score that did not correspond with previous studies is the high reputation brand, which scored quite low in other countries except China. In China, where the perceived reputation of a winery is quite important, 'highly reputed' brands did score higher. The similarity between these two countries may be surprising since Croatia is one of the oldest wine-producing countries in the world, with a high focus on local wines while the Chinese local wine market is relatively new.

Therefore, this result in Croatia implies a strong focus on profits that may be connected to the seasonality of the business, but also with a lack of knowledge and confidence, which is then substituted by reliance on some type of external validation, i.e. "image" or "brand". That we may be on to something here, shows the result in France which, comparably, is also one of the oldest wine-producing countries, but, as opposed to Croatia, it has globally famous wine brands. In spite of that, the French restaurateurs, while showing a high preference for local wines and wine and food pairing, choosing a 'highly reputed brand' is their least important strategy (Sirieix & Remaud, 2010). This finding may be connected to the previous assumption, that Croatian restaurateurs lack interest and knowledge when it comes to food and wine pairing, and they feel more comfortable to place highly

reputed brands on their wine lists rather than building wine and food pairing menus. This would imply that many Croatian restaurateurs are opportunists, not real hospitality professionals. However, this is another assumption that needs further investigation in the future.

Limitations and directions for future research

This research has a few limitations that need to be discussed. The sample is quite small, covering only two cities in Croatia, Split, and Dubrovnik. Also, restaurants were selected based on their willingness to participate in the research, from casual to fine dining restaurants. Being more precise in the restaurants' selection might have provided more detailed analyses.

For future research, collecting data from other parts of Croatia would be beneficial and would provide more reliable analyses. It would be interesting to study the choice of restaurateurs in Dalmatia, Istria, and Slavonia when selecting wines for their wine lists and how or if those choices differ from one region to another. Another idea is to investigate how different restaurant styles generate different scores and a different ranking when it comes to wine list design.

CONCLUSION

Determining which wines to offer on a wine list is a challenging and complex task that restaurateurs have to deal with. The results showed that restaurateurs' wine list design strategies were both restaurateur-driven and market/supplier driven. Croatian restaurateurs try to find a proper balance between three strategies: high reputation brand, the wine that tastes good, and preference for local wines. Finding a healthy balance between increasing profit and building a unique restaurant identity with the emphasis on the local culture is the key formula to succeed in the competitive wine and food service industry.

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