

Do eco-friendly wines taste better?

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It's time to toast environmentally friendly grapes. A new UCLA study shows that eco-certified wine tastes better—and making the choice even easier, earlier research shows it's often cheaper, too.

Though consumers remain reluctant to spend more on wine from organic

grapes, the new study from UCLA researchers shows that in blind taste-tests professional wine reviewers give eco-certified wines higher ratings than regular wines.

The study, published today in the *Journal of Wine Economics*, looked at reviews and scores for more than 74,000 California wines from the magazines Wine Advocate, Wine Enthusiast and Wine Spectator. On a standardized 100-point scale, eco-certified wines scored an average of 4.1 points higher. The standardized scale controlled for differences between the scoring systems—for example, easy graders versus hard graders.

"The bottom line is that however we look at it, we find that organic and biodynamic farming has these small but significant positive effects on wine quality," said lead author Magali Delmas, a UCLA environmental economist and professor in the UCLA Anderson School of Management.

Though the paper studied only California wines, the research team expects the results to apply broadly, since California produces 90 percent of the wine in the United States. The preliminary findings on a study looking at French wine show similar results, added Delmas, who is also part of the UCLA Institute of the Environment and Sustainability. Her co-authors include Jinghui Lim, a UCLA postdoctoral researcher with IoES and UCLA Anderson, and Olivier Gergaud, an economics professor at the Kedge Business School in Bordeaux, France.

The study looked at eco-certified wines, which included wine made with grapes from organic and biodynamic farms, but did not include a third kind of eco-certified wine: organic wine. Organic wine refers not only to how the grapes were grown but also how the wine was made. Most notably, organic wine cannot contain added sulfites, an important preservative, Delmas said. Perhaps because even the experts shy away from strictly organic wine, the reviewing magazines had only wine from

organic grapes or biodynamic farms in the 74,000-bottle sample used by the study, Delmas said

Delmas believes preservative-free organic wine, which was once known for souring quickly, may be one culprit behind consumers' unwillingness to pay more for any kind of eco-certified wine, even as wine growers and wine reviewers praise the quality of vino from organic grapes and biodynamic farms, Delmas said.

But the misperception that all eco-certified wine is worse "is good news for consumers, because they will get higher-quality wine at a lower price," she said.

Delmas hopes the research will inspire vintners to show off their eco-certifications more boldly, and encourage more wineries to take up environmental practices. A meager 1 percent of wines in the study were eco-certified, and two-thirds of eco-certified California wineries do not showcase the seals on their bottles because of the general customer sentiment that eco-labeled wines are of lower quality, Delmas said. But even though a 2014 study by Delmas showed that consumers won't pay more for eco-wine—depressing the price—many vineyards still take on the expense of getting certified, facing 10-15 percent higher costs for three to four years.

"Wine makers say it's better for the quality of the wine," Delmas said. "It's a purer taste with more sense of the terroir, because when you replace pesticides with labor, you have hands-on care for the vines and you improve the composition of the soil and you get back all the life—the microbes, insects, bees and worms that you need in agriculture."

The study also found a larger effect for red wine than for white wine, with eco-certified red wines gaining 5.6 extra points, compared to 1.3

points for [white wines](#). While the increase for white wines wasn't statistically significant, Delmas suspects that mainly reflects the smaller sample size for white wines, and explained that the while the study was not conclusive, it does indicate that white wines also see a positive effect from eco-certification.

While Delmas' previous research has shown that vintners' top motivation for using environmental practices is to improve the quality of their wine, it's of course not the only reason. Particularly at family farms, where the owners plan to pass the property on to their children, a key motivation is to provide a cleaner environment for future generations, her research has found.

So drink up your eco-[wine](#), red or white. It's good for the environment, cheaper than the alternative—and science shows it tastes just a little bit better.

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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