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**Aesthetics as market devices:  
Taste as a logic of and for practice in the natural wine market**

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### **Introduction**

Existing research suggests multi-directional relationships between the construction of cultural fields and everyday aesthetic practices and preferences. Looking beyond the well-documented link between consumers' tastes and their patterns of consumption, we can see that tastes serve as operational logics of *production* and not only of consumption. Gatekeeping cultural intermediaries draw on their own sense of taste to filter what makes it to the publishing, fashion and television markets (Entwistle 2006; Childress 2012; Kuipers 2012); television circulates new repertoires of good taste to China's emerging middle class (Xu 2007); 'cool hunters' scope out taste-leading marginal consumers for a glimpse of future fads (Gladwell 1997); consumers' creativity feeds into product development co-creation schemes (Zwick et al 2008). The aesthetic norms and material content of cultural fields are co-created by cultural producers (whose aesthetics are occupational tools and outcomes) and intended audiences (whose aesthetics are to be mined and/or mobilized).

My interest lies with the aesthetic preferences of cultural producers and intermediaries, and the role of their tastes as operational logics of production. Thinking about taste in this way draws from research on regularized, institutionalized processes of qualification, requalification, categorization and legitimation that construct markets (Callon et al 2002; Callon et al 2007; Lamont 2012; Slater 2002). Such research has been useful in attempting to move beyond atomistic, individualistic accounts of market actors, and in developing the notion of market devices as 'material and discursive assemblages that intervene in the construction of markets' (Muniesa et al 2007: 2). At the same time, however, this work has lacked attention to the affective, embodied dimensions of market devices. Missing from accounts of market devices as they are normally conceived (the shopping trolley, stock ticker, pricing equations and so forth; e.g. Muniesa et al 2007) are the ways in which habitus and shared taste regimes operate as regularized, meso-level subjective assemblages that intervene in the construction of markets.

Thus, more specifically I am interested in tastes as aesthetic ‘regimes’ (cf. Boltanski and Thévenot 1999; Goudsblom 2001; Goudsblom and De Vries 2003): collective heuristic frameworks that are both embodied and disembedded (part of individuals’ habitus, and existing independently of any individual), through which disparate actors and market practices may be connected. Taste—understood as a habitual, affective mode of sense-making—is a market device that generates courses of thought and action that exist independently of any individual market actor. Because they are guided by a common set of principles, aesthetic-led practices lead to durable outcomes through the collective repetition and sedimentation. This connection between taste and market consequences becomes all the more interesting when the outcomes constitute alternatives to usual modes of practice: an issue central to the research on which the paper rests.

My empirical context is the ‘natural wine’ market, and I draw on research conducted over the past several years with winemakers and cultural intermediaries who are explicitly involved with natural wine. Broadly speaking, natural wines are made with few, if any chemical interventions in the vineyard or cellar. Within the catch-all term of ‘natural wine’ (as I shall use it) exist multiple, overlapping and contested definitions of natural wine, organic wine, sustainable wine and biodynamic (BD) wine. Taken together, these products result from a mode of production that is arguably more environmentally sustainable, but also riskier: crops are more vulnerable to failure, vintages can be highly variable and often do not conform to established product expectations, and the legitimacy of natural wine remains questionable in the eyes of many consumers and other producers. The paper considers how the aesthetic dispositions natural wine makers and intermediaries are central to how these wines are brought to the market.

My aims are threefold, and provide a structure for what follows. Firstly, I make the case for attention to both production and consumption in considerations of how, and whose, aesthetics help to make markets. The wine makers and intermediaries occupy a liminal position between these categories. I outline their shared ‘taste for the particular’, and how it operates as an aesthetic regime that makes possible the construction and regulation of a coherent market. Secondly, I suggest how aesthetics work as affective market devices. To that end, the paper examines how the taste for the particular operates as a logic *for* practice (providing rationales for action) and a logic *of* practice (providing operational principles). Finally, I use natural wine as a case through which to speculatively suggest how aesthetics more generally might underpin the adoption and promotion of alternative market practices.

### **A shared sense of taste as an aesthetic regime**

Research on the intersection of cultural fields and aesthetic practices tends to adopt either a production- or consumption-oriented empirical entry point with regard to *whose* tastes are under investigation; studying tastes ‘in the round’ is the exception (e.g. du Gay et al 1997). My empirical entry point lies ostensibly on the production side of the equation: since 2007, I

have been interviewing wine makers and intermediaries (e.g. wine writers, sommeliers, retailers) in various markets around the world. In this, I am intrigued by hints of the relative autonomy with which the 'production side' of aesthetics might operate. For example, Soar's (2000) interviews with advertising practitioners reveal that that the intended audience (or at least its representation in the guise of 'market research') is all but ignored when advertising creatives work on campaigns within no one so much as themselves in mind. Similarly, Paxson's (2010: 446) interviews with artisanal cheesemakers suggest that producers are free to proceed on the basis of their own sense of taste (ignoring or remaining oblivious to consumers' tastes), provided that they find sufficient market demand for their wares.

At the same time, these market actors provide a compelling case for recognizing that production and consumption, as normative spheres of action and ideas, are always interwoven. They occupy liminal positions, mobilizing forms of knowledge and competence that blur the personal and the professional (Smith Maguire 2008, 2010); they 'sell so well because they believe in what they sell' (Bourdieu 1984: 365). On this front, I have been struck by how similar my respondents are in their professed sense of taste. The vast majority of more than 100 interviewees across various projects explicitly privileged specificity of place and transparency of production (e.g. wines from *somewhere* and made by *someone*) in their definitions of quality with regard to the wines they personally prefer. This is even more pronounced within my smaller sample (n=28) of wine makers and intermediaries (primarily in and around Perth and Melbourne, the Champagne region, and New York) explicitly involved with natural wine. I have come to think of this as a shared 'taste for the particular.' This framework of cultural legitimacy draws on the established authority of *terroir* as a mark of quality in French winemaking, but extends it as a sort of *terroir max*: seemingly everything from the vineyard soil to the family heritage of the winemaker to the peculiarities of harvesting become relevant to a wine's provenance. This hyper-specification of provenance reflects contemporary notions of good taste that privilege the authentic, artisanal, transparent, traditional and sincere (e.g. Smith Maguire 2014; Johnston and Baumann 2007). Moreover, the taste for the particular is bound up with respondents' vocational identities and their production, or pursuit, of quality wine for the market. In short: my respondents make, write about, promote and personally prefer those wines that retain a specific link to their origins. They share both a taste for the particular, and a mode of operationalizing that taste in their work.

Bourdieu suggests that such a shared sense of taste is not merely an accidental recurrence amongst preternaturally 'gifted' individuals (1984: 29). Rather, it is the outcome of a shared habitus (perhaps more precisely, a cosmopolitan habitus; Kuipers 2012), formed through occupying similar positions within similar conditions of existence, and undoubtedly facilitated through the media ('old' and new) as a diffuse mechanism of education. This calls our attention to what habitus does as a 'generative formula' (Bourdieu 1984: 173) of

regularly recurring dispositions and preferences,<sup>1</sup> not simply on the level of individual tasters exercising their preferences, but as an aesthetic regime: a collective foundation on which markets are constructed and reproduced through shared ways of doing things.

Consider the following three examples of respondents' orientations towards official designations and certifications of natural, organic and biodynamic winemaking. First, Rex reflects on the wines that he chooses to review, hinting at the way in which personal taste is used as a heuristic device:

If you look at the wines I review, probably more often than not they probably fall on the 'natural' side of the ledger, but I might not mention that in my writing because it's not relevant. ... Yeah, because the quality is there, and that's what people want to know about, isn't it? ... I like to think I will never review a wine just because it's BD or natural. If the wine doesn't appeal to me, I won't... It has to be about taste. It's all about taste. From the very beginning, the thing that interested me in organics, although it chimed with my personal ideology, was the flavour, and the character of the taste. (Rex, Writer, Melbourne)

For Rex, it is the sense of taste he shares with his readers that enables (and pushes) him to focus on quality ('that's what people want to know about') rather than category labels as the basis for evaluation.

Whereas, Benjamin's and Philippe's accounts point to a sense of taste that is shared between intermediaries and producers. Their accounts suggest how that shared taste enables establishing trust and relations of exchange:

By and large, we like to go with wines that are certified, but we're not caught up in glorifying 'organic' or 'biodynamic.' Here, it's really about method: smaller production, lower yields, hand-picked grapes, naturally occurring yeasts. These tend to be, by default, people who are also organic or biodynamic. A lot of wines that brag about organic or biodynamic, you know, it's all over their labels? We don't have them because they're generally trying to hide the fact that it's not very good wine, to be honest. (Benjamin, Sommelier, New York)

We are *not* certified. We may be one day, but...it's not a must, it's not a goal. It's not a target, because our customers are not really asking for that. We are not on the shelf of the supermarket... It's more people linked with the soul, with the *terroir*, and the philosophy of the family, in a village, in a land, working on a product. ... What [customers] are looking for with [our winery] is probably the champagne by itself, the style, then the name of the family. And number three, the fact that it is organic or organic-oriented. (Philippe, Winemaker, Champagne)

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<sup>1</sup> It also calls attention to the under-researched question of habitus formation. However, my analysis has not focused on the paths through which respondents acquired their stocks of cultural capital or the modes by

A shared taste for the particular operates as an aesthetic regime, providing a system of evaluation, categorization and legitimation based on the particularities of provenance (e.g. where a wine was made, when, by whom, how). The three examples underline the way in which that aesthetic regime operates independently of disembedded trust regimes (Sassatelli and Scott 2001) such as certifications and other authorized forms of regulation. Shared tastes allow for the coordination of actions and markets, working in conjunction with (or in place of) institutionalized mechanisms as the basis of trust for exchange and guarantee of quality and legitimacy.

### **A shared sense of taste as an affective market device**

As noted above, the taste for the particular provides a shared heuristic device through which options are weighed and choices are made. For the winemakers, that device assists in choosing between strategies for making and promoting their wine (e.g. 'What will result in the purest expression of the grapes' place of origin and my style of winemaking?'). For the intermediaries, it enables choosing which wines to bring to market, and how to frame them (e.g. 'Which wines tell the most compelling story of their provenance?'). For both sets of actors, the shared sense of taste has discernible outcomes with regard to how the market is approached and constructed—as the following three examples suggest.

First, consider the implications of a taste for the particular from the point of view of a sommelier. My respondents include eight sommeliers whose wine lists (for wine bars and restaurants) focus primarily (if not solely) on natural and biodynamic producers. These are small-scale production wines; coupled with the taste for trying new things and avoiding the conventional, the implication for such sommeliers is an amplification of their workload. This is exemplified in Lara's account:

We change the wine list every fortnight, or every week. It's changing constantly. ... It's a big part of the role and it's a big part of why I work here...it's not just 'OK, I've got two spare minutes, I'm going to change the list.' I spend a week thinking about it. But then, that's what I love to do. I spend a week looking, or just constantly looking, for new things. But it's a love for me. ...It does take a lot of effort, but it's just a part of it. It wouldn't interest me to just, to not have a philosophy behind it. It's not easy to find good wines, at a good price, that fit in, that people like. So, it's not that much more difficult to find *only* biodynamic wines. In fact, sometimes it just limits it down, because there's so much good wine in the world. You're constantly finding, going to different wine tastings, finding new things. If you do have limitations, it narrows it down a little bit. ...For instance, if you say to one of the bigger suppliers, 'I'm looking for a sauvignon blanc from New Zealand.' 'OK, we've got 15.' 'Right, how many are biodynamic?' 'Two.' 'Can I look at those two.' Or, 'How many are biodynamic?' 'None.' 'OK, we'll see you next time.' And you call the next person. (Lara, Sommelier, Perth)

My friends still give me a hard time about the biodynamic, they think it's a bit wacky.

Thus, Lara cannot work in the 'usual' way through a small number of suppliers, but rather engages in more logistically-complex and time-consuming procurement strategies. Furthermore, earlier in the interview, Lara had recounted how her friend, a sommelier in London, derided her interest in biodynamic wine as 'wacky' and 'insane.' Despite the teasing of friends and the extra work such tastes entailed in terms of putting together her wine lists, she felt that her sense of taste was not only important to meaningful work (cf. Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011) but also an instrumental filtering device for narrowing her choices.

Second, consider the implications of a taste for the particular for the winemaker. For most of my 12 winemaker respondents, moving to natural or BD principles involved a marked change from (and fight with) their parents. Maurice (winemaker, Champagne) recounts how he and his brother decided to change their approach to production, suggesting how taste pushed them to abandon a tried-and-true method of production and risk market failure:

There was a sort of incident during a tasting 14 years ago in spring '98. At the time, [my brother and I] were working on the blend of our classic non-vintage brut of the time.... My brother and I made the first blend that we liked very much, we found it really superb. But we found also it was too chardonnay-oriented. It was not only too different from the previous one but certainly difficult to reproduce later, so it couldn't work. So we made a second one, which was good of course, but not as good. And it was this 'not as good' that became a problem for our little minds in the following weeks or months. And one thing that we said to each other is, 'Do you realize what we have done? We have simply decided to make a wine less good than it what it could have been simply to make it consistent.' If we do that, why bother about wine making? So we began to reverse our way of thinking and of course, I am telling you in five minutes what took us many years! [laughs] We said to each other, 'OK, what would happen if in the future when we work our multi vintage blend, instead of trying to imitate what we have done last year, we don't care. We work from a white sheet of paper and we try to make the best wine possible.' And we said that two things would happen. One, the wine would be better, which is good. Two, the wine would be different. (Maurice, Winemaker, Champagne)

It is through recourse to their shared sense of taste that the brothers could envision an alternative mode of production, and rationalize the risks they were taking. Maurice recalled numerous arguments with his father about giving up both fertilizers and chemical treatments, and the established practice of making champagnes each year that tasted the same (the house style) by virtue of blending from different vintages. Their father was proven correct initially—Maurice and his brother lost '99 per cent' of their parents' customer base by changing production practices. Yet, the brothers persevered to develop a *terroir*-oriented expression of place through blends based on each year's particular vintage—a change that reflected their personal philosophies and tastes, and thus was felt to be crucial to carrying forward the family enterprise.

Third, if personal identity and professional satisfaction are tied to giving the purest expression of one's *terroir*, then taste pushes winemakers to remove any extraneous interferences. This can mean abandoning irrigation, or removing all chemicals from the vineyard (including those from tractors and harvesters). In turn, this leads to the adoption of specific practices—some of which have become largely 'extinct' since the growth of industrial agriculture following WWII—including hand picking, using horses in the vineyard, and creating tinctures with naturally occurring weeds to discourage pests. Not only does this entail additional (and different forms of) labour, but also risks attracting the criticism of others. For example:

I have a lot of neighbours. It's a problem; it's not a problem. It's a problem because when you have neighbours without respect, he come and spray on your vines. So it's a problem, because there is no respect from him. ... Before, it was a problem, because 'Ah shit, you are crazy to do that.' And they laugh about that. But now, now they see the difference... For example, I have used the horse in the vineyard for two years. And nobody has tried that! [Laughs] And when I started everybody said 'Ohhhh, a horse in the vineyard?! [He] is crazy!'

[Does that bother you?]

No, because I know why I do that. So it's not a problem for me. They are free to love, they are free to say I am crazy. But I know why I do that. So no impact for me.

(Guillaume, Winemaker, Champagne)<sup>2</sup>

In keeping with the other winemakers in the sample, Guillaume's response is suggestive of the empowering implications of the taste for the particular, which enables not only the choice of 'different' practices, but also the capacity to undertake such practices in the face of (explicit and implicit) opposition and obstacles. Despite Lara's mention of the derision of a sommelier friend, this was an obstacle faced primarily by the winemakers rather than the intermediaries—perhaps due to winemakers' greater proximity to risk (if a BD vintage fails, it is the winemaker, not the intermediary with a panoply of choices, most directly impacted and held responsible). As Meryl (winemaker, Perth) recounts: 'And you know we're constantly having to defend the fact that, even in interviews like this, you have to defend why you're biodynamic and why you talk about it. Quite frankly, you get a bit sick of it. You can tell I'm getting a bit annoyed now!' But the annoyance is worth it, because: 'There's something to be said about feeling good about what you do, feeling good about, that sense of being uplifted is certainly a part of biodynamics which I enjoy.'

The way viticulture and viniculture are thought about and practiced (by winemakers) or privileged (by cultural intermediaries) are channelled through the lens of a particular taste: the aesthetic regime serves as both a logic for practice (an ideology or philosophy of action),

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<sup>2</sup> The peculiarities of expression are a function of my poor French (Guillaume was kind enough to answer my questions in English).

and a logic of practice (a 'modus operandi' (Bourdieu 1977: 72) comprising a set of norms and techniques for action). The expanded notion of *terroir* and the taste for the particular tie the practices of the vineyard (e.g. the use of fertilizer) to the outcome in the glass, thereby retaining that which might potentially be lost to sensation and from the domain of what is considered important for attention and practice. In other words, *terroir max* makes the context of production into something that is perceptible (*gout de terroir*) and open to aesthetic practice.

### **Concluding thoughts: A shared sense of taste as a pathway to alternative market formations?**

As the paper has explored, the taste for the particular guides perception and practice, not simply in terms of assessing the wine in the glass, but demanding a view of wine's provenance in its entirety. As a market device, the taste for the particular intervenes in the construction of markets (in this case, the natural wine market) by rendering the entire context of production as aesthetic practice: hand picking, using horses, not using industrial fertilizers and so forth all become actions to be undertaken in accordance with a principle of 'the good', and are thus also framed as sources of pleasure. This can be a powerful generative device when the practices in question face such obstacles as derision (beauty and pleasure trump the disdain of others) or the aggravations of additional and non-standard labour practices. And, because it is shared by those at various points in the commodity chain from production through to the end consumer, that sense of taste operates as a collective basis for exchange and trust, for evaluation and legitimation, for coordination and regulation, for innovation and contestation.

The wider implications of this shared sense of taste are suggested in my various examples. Lara's mode of working accommodates multiple procurement chains, which is a hurdle for large institutions such as hospitals and supermarkets seeking to include local, small-scale purveyors. Guillaume and Maurice's mode of working keeps herbicides, pesticides and fertilizer out of the ground water and ecosystem. It entails embracing forms of labour largely considered 'extinct' and notions of success that are commensurate with their mode of production, which are two hurdles to larger-scale producers adopting more sustainable modes of agriculture. Flexible procurement, resurrecting lost forms of knowledge and skill, a 'degrowth' mentality about market success: these are just a few aspects of alternative futures we might glimpse in the case of the natural wine market. That the outcomes are better for the planet is a happy, but secondary consideration (if considered at all): practice is above all driven by taste, desire, pleasure.

This brings me, in closing, to suggest how aesthetic regimes might underpin the transformation of environmentally-sustainable alternatives into durable, normative practices. My respondents' accounts suggest that taste can be a potentially powerful market device for pushing and enabling market change; for doing this differently. In this, it creates



and helps to coordinate a 'social desire path', a term Laura Nichols (2014) offers for thinking about how change might happen within institutions. Nichols develops the concept from that of 'desire paths' in landscape architecture: informal paths created by people to meet their needs more efficiently or effectively than via officially-sanctioned options. Think of the dirt path worn through grass that 'cuts the corner' set out by paved pathways: no one person set out to create change, but a more suitable path is worn into permanence through shared perceptions and practices.

The taste for the particular similarly suggests an alternative path for those for whom hegemonic industrial practices and products do not fit their sense of what is good, desirable and worthy. Importantly, this is a *shared* sense of taste, coordinating disparate market actors and practices. There is an accretion of a multitude of actors' departures from the hegemonic path. Those departures eventually becoming so 'worn in' that the alternative path becomes readily available for anyone, regardless of whether or not they share—to the same degree or at all—that sense of taste.

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