

Wine experts can overcome the limitations of language

June 27 2016



Credit: Radboud University

The Dutch language has few words for smells, which makes it difficult to describe them. A study conducted by language scientists Ilja Croijmans and Asifa Majid from Radboud University in the Netherlands has now shown that wine experts are better at talking about the smells and flavours of wine than novices.

Wine experts are known for their colourful descriptions of tastes and

smells: 'fruity, with hints of strawberry, cherry and other red fruits', for example. Novices have more difficulty with such descriptions. "In Dutch we have don't have many words to describe scents, only a few such as *aromatisch*, ('aromatic'), *muf* ('musty'), or *weeïg* ('cloying')," explains [language](#) scientist Ilja Croijmans.

Coffee and wine experts

Croijmans and Majid investigated whether experience plays a role in overcoming this language barrier and/or whether this experience helps people to describe more general smells and tastes. To answer these questions they performed a study with coffee and wine experts and with novices. The subjects were asked to describe the aroma and taste of wine and coffee, along with everyday smells (such as cinnamon and lemon) and basic tastes (e.g. salty, sweet).

Training

The study showed that wine experts are better than novices at describing flavours in their area of expertise, but coffee experts are not. Croijmans: "We think that's because wine experts are more accustomed to talking about wine than coffee experts are about coffee." Wine connoisseurs often partake in wine tastings, talk to consumers about wine and write wine reviews. The study therefore indicates that if you do not have a good vocabulary for smells, years of training and practice can improve your ability to describe smells and flavors.

A striking result was that wine and coffee experts were no better than novices at naming everyday smells and [tastes](#). This shows that the benefits of expertise are limited to the specific smells and flavors used to train experts, and not to more general ones.

More information: Ilja Croijmans et al. Not All Flavor Expertise Is Equal: The Language of Wine and Coffee Experts, *PLOS ONE* (2016). DOI: [10.1371/journal.pone.0155845](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0155845)

Provided by Radboud University

Citation: Wine experts can overcome the limitations of language (2016, June 27) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-06-wine-experts-limitations-language.html>

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