

Day One: Lateral Vision and Different Perspectives

Day one offered the most forward-thinking and challenging content. The speakers were mostly people who have no professional connection with wine at all, and that's what made it so riveting.

The first session featured the entertaining and informative Dr. Michael O'Mahony from UC Davis, a professor of food science and technology. He demonstrated just how fickle our sensory perceptions are, throwing into confusion the idea that there could possibly be any objective judgment about wine. To illustrate this, O'Mahony used slides of images to show how our brain misreads information in front of us, tricking us to perceive something that isn't there.

Dr. Charles Wysocki of Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, led the group in an exercise of taste to show the wide variation of abilities, even among the MW-dominated crowd. We all fell into "hypo," "average" or "hyper-tasters," based on our perceptions of taste characteristics. The obvious conclusion of these exercises is that taste is more than it seems, perception is reality, after all, and interpretation of taste is absolutely affected by experience. Nobody tastes exactly the same, and learning, experience, context and expectation all feed into the formula. This is a strong message for wine professionals who are trying to sell, describe or teach wine, as wine should not be treated as a one-size-fits-all product. There are many different populations out there who genuinely perceive wine differently.

Jennifer Jo Wiseman, vice president of consumer insights at E&J Gallo Winery (and a market strategist rather than a wine professional), talked at length about taste, but this time with a focus on consumers: how to connect with them, how to package for them, and how to find the right wine styles and craft wines for particular consumer tastes. There was much discussion of the controversial notion of quality being less important than the right style.

The other fascinating, non-wine professional speaker was Terry McBride, CEO of Canada's Nettwerk Music Group, which is made up of Canada's largest record label.

He spoke about missing opportunities with Internet marketing, and not just to the younger crowd. No one present knew that 60 percent of today's Internet content is created by the consumer (it was zero percent just two years ago), and consumers over 40 years old make up more than 50 percent of Internet use. McBride also advocated use of the more social sites to capture an audience, saying that peer-to-peer communication is key.

One afternoon session explored the now oft-visited topic of climate change, with more repeated warnings about the heat potential coming our way. The knowledgeable and ubiquitous Southern Oregon University-based professor Dr. Greg Jones' presentation was alarming, and pointed out that raised temperatures could spread the cooling fog effect of the Pacific throughout California, and that if the Gulf Stream is weakened or diverted by all the melting Arctic ice, then Europe could become very cool.

Day Two: Trends and Issues

The second day of the program focused on current trends and issues, such as U.S. legislation, international perspectives on wine, distribution and quality markers. While hot topics were certainly raised, the thinking followed more familiar lines.

One session entitled "Diagnostics from Abroad" was educational, talking about the cyclical nature of oversupply and the two discrete branches of the international wine market really creating two distinct wine industries: a fine wine side and a commercial side.

Laura Jewell, MW of London-based wine and beverage company HwCg, directed her presentation to the California industry that exports to the U.K. She claimed that poor-quality wine was being dumped in the market, wine that was weak and sweet. She implored producers to: (1) improve the perception of California wines in the U.K., (2) to create a strong united message that focuses on diversity, regions and personality, (3) to take a long-term view of exports and not just push the cheap stuff, and (4) to be flexible and understand the structure of the U.K. market, adapting styles to consumer needs. Jewell urged producers to visit the market and concluded with a plea that California wine not be treated as just a commodity.

The Wine Quality session was also illuminating. James Halliday, Jancis Robinson and Jim Laube shared their personal markers for quality and what they sought in a wine. Each chose two wines to show as examples.

While they each had very similar comments about quality, the example wines they chose couldn't have been more different. The wines were tasted blind and not in order of the panel's seated line-up.

Robinson chose "refreshing wines," and her selections were easiest to spot. Halliday's choices were also clear as he stayed loyal to Australia. Laube's choices were equally transparent, with his first wine an extracted 16.9 percent Syrah. The audience had to keep thinking of and referring back to the previous day's presentations about perceptions and taste. The critics themselves talked about how subjective taste really is.

The Workshops

The "Wine Faults" workshop was led by Antonio Palacios of Canadian-based producer of yeast and bacteria, Lallemand. The program offered a very technical tasting and presentation on most of the common wine faults and beneficial yeast manipulations. It was a fascinating session, but other sessions stood out as well, each focusing on different aspects of export and marketing wine.

The later sets of workshops were more varied, with choices including a workshop hosted by Clark Smith of Vinovation, a consumer segmentation case study presentation, and a discussion of the Quinta de Noval turnaround.

The one out-of-the-box program was a "Water Codex" done by Roger Bohmrich, MW, pairing San Pellegrino, Panna water and tap water with a range of different wines to see the interactions. It was the least-attended workshop but likely the most forward-thinking and cutting edge.

The Strategic Roundtable

The last session of the symposium gathered Jancis Robinson, Christopher Carson of Constellation Europe, Chris Hancock of Oatley Family Estates (formerly of Rosemount), Rich Cartiere of Wine Market Report, Christian Seely of AXA Millesimes, and Bill Harlan of Harlan Estate and Bond for a roundtable discussion. The topic was on the future of the wine industry.

Carson was the most directed and urging speaker, stating that there has not been enough discussion about outside influences on the wine industry, such as health care, government and the anti-alcohol lobby. He told the audience that we are "ignoring these people at our own peril." Hancock agreed with Carson, saying that "they are out to get us," and "it is at our doorstep, and it is a big dog."

Seely and Harlan were both horrified by the notion discussed the first day, suggesting that preferred consumer style was more important than quality. Seely said he found that concept scary and called it "the voice of the devil." He and Harlan argued for the notion that quality is fundamental, and that while consumer wines and crafting to their preference may be important, from their positions, the primary focus is on making something really great from a great vineyard.

The Master of Wine Symposium was a fascinating and well-organized three-day event, forcing its participants to approach wine more laterally and globally. More of this kind of thinking should happen more often in our wine world.

by Lisa Shara Hall, Editor for Wine Business International and the first student in Oregon, USA to enroll for the Institute of Masters of Wine Education Programme.