Consumers’ Attitudes towards New Products derived from Wine Dealcoholisation

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The wine industry is facing changes both due to the economic trends, such as reduced sales for certain types of products, and structural, as consumption in traditional producer countries decreases. In a global context, characterized by increasingly competitive non-European companies and competition from alternative products such as beer and soft drinks, companies face the difficulty of capturing the market signals to address the supply. Wine demand is moving toward consumption patterns characterized by the pursuit of both healthier and more hedonistic lifestyles; moreover, public opinion is trending toward responsible consumption of alcoholic beverages because of public health recommendations and national campaigns against alcohol abuse. Market trends are predicted to change in the near future because, after the consumer orientation toward the demand of barrel-aged and well-structured high alcohol wines, a new enthusiasm toward light wines that are low in alcohol is arising. Moreover, for the past several years there has been a steady increase of the alcoholic degree of wines because of climate change and the southwards shift of grape varieties from cooler areas, resulting more frequently in grapes that are very rich in sugar.

This scenario could offer the opportunity of new markets for products derived from wine dealcoholisation while preserving the health-giving properties of the original product (phenolic compounds, anthocyanins). Technological innovation has developed many new solutions, some involving grape growing techniques and some involving dealcoholization processes or partial removal of alcohol. For some companies the adoption of such technologies offers opportunities to develop new products for both traditional and new wine consumers, new consumption contexts, and new market segments such as consumers who for dietary, cultural, religious, or professional reasons cannot or will not consume wine.

The reduction of alcohol is a technique for correcting wines that traditionally has been motivated by winemaking technologies. Recently, interest in the production of drinks made by partial or total reduction of alcohol content in wine has increased, generating a debate involving public institutions, national and international wine producers, and scientific institutions. The group of products resulting from the reduction or removal of alcohol from wine is very heterogeneous in terms of presentation and labeling in different markets because of the differences in regulations regarding the definition of wine, the classification of alcoholic products, and the minimum alcohol level. Some countries do have a specific regulation for dealcoholised products, and terms such as ‘alcohol-free wine’ and ‘alcohol-reduced wine’ are differently appraised.

In the European Union (EU), the process of dealcoholisation is regulated by the wine CMO (common market organization), Reg. (Ce) 606/2009, and it is legal as an oenological corrective practice for reducing alcohol by volume up to 2 percent without changing its sensory profile. Products from partial or total dealcoholisation with alcohol level below the minimum of 8.5 percent are not called ‘wine’ in EU countries, but as alcoholic or non-alcoholic beverages that include wine as an ingredient. Only in Germany and in Austria, which have specific national regulations, it is possible to produce and sell alcohol-free wines and dealcohoolised wines. In the International Organization of Vine and Wine (OIV), the debate about the definitions of wine based products resulted in two draft resolutions which define two categories: Dealcoholized Wine, with an alcoholic strength by volume below 0.5%, and Partially Dealcoholized Wine, with an alcoholic strength by volume between 0.5% and the minimum alcoholic strength of wine established in the national legislation of the producing country.

This paper is the first attempt to investigate the attitude of consumers towards new products resulting from the process of dealcoholization as low-alcohol wines (9-11%), partially dealcoholized wines
(5-7%) and dealcoholized wines (<0.5%), together with other traditional attributes which are important in purchasing wine. For such purpose the Best-Worst method has been adopted. This approach has been already applied in other studies about wine and it is suitable for studying the acceptability of new combinations of attributes or new products.

The research has been carried out submitting a survey to a sample of potential consumers who could be the target for such new products as people who do not drink wine for health reasons or dietary issues, pregnant women, people who work as drivers or cannot drink for job reasons, athletes, or those who cannot take wine for religious reasons. The survey was carried out in a selected area of Southern Italy (Puglia Region) and different consumer targets were considered: generation Y women, people with health concerns, athletes, people professing religions that prohibit alcohol consumption, drivers.

The obtained results show that consumers included in the sample are traditionalist in choosing some wine attributes. In fact, bottled wines in different colors and sparkling wines are preferred instead of sweet, flavored and packaged in cans wines. As expected, considering the chosen target groups characteristics, the consumers assign a great importance to health issues when they make wine purchase decisions. In response to these concerns, organic certification has been evaluated as the most preferred wine attribute. Regarding the alcohol content, the obtained results are complex and require a more detailed discussion. The interviewed consumers have positively evaluated partially dealcoholized wine (5-7%) while dealcoholized wine (<0.5%), as well as wine with reduced alcohol content (9-11%), received a negative assessment. Nevertheless, some differences occur among target groups: in particular, Gen Y women, people with health concerns and people practicing sport give a moderate positive evaluation for dealcoholized wine (<0.5%) while wine with reduced alcohol content (9-11%) received a positive assessment only by regular consumers. A possible explanation of these results can be that consumers, including those who should moderate or eliminate alcohol consumption, consider alcohol as an essential component of wine; in other words, wine without alcohol is considered an unpleasant beverage. In this case, a moderate consumption (or not consumption) of wine with alcohol is preferred instead of dealcoholized wine. On the other hand, consumers consider alcohol as a component that negatively affects human health. Therefore, partially dealcoholized wine (5-7%) is preferred instead of wine with reduced alcohol content (9-11%) particularly by consumer’s segments who should moderate or eliminate alcohol consumption. In conclusion, these results would suggest that partially dealcoholized wine (5-7%) could have better market perspective compared to dealcoholized wine (<0.5%). Nevertheless, it is important to take into account that this analysis has the limit of the low number of respondents and it is referred to a specific area, the south of Italy, where traditional wine consumption is strongly rooted. Therefore, this research would need a follow-up by extending investigation to other areas of Italy and of other countries. For this purpose, Best-Worst methodology seems to be easily applicable to measuring and comparing style preferences for wine in different geographical contexts. Results of the study could be of interest for marketers and policy makers of wine industry. Managerial implications could refer to the importance of wine attributes in influencing consumer drinks purchasing and to the opportunity for producers in investing towards new wine based products. Market implications could refer to segments of consumers interested in such new products perceived not as substitute of traditional wines but as substitute of other beverages. They could have the opportunity of consuming a product that retains the color and aroma of wine, ensures the intake of phoenolic acids, flavonoids, tannins and resveratrol, and also limits calories and alcohol.

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