Varietal and quality distinctiveness of US wine regions

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Abstract

Climate change has been detectable in many of the world’s vineyards over the past half-century, most notably in terms of an upward trend in the mean summer temperature and ever-earlier harvest dates. The expectation is that climates in temperate zones will change even faster in the 21st century, requiring adaptive responses by vigneron's such as altering the mix of varieties grown. A first step in anticipating or modeling how future climatic changes will alter the competitiveness of regions requires indicators of the current varietal and quality distinctiveness of each region and of their similarity with other regions. Also helpful are indications of the extent to which those features have changed already in recent times.

To that end, this paper examines empirically three distinguishing features of the main wine regions of the United States, namely Oregon and the 17 wine districts of California. One feature is their degree of specialization in producing certain winegrape varieties, as measured by a varietal intensity index and a Herfindahl-like index of varietal concentration. The second is their distinctiveness in terms of winegrape quality, as reflected in the average winegrape price in each region relative to the average price nationally. And the third is the degree of similarity of each region with other regions in the US and abroad in terms of their varietal mix, as measured by a varietal-based regional similarity index.

The three indicators are calculated for 1999 and (except for the comparison with the rest of the world) will be also generated for 2009. The study focuses on the top 12 red and 10 white winegrape varieties that together account for more than 90 percent of the United States’ winegrape crush. Some indicators are shown in the following tables for 1999 (and for 2005, to be replaced with 2009 estimates when the latest data become available at end-April 2010).

Keywords: climate change, terroir, regional winegrape varietal specialization, varietal similarity of wine regions

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