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# Distinction by proxy: The democratization of fine wine



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## Abstract

In the 17th-century wine was transformed from a simple, bulk commodity to one distinguished by vineyard, vintage, grape varieties and the ephemerality of cellaring, and increasingly consumed in public theatres of consumption. This laid the foundations for the emergence of wine connoisseurship and a conspicuous link with elite social distinction. In the 1970s the New World wine industries democratized the cultural and social capitals of appreciative wine consumption, while retaining its capacity to stratify. Democratization enables connoisseurship by proxy and for middle-class individuals with variable wine tastes and aspirations to readily transform their economic capital into cultural capital and thus enact distinction-signifying performances. This is significant in Martinborough, a boutique wine village renowned for high-quality wines and an objectified, performative site of middle-class distinction. In consuming fine wines Martinborough's tourists are structurally validated in middle-class distinction, personalized tastes and reflexive individuality.

**Keywords:** democratization, reflexive individuality, social distinction, wine

Connoisseurship has power for identifying the person as well as the wine. Not knowing may deliver one into the hands of manipulators. (Douglas, 1987: 9)

Since the first record of wine 5000 years ago the best wines have arguably been the preserve of the best people, although, as Bourdieu cogently argued in *Distinction* (2010 [1984]), what constitutes best is in all instances a matter of historical, economic, cultural and social contingency. In this article I briefly examine the historical development of 'fine wine' connoisseurship as a form of objectified symbolic capital that denotes elite status; and how the cultural capitals of fine wine were democratized to increase domestic

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markets in New Zealand. Democratization strategies included varietal labelling, accessible tasting notes, quality assurance mechanisms, and social access to winemakers.

I also examine how within the 'metro-rural idyll' (Howland, 2008a: 77) of Martinborough – a rural 'boutique wine village' and performative site of middle-class distinction renowned for expensive, high-quality wines – democratization facilitates ready transfer of economic capital into status-signalling cultural capital, and thereby enables distinction by 'proxy' (Bourdieu, 2008: 50). Democratization does not supplant fine wine consumption as a form of elite distinction, especially as connoisseurship remains at the apex and differential status within the field of wine production, acquisition and consumption is reproduced accordingly. Elite status is objectively assigned to winemakers, critics, Masters of Wine and others with high cultural capital, and ensures entry into exclusive events such as invitation-only wine tastings on Martinborough vineyards. Absence of this capital is not significant, however, in Martinborough's public theatres of consumption (Finkelstein, 1989), where sufficient economic capital (which remains an obvious barrier to many), the minimal cultural capital of appropriate dress and behaviour, and an awareness that fine wine consumption is a mark of elite distinction are the primary requirements for performative participation. Democratization thus ensures the wine industry a thoroughly open market, while simultaneously retaining the mechanisms and hierarchies of elite distinction based on connoisseurship.

I also respond to Askegaard and Linnet's call for consumer culture theory to transcend its psychologizing and individualizing tendencies to study the 'context of the context ... the structuring of macro-social explanatory frame-works within the phenomenology of lived experience' (2011: 381). These tendencies are particularly apparent in the majority of the research on wine tourism in New Zealand, conducted in tourism, marketing and management studies, and primarily focused on 'push' and 'pull' variables to identify market growth opportunities (e.g. Hall and Mitchell, 2002; Hall et al., 2000; Mitchell and Hall, 2006). Critical examination of industry-based economic and political structures is evident in geographical studies of wine production, distribution, branding and place specifics (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2012; Murray and Overton, 2011; Unwin, 1996). However, consideration of broader structural influences is most apparent in the anthropological studies of Ulin (e.g. 1996, 2001) and Demossier (e.g. 2010, 2011), who canvass a wide array of discourses, representations, practices – class, power, identity, gendered, technological, etc. – in analysing French wine. My aim is to contribute by examining the structural structuring of middle-class distinction and reflexive individualization or self-reflexization (Demossier, 2010: 175–93), as facilitated by strategies of democratization and conspicuously enacted by Martinborough's tourists.

## Bourdieu in new bottles

Bourdieu argues that tastes reflect particular configurations of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital, and exist in embodied, objectified and institutionalized forms within various fields of action. Stylizations of life are therefore ‘closely linked to the different possible positions in social space and, consequently, bound up with the systems of dispositions (*habitus*) characteristic of different classes and class factions. Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier’ (Bourdieu, 2010 [1984]: xxix). Furthermore, Bourdieu argues that conscious pursuit of aesthetics is ‘reserved for members of the dominant class, indeed the very top bourgeoisie, and for artists, who as the inventors and professionals of the “stylization of life” are alone able to make their art of living one of the fine arts’ (2010 [1984]: 50) – at least in 1960s France. Bourdieu recognized that self-consciousness can exist for others such as ‘sociologists’ schooled in ‘habitual reflexivity’ (Sweetman, 2003: 544), but argued it is chiefly limited to those experiencing temporary periods of crisis arising from a disjunction between *habitus* and field. Sweetman (2003) notes that this appears to imply the *petit-bourgeois*, who experience persistent failure to adapt in their high cultural capital pursuits.

However the ‘new middle-classes’ (Roper, 2005: 49) operate within institutions of reflexive individualism (Beck, 2002) in which self-consciousness and self-reflexivity<sup>1</sup> routinely underpin practice. Generated within the ‘reflexive *habitus*’ (Sweetman, 2003: 528) of liberal education, meaning-centric occupations, elective forms of sociality (e.g. friendship, sexual) and via various forms of mobility, the new middle classes knowingly commit to pursuing CV milestones and wilfully deploy their capitals in fields where *de facto* autonomy (Bauman, 2000) and ideal reflexive individuality (Howland, 2008a) are likely optimized; educational and occupational advancement, life politics, self-narratives and identity projects, and in consumption, especially hedonic, where personalized taste is readily expressed. Sweetman (2003) argues, however, that structured self-awareness and reflexive individuality do not necessarily or routinely result in consciousness of the contingencies that underpin and generate reflexive *habitus*, which is where Bourdieu’s misrecognizing and embodied subjects are found.

The straightforward relationship between class and taste has also been challenged. Postmodern blurring of culture boundaries, the over-production of signs and the plurality of sanctioned readings (Baudrillard, 2001 [1988]; Jameson, 1991) have problematized distinctions between high, middle and low culture. Peterson notes that numerous studies have also demonstrated that high-status consumption is ‘becoming increasingly diversified, inclusive, or omnivorous’ (2005: 261). In addition, middle-class consumers have responded to status-group and generational politics by pursuing strategies of cultural eclecticism, massification and omnivorousness in musical tastes (Peterson and Kern, 1996), reading (Zavisca, 2005) and the arts (DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004), while national studies have revealed specific cultural

and generational differences. For example, Australia's postwar elite express a marked distaste for high-brow and exclusionary forms of culture, view leisure activities chiefly as therapeutic relief from employment and not as strategic distinction investments, and pursue omnivorous, eclectic and low-brow modes of consumption (Turner and Edmunds, 2002). Appreciative consumption by proxy, and the concordant possibility of simple, emulative, *faux* or even deceitful performances (Goffman, 1972 [1959]) is not commonly canvassed. Researchers concur, however, that 'objectified cultural capital has become a relatively weak mechanism for exclusionary class boundaries' (Holt, 1998: 5) and that the upper class increasingly distinguishes itself through legitimizing plurality, omnivorousness and genre-appropriate consumption (Erickson, 1996).

Johnston and Baumann similarly argue that the broadening of the gourmet food repertoire in America reflects a 'food democracy' (2007: 166). Cultural capital and status differentiations are still operationalized, albeit through the discursive framing of foods as authentic and exotic. Moreover, these distinctions are applied to a narrow range of foods that require considerable cultural and economic capitals, and the high status of French food, especially haute cuisine, is retained. A similar situation exists in the casting of New World wines as quality, the retention of premier French wines as exemplars, and the widespread promotion of wine eclecticism or what Demossier calls the 'wandering drinker' (2005: 132).

## Hyper-differentiated wine

During the 17th century, wines in Europe were produced, stored and sold in large wooden barrels, blended together from various vineyards, and sold predominantly under regional or varietal designations (e.g. Burgundy). The freshest wines, those procured shortly after pressing or cellared in especially large barrels, were highly valued as they were less likely to have spoiled due to oxidation<sup>2</sup> (Johnson, 1989).

However a series of 17th-century innovations radically altered wine as a material and social product. These included the 1660 establishment of discrete vineyards and associated wines sold under the name of a producing estate (and by vintage);<sup>3</sup> the gradual adoption of grape-growing and wine-making techniques (e.g. rejecting mouldy grapes, using new barrels) purposefully aimed at producing quality wine; the mass manufacture from 1630s onwards of wine bottles that were thicker, stronger and darker; the invention of oxidation-resistant cork stoppers mid century and the cork-screw in about 1681; and finally the realization that laying wine bottles on their side further reduced oxidization (Johnson, 1989).

These developments enabled wine to be transported, cellared, and to evolve additional taste characteristics in the bottle. Consequently wine was transformed into a hyper-differentiated commodity valued for its distinctive

varietal, vineyard and vintage characteristics; conspicuously consumed as mark of distinction in public theatres of consumption; transported, stored, sold and consumed as a singular commodity (i.e. by the bottle); and increasingly valued for its evolving and ephemeral qualities facilitated by bottle cellaring. These developments laid the foundations for the emerging middle class of the 18th and 19th centuries to emulate the consumption practices of individual aristocratic and other elites (e.g. monasteries), who, until these innovations, were the only members of society possessing the economic resources to purchase and cellar large barrels of ‘good wine’.

The social development and codification (numerous books on wine tasting, quality, keeping and serving appeared in the first half of the 19th century) of an educated wine palate involved complex practices and discourses (Silverstein, 2006) that cast wine as a particularly aesthetic product notable for discrete tastes (including aroma, colour, clarity, texture or mouth-feel, etc.) and differences in quality arising from grape varieties, vine age, production techniques, terroir, winemaker philosophies and via evolutions over time (vintage-based and cellared). Furthermore, appreciative consumption requires optimal consumption conditions, ensuring wine is served at the ‘correct’ temperature, decanted as appropriate and so on.

Wine connoisseurship also necessarily involved knowledge of ‘wine French’, or equivalencies in Spanish or Italian, to decipher labels. Furthermore labelling by region and/or vineyard – for example, Haut-Brion is Bordeaux red or claret (a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Petit Verdot) – demanded a knowledge of variations in vineyard and regional production to enable identification of different grape varieties and blends. Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, it also required knowledge of comparative vintage quality.

In late settler societies the link between appreciative wine consumption and elite status was further pronounced. These societies lacked indigenous grape varieties suitable for quality wine and wine was initially imported from Europe at considerable expense. Unsurprisingly, the primary consumers were elite male settlers, who regarded the appreciative consumption of wine as a particularly civilized endeavour. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the great American poet and essayist, wrote:

I think wealth has lost much of its value if it has not wine. I abstain from wine only account of the expense. When I heard Mr. Sturgis had given up wine, I had the same regret that I had lately in hearing that Mr. Bowditch had broken his hip. (in Fuller, 1996: 13)

While Samuel Marsden, an Anglican missionary and the first to plant wine grapes in New Zealand at KeriKeri in 1819, believed that Maori could be civilized through being taught European viticulture, agriculture and handicrafts (Thorpy, 1971). Comparing wines and tasting notes were frequent topics of recreational conversation among elite male colonists and wine

consumption was considered conducive to collegial, erudite ruminations on matters such as politics. Moreover the commonplace consumption of *vin-de-table* wines that characterized sectors of French and British society was negligible and in New Zealand beer was the undisputed drink of the common man: 'Aotearoa might have been translated "land of the long white froth"' (Haydn, 1997: 25).

The development of the domestic wine industry in New Zealand followed a similar trajectory to other late settler societies; importation of fine French wine; foundational domestic production by Christian institutions; nascent commercial plantings that mostly produced poor-quality wines; a gradual 'trickle down' of appreciative consumption of French and other imported wines to emerging professional middle classes; the eventual emergence of a domestic industry consistently producing good-quality wines (often using grafted French vines); and the concordant establishment of domestic wine consumption as a mark of middle-class distinction (Cooper, 2002; Hadyn, 1997). The first Wine and Food Society was established in Auckland in 1954, although restaurants were not granted licences to sell wine until 1960. However wine still 'inhabited a twilight world. Student types, intellectuals and foreigners might stash a bottle of Bakano (McWilliams' first dry red wine) under the arm when headed for a party, but they weren't straight living people' (Haydn, 1997: 25). By the early 1970s, however, wine was becoming a mark of distinction among the urban middle classes and in the 1980s domestic wines began approaching international standards.

Around this time, New Zealand winemakers, along with other New World producers, sought to increase domestic demand by differentiating local from imported wines. New World innovation, and especially the use of scientific technologies (e.g. temperature-controlled fermentations), was promoted as the key to consistently producing good-quality wines at significantly cheaper prices. In addition the purchase and appreciative consumption of local wines was democratized; an initiative one Martinborough winemaker said was prompted by 'consumer demand' and reflected how many self-taught local winemakers were 'learning about and approaching wine'.

## **Democratized wines**

Most significant was the introduction of varietal labelling in addition to vineyard and vintage information. Single varietals such as Pinot Noir and Sauvignon Blanc, and blends such as Cabernet Sauvignon/ Merlot, were identified as such on front labels (e.g. 'Ata Rangi Martinborough Pinot Noir, 2010') thereby relieving consumers of acquiring knowledge of vineyard and regional intricacies that still characterize most French wine labels. This was complemented by tasting notes, brix levels, and other relevant

information (e.g. food accompaniment suggestions) on back labels. This type of information is also readily available, often in expanded form, on vineyard websites<sup>4</sup> and is routinely proffered in restaurant menus and by sommeliers.

The cultural capitals of appreciative consumption are also readily accessible on websites,<sup>5</sup> through wine clubs (that only require payment of club dues to ensure membership) or via the guidance of winemakers, wine merchants and other professionals. Furthermore in public theatres of consumption sommeliers and waiters will ideally ensure wine is served at the appropriate temperature, in optimal glassware, and routinely suggest appropriate food matches.

Discernment of quality has also been significantly democratized via assurance mechanisms such as critic reviews/ratings and wine show awards that are widely reported in lifestyle magazines, on vineyard websites<sup>6</sup> and via the display of award certificates in cellar doors. Quality ratings in the form of stars (one to five) and medals (gold, silver, bronze) are advertised via stickers attached to the front of wine bottles, enabling easy identification of quality wine on supermarket shelves. Many tourists said they were regularly motivated to purchase specific wines on the basis of awards or favourable reviews: 'So many Martinborough wines are of such good quality that an award or a really great review can help you make a decision' (female; mid 20s). An award from a renowned overseas show (e.g. the International Wine and Spirit Competition) or favourable review from a prominent overseas critic, especially Robert Parker (America), were regarded as even more noteworthy. Guided by varietal labels, tasting notes and quality ratings a consumer needs only economic capital, literacy and an awareness that wine consumption is a middle-class disposition to purchase a bottle of good wine and thereby display their social status.

Another democratization strategy was tiered wines that enable consumers with different levels of economic capital to purchase wines from renowned vineyards. For example, Martinborough Vineyard sells Te Ara Pinot Noir for \$35NZ, Martinborough Vineyard Pinot Noir for \$85NZ and, in 'exceptional' years, Martinborough Vineyard Reserve Pinot Noir for \$175. Lower-tiered wines are frequently promoted as being produced from younger vines and thus purposefully 'designed' for early drinking. However they also share in the distinction of being produced in the same terroir, vintage conditions and by the same winemaker as top-tier wines. Accordingly consumers can engage, at 'bargain prices', the elite distinction ascribed to drinking wines from top vineyards. Some notable French producers have followed this initiative. For example, Haut-Brion introduced a vintage 'second wine', Château Bahans Haut-Brion (now named Le Clarence de Haut-Brion), in 1976.<sup>7</sup> As a form of niche consumption (Rouse, 1995), tiered production gradates commodities in quality and price to provide a range of market entry points, all of which are promotionally celebrated as makers of



valued social distinction. Furthermore, the purchase of good wine is also 'democratized' via the relative inexpense of purchasing singular bottles or glasses of wine (in restaurants).

Social capitals have also been democratized, especially access to high-status experts such as winemakers. In France systems of land tenure (unfenced patchwork of vines), instrumental beliefs about rurality and grape production, and the collective nature of wine production, typically means that the village is the location of production facilities and the reception/office often doubles as the site of wine tourism. Accordingly, vineyard visits are usually absent. This contrasts with Australia and New Zealand where romanticized notions of rurality, individualized ownership, bounded/fenced vineyards, and wineries, cellar doors and winemakers' domestic residences situated on vineyards, means that in situ vineyard visits are a valued norm of wine tourism (Mitchell et al., 2012).

Most Martinborough vineyards have cellar doors open to the public in which the winemaker or cellar-door hosts interact with tourists keen to sample wines in situ. Winemakers also regularly host public events such as wine tastings, vintage releases, and wine and food festivals, where the primary criteria for entry are individual interest and/or payment of an entry fee. For many enthusiasts meeting a renowned winemaker is a prized form of social capital. In addition winemakers are routinely biographized and cast as ideal reflexive individuals in various media (e.g. lifestyle magazines, vineyard websites), and their wine-making motivations, experiences and philosophies are celebrated alongside their urbane domestic homes, enviable family lives and personal interests such as native tree conservation.

These strategies have, in part, influenced the growth of domestic wine production and consumption in New Zealand. From 1990 to 2011 the registered vineyards of the New Zealand Winegrowers Association rose from 131 to 698; total producing area increased from 5417 to 33,600 hectares; annual production from 44 to 235 million litres; annual domestic sales from 38.2 to 66.3 million litres; and per capita consumption from 12.2 to 15.1 litres annually. This is contrary to France and other Mediterranean countries, where per capita wine consumption has been declining for 30 years (Demossier, 2010: 70–100).

## **Democratized consumption in Martinborough**

Martinborough is a small, but notable site of quality wine production in New Zealand, with 40 vineyards registered as members of the New Zealand Winegrowers Association. Most are boutique enterprises producing less than 200,000 litres of wine annually and routinely promote the 'hand-picked', artisanal qualities of their wines. Pinot Noir is the principal variety grown and high-quality Martinborough pinots retail at \$65–\$85NZ per

750 ml bottle (compared with Marlborough pinots at \$30–\$35NZ). There are more than 100 accommodation providers, headlined by the five-star Martinborough Hotel (circa 1883), although most are self-contained ‘homestays’. Martinborough also boasts designer clothing stores, jewellers, delicatessens, health spas, cafés and restaurants.<sup>8</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that Martinborough, which is situated one hour’s drive from Wellington, New Zealand’s capital city, is collusively staged by tourists, tourism operators, winemakers, lifestyle magazines and others as a metro-rural idyll; an enchanted, performative site in which popular notions of a vernacular rural idyll (e.g. cohesive farming families, ‘clean, green’ countryside) are discursively deployed to provide a corroborating setting and moral foundation that validates the tourists’ middle-class urbanity and ideal reflexive individuality (Howland, 2008a). This routinely involves the conspicuous, leisured consumption of fine wines, gourmet foods, luxury accommodation and the elective sociality of friends, romantic partners and families (although most tourists holiday without their dependent children; Abramovici, 2002; Howland, 2008b). As an objectified site of leisured, hedonic consumption, many tourists regard a Martinborough holiday as ‘time out’ from the ‘daily grind’ of metropolitan employment and domesticity, and as an opportunity to enjoy *de facto* autonomy through personally selecting and sampling wines and other urbane offerings.

The majority of tourists are new middle class, Pakeha or New Zealand European, and residents of Wellington. They are typical of wine tourists throughout New Zealand in being ‘usually 30–50 years of age, in the moderate to high income bracket and coming from within or in close proximity to the wine region itself’ (Mitchell et al., 2000: 121; also Alonso et al., 2007). Most are ‘generalist’ wine tourists (Mitchell, 2004) and range from hangers-on (i.e. with little or no interest in wine), wine novices, wine-curious (i.e. with limited experience and mild interest) and enthusiasts keen to add to their wine experiences. Only a small minority exhibit or aspire to achieve connoisseurship or advanced appreciative consumption and their numbers are easily overshadowed by the various professionals (e.g. wine writers, chefs, etc.) who regularly visit Martinborough. One winemaker told me:

Sixty, seventy percent of tourists are either novices here to learn or have some basic wine knowledge and know that Martinborough produces top-quality wines, so they are also here to learn more about Martinborough wines, about specific varieties such as Pinot and about specific vineyards. Only a minority are real enthusiasts, but this number is growing all the time.

Objectively renowned for fine wine production, Martinborough is engaged by enthusiasts, connoisseurs and wine/food professionals as a site where their dispositions of wine appreciation are routinely, even disinterestedly, correlated with practice and therefore structurally re-legitimated. For the majority of tourists, however, advanced wine appreciation is either beyond

their experience or aspiration. Their cultural capitals range from a minimal level of awareness that appreciative wine consumption is a signifying practice of middle-class status through to somewhat nuanced cognizance of different varietal characteristics (e.g. dry to sweet Rieslings). Most were aware that the consumption of Martinborough wines is primarily focused on aesthetics and not for the purposes of intoxication; that consumption in restaurants, cafés and with holidaying friends generally involves certain codes of dress (ranging from 'stylish causal' to formal 'dressing up'); and that disorderly behaviour resulting from wine intoxication is inappropriate, although tolerated when it leads to jovial discourse or convivial 'philosophical discussions'.

Tourists ranged widely in aesthetic sensibilities and aspirations. Many said they were able to identify basic taste characteristics such as sweet, dry, etc., but were mostly guided by tasting notes and commonly attempted to identify these when drinking wine. A few dismissed connoisseurship as 'pretentious posing', however others expressed admiration and delight in being able to personally identify and experience the tastes identified by experts. Moreover, the majority said they were content with their current levels of appreciative consumption and that acquiring connoisseurship or advanced appreciation was either too much 'hard work', 'too costly' or would involve too much time. For the majority of tourists Martinborough is chiefly engaged as an objectified site of middle-class distinction in which their varied capacities of appreciative wine consumption are facilitated by democratization and singular commodity strategies.

Many stated that when holidaying in Martinborough they frequently 'treated' themselves (Howland, 2010) by purchasing the 'most expensive wine' they could afford or 'justify'. This was based on the assumption that the most expensive was most probably the best quality. This strategy commonly manifested in purchasing single glasses of expensive wine in a local restaurant or café to accompany a meal or buying single bottles directly from a vineyard. This compares with how many tourists described their wine purchasing for everyday consumption, when they were mostly guided by price and sought out 'supermarket specials' on award winning or heavily discounted wines. Interestingly, some felt that 'relying too heavily on gold medals' could reveal a personal lack of sophisticated knowledge. Consequently if they felt a social occasion warranted it (e.g. attended by wine enthusiasts), they would be guided by a local wine merchant to buy the best wines within 'certain price ranges'.

Many stated they were routinely guided by Martinborough winemakers or cellar-door representatives, waiters and sommeliers, or by holidaying friends with general or specific wine knowledge: 'I mostly take the advice of the winemaker or someone in our group will suggest a wine in my price range. It's the same when I go to a restaurant. I usually follow the waiter's recommendation' (female, 40s). One tourist I interviewed in Martinborough

and later at his Wellington home, was a wealthy, self-employed business owner, who confessed to knowing ‘nothing about wine’ but who, on the advice of his more knowledgeable business partner and local wine merchants, regularly bought cases of quality wines. He had a well-stocked cellar at his home that included top Martinborough wines (Dry River, Ata Rangi), quality New Zealand (Felton Road, Te Mata) and Australian (Penfold Grange) wines. Many said, however, they would try anything, mostly to expand their wine knowledge and experience, but also on the assumption that all Martinborough wines were of high quality.

Others knew the variety or style of wines they personally liked and disliked (e.g. ‘dry’, ‘fruity’) and acted on advice on this basis: ‘It is a matter of finding out what you personally like and don’t like and then just following your own tastes’ (male, aged 37). Some were adamant in their preference for second-tier Martinborough wines, and especially with regard to Pinot Noir, which they felt was ‘lighter’ and more ‘easy drinking’ than the more exalted, expensive first-tier wines. Some had specific Martinborough favourites they repeatedly purchased: ‘My favourite is TK’s sav (Te Kairangi’s Sauvignon Blanc)..... I have tried other Martinborough wines, but for me TK sav is the best. It’s good quality and real value for money’ (male, aged 54). This discourse of ‘value for money’ or best wine within a ‘price range’ was relatively commonplace.

Martinborough’s tourists produced a wide range of reflexive narratives of wine tastes, aspirations and distinctions. Many were content with minimal wine knowledge; some aspired to connoisseurship, but most did not; many admired and sought advice from others with advanced wine experiences, with some following this fully, but many others only doing so in relation to already established personal tastes; many regularly sought to consume new wines, while others stuck to their personal lists of the ‘tried and true’; while some thought that connoisseurship was overly subjective or pretentious. Yet the vast majority clearly shared the notion that appreciative consumption of good wine – which was an objectified norm in Martinborough – was a signifier of middle-class distinction and status. Furthermore, in signalling this to accompanying friends and an imagined audience of observing middle-class others (cf. Campbell, 1995) many gladly relied on democratization strategies that transformed their economic capital into cultural capital and thus also into distinction by proxy.

Elite wine status could, however, warrant individuals’ entry to invitation-only wine tastings on vineyards, afford opportunities to dine with local winemakers, or secure much sought-after VIP tickets to Toast Martinborough (the public release annually sells out in minutes). It also routinely manifested in heightened status amidst friends and colleagues who might seek out a knowledgeable individual’s wine perspectives or who would exclusively share ‘special’ (i.e. expensive, high-quality or rare) wines with other appreciative enthusiasts. However, status lack did not greatly impact in

public consumption sites where economic and minimal cultural capitals were the primary determinant of participation; besides, celebrity or VIP status acquired outside of the cultural field of wine was just as likely to translate into better service or fringe benefits (including obtaining Toast Martinborough tickets).

Variations in wine-based distinctions and status did not therefore function as a mechanism of social inclusion, exclusion or derision in the front stage (Goffman, 1972 [1959]) of Martinborough's restaurants, etc. By contrast tourists' varied personal tastes and aspirations were routinely and publicly validated by industry representatives. In my field-work on a Martinborough vineyard I only once observed a cellar-door host directly oppose a customer's tastes (subtle attempts to influence tastes were commonplace). This occurred when a tourist asserted that some plum wines were equal to Cabernet Sauvignon. The cellar host objected on the grounds that fruit wines lacked the complexity of taste and structure of grape wines. Even so the tourist (male, mid 30s) remained unmoved and countered: 'I'm not sure about that, some of the plum wines I've tasted are pretty good, although I guess everyone has their own tastes.' This ended the disagreement, although the cellar host later confided to me when the shop was empty that tourist had 'clearly lacked taste'. Negative back-stage appraisals such as this were not uncommon. Nevertheless tourists' personal tastes were habitually affirmed in restaurants, cafés, etc. and furthermore appeared to function as an unassailable default position whenever friends disagreed over the merits of different wines. Tourists therefore routinely experienced the 'customer is always right' ethos common within retailing and individualized dining out (Sloan, 2004), and had their reflexive individuality affirmed in terms of autonomy of choice and the apparent irrefutability of personalized, albeit thoroughly middle-class, tastes.

## Conclusion

In the 1970s, New World wine industries sought to differentiate domestic wines from their foreign counterparts and profitably develop local markets. This was pursued, in part, by democratizing the cultural capitals of appreciative consumption, by making winemakers socially accessible and via a variety of user-friendly avenues through which consumers could learn about wine's complexities. Democratization, along with the capacity to purchase wine as a singular commodity, enables the ready transfer of economic capital into cultural capital. It also enables consumers with variable wine knowledge, experience and aspirations to partake in performances of appreciative wine consumption by proxy.

The 'inferred cultural aptitude of the consumer' (Holt, 1998: 5) remains paramount, although with democratization the primary aptitudes are economic

capital and minimal cultural capital awareness that appreciative consumption of fine wine denotes middle-class status. Accordingly, performances by proxy, which potentially run the gamut from simple to *faux* or deceitful, can be knowingly deployed as significations of middle-class distinction and status. As such, democratization enables appreciative consumption to effectively trickle down as a denotation of status, while still retaining the social stratifications and hierarchy that result from connoisseurship.

Although Bourdieu's theory of tastes is a 'theory of signifying practices rather than signifying objects' (Holt, 1997: 101), taste nevertheless remains 'the practical operator of the transmutation of things into distinct and distinctive signs' (Bourdieu, 2010 [1984]: 170). Objects do signify, but it is signification of acquired capitals rather than the pure gaze of Kantian aesthetics. This is especially evident in Martinborough, an objectified, performative site of middle-class distinction, in which considerable attention is focused on the signifying object of fine wine. The majority of tourists know that wine consumption is primarily focused on sober, aesthetic appreciation and that performance of such – by proxy or *bona fide* – signifies middle-class status; also that this is all that is required for social inclusion into Martinborough's public theatres of consumption.

Tourists also share awareness of, and commitment to, personalized wine tastes and aspirations, which are structurally cast by the wine and hospitality industries as socially worthwhile, irrespective of their variations. In knowingly pursuing personalized tastes and elective socialities, Martinborough tourists therefore experience and reaffirm one of the key ideals of reflexive individuality; *de facto* autonomy. Reflexive individuality is a key disposition of the new middle classes, generated within reflexive habitus that routinely advocates self-consciousness and reflexivity; dispositions particularly apparent in tourists' personalized narratives of wine consumption and distinction.

My analysis of Martinborough wine tourists reveals self-aware, self-narrating and distinction-conscious subjects who are structurally enabled by the strategies of democratization to engage a range of performative practices by proxy with respect to the appreciative consumption of fine wine and thus to display middle-class status. Despite the apparent emancipatory dynamics of democratization and personalization, arguably these processes primarily advance the profit motives of the wine industry and consequently serve to maintain middle-class belief in, and commitment to, the neoliberal games of meritocracy, reflexive individuality and social hierarchy.

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## Notes

- 1 Reflexivity is a universal psycho-social process through which individuals generate an evolving, distinguishable sense of self that manifests (implicitly and explicitly) as *I* and *me* compared to *we* or *them* (Quinn, 2006; Sökefeld, 1999). However, contemporary institutions routinely compel a reflexivity firmly rooted in the dispositions of western individualism.
- 2 Sweet wines with high sugar content (e.g. Tokay) or fortified with alcoholic spirits (e.g. Madeira) were also esteemed for their preservative capacities.
- 3 The first was Haut-Brion from Bordeaux in 1660, which was sold for seven shillings a bottle when two shillings was standard for a good wine at London's first restaurant, Pontack's Head (circa 1666). Both Haut-Brion and Pontack's Head were established by Arnaud de Pontac, the first president of the Bordeaux regional parliament.
- 4 For example, 'Tasting Notes' and 'Vintage reports' at [www.atarangi.co.nz](http://www.atarangi.co.nz) (accessed August 2012).
- 5 See: [www.wine.about.com](http://www.wine.about.com) (accessed August 2012).
- 6 For example, [www.atarangi.co.nz](http://www.atarangi.co.nz) – 'Reviews' (accessed August 2012).
- 7 See: [www.haut-brion.com](http://www.haut-brion.com) (accessed August 2011).
- 8 See: see [www.martinborough.com](http://www.martinborough.com)

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