

Choosing organic wine in context: from perceptions to valuation in an emerging sustainable wine market

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Abstract

Organic wine represents a growing yet still marginal segment in traditional wine markets, where consumer choice remains strongly dominated by extrinsic quality cues and price sensitivity. This paper integrates qualitative and experimental evidence from two complementary studies conducted in Portugal to examine how consumers evaluate organic wine within real decision-making contexts. Drawing on Cue Utilization Theory, Signaling Theory, and Credence Goods Theory, the research explores how sustainability cues interact with traditional wine quality signals such as region of origin (RO) and sensory experience. Focus groups investigated consumer perceptions, trust mechanisms, and symbolic meanings associated with organic certification. At the same time, a point-of-sale tasting experiment assessed how sensory evaluations and RO disclosure influence willingness to pay (WTP). Across both studies, flavor and RO emerged as dominant drivers of choice, while organic production operated primarily as a value-oriented directional cue contingent on credibility and transparency. Moderate price premiums of approximately 10% were broadly accepted, whereas higher premiums faced resistance unless supported by strong trust signals. The findings contribute to a process-based understanding of sustainable wine consumption in credence-heavy markets and illustrate the progressive development of doctoral research from exploratory to causal analysis.

Keywords: organic wine, consumer behavior, region of origin, trust, sustainability cues, willingness to pay

Introduction

Consumer interest in sustainable food and beverage products has increased substantially over the past decade, driven by growing concerns related to environmental impact, health, and ethical production practices (Casais & Faria, 2022; Forbes et al., 2009; Mann et al., 2012). Within the wine sector, organic production has gained visibility as a symbol of reduced chemical inputs, environmental stewardship, and perceived naturalness (Pomarici & Vecchio, 2014; Vecchio et al., 2019). Nevertheless, market penetration remains uneven, particularly in traditional wine-producing countries where long-established quality heuristics such as region of origin, price, and producer reputation continue to dominate purchasing behavior (Bernabéu et al., 2008; Lockshin & Corsi, 2012).

Portugal represents a compelling empirical context for examining this dynamic. Wine consumption is deeply embedded in Portuguese cultural identity and gastronomy (Anderson & Pinilla, 2018; Robinson & Harding, 2015), with strong loyalty to regional appellations functioning as key quality signals (Panzone & Simões, 2009). In contrast, organic wine remains a niche segment characterized by limited availability and relatively low consumer familiarity (Moya & Lucas, 2021). While sustainability-related claims increasingly influence attitudes toward wine, their integration into real purchase decisions remains insufficiently understood (Delmas & Grant, 2014; Wiedmann et al., 2014).

This paper presents the evolution of a doctoral research program that moves from exploratory qualitative inquiry into consumer decision-making toward experimental valuation analysis. By integrating two complementary studies, it offers a deeper understanding of how organic certification interacts with traditional wine choice cues and how trust and sensory experience mediate sustainable consumption.

Theoretical Framework

Wine can be viewed as a credence good in which key product attributes - such as production practices - remain difficult for consumers to verify even after consumption (Darby & Karni, 1973). Under such conditions, consumers rely heavily on extrinsic cues available at the point of purchase to infer quality and reduce perceived risk.

Cue Utilization Theory proposes that perceived quality emerges from the interpretation of intrinsic attributes (e.g., taste, aroma, color) and extrinsic cues (e.g., price, brand, region of

origin) (Olson, 1972; Steenkamp, 1990). When intrinsic evaluation is uncertain or costly, extrinsic cues become dominant decision heuristics guiding consumer choice. Signaling Theory further explains how observable attributes convey credible information about otherwise unobservable quality (Spence, 1973). In wine markets, price often operates as a prestige and quality signal (Lee, 2012), while region of origin communicates authenticity, expertise, and stylistic expectations (Ferreira et al., 2021; Sáenz-Navajas et al., 2013; Skuras & Vakrou, 2002).

Sustainability-related claims such as organic certification function as additional ethical and quality signals (Delmas & Grant, 2014). However, their effectiveness is frequently weakened by label proliferation, limited consumer literacy, and halo effects that blur distinctions among organic, sustainable, biodynamic, and natural wines (Apaolaza et al., 2017; van Amstel et al., 2008; Wiedmann et al., 2014). As a result, organic cues often lack the clarity and credibility necessary to override traditional heuristics. These frameworks collectively predict that organic wine adoption depends not on certification alone, but on how sustainability cues integrate with established quality signals.

Methodological Progression

The first stage of the research employed focus groups conducted in Lisbon and Porto with 23 wine-aware participants to explore wine choice routines, meanings attached to organic wine, trust mechanisms, and price perceptions. Discussions highlighted the contextual nature of wine consumption, emphasizing meal pairing, social occasions, and audience as primary anchors of decision-making. Thematic analysis followed an hybrid deductive–inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Building on qualitative insights, the second stage implemented a real point-of-sale blind tasting experiment in a specialized organic wine store in Braga with 35 participants. Participants stated initial WTP for three organic wines, revised WTP after RO disclosure, under an incentive-compatible Becker–DeGroot–Marschak mechanism. This design isolated the effects of sensory experience and extrinsic information cues, responding to calls for experimental approaches in sustainable wine research (Maesano et al., 2021; Scozzafava et al., 2021).

Integrated Results

Both studies confirmed that flavor remains the primary driver of wine choice, consistent with prior research emphasizing taste as the foundation of satisfaction and loyalty (Bonn et al., 2016; Lockshin & Corsi, 2012). Region of origin (RO) emerged as a central heuristic allowing consumers to anticipate style and reduce uncertainty (Ferreira et al., 2021; Sáenz-Navajas et al., 2013). Experimental evidence demonstrated that RO disclosure significantly increased WTP for certain wines, confirming its strong signaling role.

Organic production was framed symbolically as a value-oriented direction associated with sustainability and ethics rather than as a sensory expectation, aligning with previous findings (Capitello & Sirieix, 2019; Rojas-Méndez et al., 2015). Only conviction-driven consumers prioritized organic cues ahead of traditional heuristics, echoing segmentation patterns observed in organic wine markets (Boncinelli et al., 2021).

Across both studies, moderate price premiums of approximately 10% were broadly accepted, while larger increases faced resistance unless justified by strong trust signals. This bounded premium logic mirrors previous empirical evidence in emerging organic wine markets (Moscovici et al., 2022; Schäufele & Hamm, 2020). Certification provided baseline credibility, but producer reputation, transparent labeling, and traceability mechanisms were decisive in enabling premium acceptance.

Discussion: Evolution of the Research Contribution

The qualitative phase revealed organic wine as a symbolic value cue embedded within contextual consumption practices. The experimental phase quantified how traditional quality signals dominate valuation even when sustainability attributes are present. Together, the studies demonstrate that sustainability cues rarely replace sensory and regional heuristics but instead integrate dynamically within existing decision structures.

This process-based perspective advances the literature by explaining not simply whether consumers value organic wine, but how sustainability attributes enter real choice sequences under conditions of uncertainty. The findings highlight the central role of trust as a mediator between ethical intention and economic behavior, contributing to broader debates on the intention–behavior gap in ethical consumption (Casais & Faria, 2022).

Conclusion

Organic wine adoption in traditional markets such as Portugal is governed by heuristic decision structures anchored in taste, region of origin, and price realism. Organic certification functions primarily as a credibility amplifier rather than a quality substitute, gaining influence only when aligned with strong sensory performance and transparent trust mechanisms. Sustainable wine growth therefore depends on embedding ethical value within established quality frameworks rather than relying on labels alone.

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