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Wine Tastes:
The Production of Culture among Service Workers and Consumers in Napa Valley
Wineries

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An Abstract of
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James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
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2010

Abstract

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More people than ever before organize their lives around consumption, thereby allowing most income groups the ability to use commodities to upscale their lifestyles. This process is especially evident in the case of wine, as consumers from all walks of life upscale their lifestyle through its consumption. In the United States, a familiarity with fine wine has long served as cultural currency within high status groups. However, the U.S. wine industry has experienced explosive growth in recent years making wine and wine-related knowledge (e.g., ratings) more accessible across income groups. The expanded sense of wine “tastes” and wider access to wines may suggest that old class hierarchies have been replaced by more democratic spaces of consumption—with fine wine consumption no longer limited to the affluent. Yet, not all wines are equal, nor are all consumers. Instead, industry critics and “experts” (e.g., Robert Parker or *The Wine Spectator*) legitimate certain wines and how to appreciate them. Consumers themselves enter consumption sites with varying levels of skills and knowledge (e.g., cultural capital) that shape their tastes for particular wines and how they consume them. Service workers mediate this relationship by communicating critic-generated information about style, value, and ways to appreciate wine to consumers. By using wine as a case study, this project combines research on the production of culture and on cultural capital to ask: How do service workers (as cultural intermediaries) and consumers interact with expert-generated classifications and under what conditions do these interactions uphold or lessen social boundaries? This project draws on a variety of data sources, including industry publications (e.g., *The Wine Spectator*); participant observation and interviews with consumers and tasting room hosts in Napa Valley, California; and informal conversations with industry insiders (e.g., winemakers, consultants and winery owners). These findings advance theoretical and empirical knowledge about stratification as well as economic and cultural sociology by highlighting the cultural dimensions of social class and status.

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Acknowledgements

Two of the mutually reinforcing difficulties that social scientific researchers face when studying affluent consumer cultures are time and money. Simply stated, studying lifestyle cultures requires that a researcher spend time actually living among the people under investigation. Thus, when examining cultures of affluence a researcher confronts many of the same barriers that will be discussed in the following pages, namely limitations of economic, social and cultural capital. Securing these various forms of capital takes money and time in the field networking and learning the “rules of the game.” Therefore, this project could not have been accomplished without the generous financial support and patience of a variety of people and institutions.

Specifically, I would like to thank the Laney Graduate School at Emory University, which invested munificent research funds to support the early stages of fieldwork in Napa Valley. Especially thank you to Dr. V.A. Shadron, Dr. Rick Rubinson and Dr. Lisa Tedesco, who signed off on the allocation of these resources and who have offered a good deal of patience as my academic pursuits twisted and turned through the Graduate Division of Religion before finally completing this PhD in Sociology. I firmly believe that my years spent with Religion and Ethics add intellectual rigor to the study of the cultural meaning systems and social inequality that I examine in this work. Also, thank you to Queen Watson and the other people who work tirelessly on behalf of the Graduate students of Emory University.

Financial grants from Laney Graduate School were supplemented by support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute Teacher-Scholar Fellows Program, which offered research funds as well as terrific opportunity to combine my passion for undergraduate teaching with this research. Especially, thank you to Dr. David Lynn for being an excellent mentor for collaborative and interdisciplinary teaching and research. Also, during a crucial time in this project, a much-needed National Science Foundation Dissertation Improvement Grant helped me get back to Napa Valley to continue data collection among the most elite wineries and consumers included in this study. Other costs were offset by the kindness of wine-loving friends and research respondents in Napa who became friends as the project evolved. Without question, this dissertation would have not have been possible without these various sources of economic capital, which provided the tangible resources necessary to gain access to wineries, tasting events, private parties, restaurants and the overarching “Napa lifestyle” that is the focus of this research.

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No doubt, this project took a lot of time in the field. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3, I was a relative outsider to wine culture and had only visited Napa a few times before embarking on this journey. Not surprisingly, then, it took a long time learn the "legitimate" norms of wine consumption and the insider information surrounding Napa Valley. Therefore, I want to thank the people living and working in and around Napa for their patience with my inexhaustible questions and insistence that they slow down or "spell that." Especially thank you to the tasting room hosts and restaurant service staff folks who cluster at the Calistoga Inn to drink PBR (with lemon) after the tourists are in bed from a day of wine tasting. Additionally, thank you to the many winery owners, consultants and winemakers who opened up their homes, vineyards, wineries and wine cellars to me during the later part of this project so that I could get a glimpse into the lifestyle of the true insiders of the industry. Many thanks also to the tourists to the Valley, who took valuable time out of their vacations to explain their perceptions of wine, their social networks and the wineries they chose to visit while in the area.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: WINE IN THE FIELDS OF PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

More people than ever before organize their lives around the acts of consumption, thereby allowing all income groups the ability to use commodities to upscale their lifestyles (Schor 1998). While the use of consumer goods to mark lifestyle choices may not be new to our contemporary era, the stark rise in the quality, variety, and quantity of consumer goods has exacerbated competitive consumption, in which consumers spend more and more money to keep up with the lifestyles of the social groups with whom they identify (Schor 1998; de Graaf *et al.* 2005). So, even though consumers may not share the same income as upper middle class reference groups, they have opportunities to gain information about product distinctions and to frequent consumption sites where a range of products can be purchased. This expanded accessibility of products and knowledge suggests to some social critics that old social hierarchies have been replaced by more democratic spaces of consumption, in which anyone can enter and leave with indicators of style that mask their class position (Featherstone 1991).

Yet, the growing accessibility of consumer goods also includes the expansion of hierarchically ordered product distinctions that confer status to consumers. These rankings involve the legitimation of particular products by cultural “experts” who elevate some commodities to a consecrated status. This is done through the establishment of Artistic Classifications Systems (ACS), which assign designations of quality and status, as well as, legitimate ways that consumers “should” appreciate these products. However,

for these classifications to order products (and ways of consumption) they must filter to consumers in a meaningful way that is widely understood and accepted as a normative and/or common sense. In other words, they must be established through rituals that generate symbolic potency for the hierarchical classification system (DiMaggio 1987). When symbolic boundaries of this sort are clearly established and widely understood, then they can become the foundation for social rankings, whereby consumers from different class backgrounds use commodities as a way of creating solidarity or distancing themselves from other social groups (Simmel 1904/1957; Veblen 1899/1965; Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1997, 1998). In this way the symbolic boundaries around product (established through legal and critic generated classifications) may translate into social boundaries that reproduce class based hierarchies through acts of consumption.

In large part due to the power of the 18th Amendment (Prohibition), and its subsequent Repeal with the 21st Amendment, the U.S. wine industry has expanded *because* of its reliance on such classifications systems, which differentiate products one from another and provide markers of quality and status. Additionally, the historical connection of wine with high culture has linked the classification system for wine in the United States with rituals that outline how wine products should be enjoyed or appreciated. These rituals involve functional actions such as swirling wine in one's glass in order to release the aromas embedded in the wine, as well as, other ritual performances that are tied to high culture (e.g., presenting wine to the man at the table but pouring the first glass of wine to the woman). By exploring the ways in which classifications for wine and rituals around wine consumption are enacted, this project offers the opportunity

to glimpse how status hierarchies are maintained and transcended for a commercialized, yet artistic, cultural product.

As discussed in detail in Chapter 2, the regulatory framework in the United States has allowed the industry to organize itself around the categories of mass wines versus elite boutique (or more recently “cult” wines) so that status is always present when making product distinctions. Historically, titles such as “winos” and “aficionados” suggested status distinctions between impoverished “urban dwellers” who drank cheap, low quality wines and affluent “connoisseurs” who enjoyed expensive, fine wines. In recent years, however, the wine industry has distanced its product from an association with the poor, while solidifying a detailed ranking system organized around status distinctions for wines, wineries and growing regions. This has included expanded education opportunities for wine consumers who wish to upscale their lifestyle by learning about wine and how to consume it in socially acceptable (i.e., legitimate) ways.

Because of its leadership in the industry and the power of its trade organizations, Napa Valley, California has risen to the top of the status hierarchy (not just in the U.S. but around the world). Here, mass commercial firms oriented toward “new consumers” and some of the most prestigious wineries in the world share the 32-mile stretch of vineyards within one of the most internationally renowned viticulture areas. In the United States, symbolic value is generated through critic ratings (especially industry experts such as Robert Parker or wine magazines such as *The Wine Spectator*) that determine if a wine is “worthy” by use of a 100-point scale. Not surprisingly, then, as tasting rooms in Napa Valley compete for visitors and display their prized wines, symbolic markers of value and quality abound! This makes the area ripe for investigating the ways in which symbolic

boundaries (as generated through expert ratings for wines) may or may not translate into social boundaries for consumers who visit these tasting rooms.

As described in Chapter 3, this project began by mapping the landscape of Napa Valley tasting rooms based on their orientation toward mass markets or symbolic forms of validation (i.e., high critic ratings). Through the use of qualitative methods (e.g., participant observation, interviews, informal conversations), I identified five distinct *wine cultures* that co-exist in this agro-tourist region. Then, using wine as a focal point, the project probes the different meaning systems that tasting room hosts and consumers communicate about this cultural product, ranging from an intoxicant, to a means of social mobility, to a status marker, to a part of a cultured lifestyle. Moreover, these different cultures reveal ways that consumers themselves use wine to express allegiance to their own class group while simultaneously distancing themselves from other social groups.

As discussed in detail in Chapter 4, wineries in Napa Valley vary in how they utilize critic ratings, depending upon whether the organization is oriented toward profits, education, status, or an internalized sense of taste. More specifically, mass commercial organizations organize their tasting rooms in such a way as to capture the largest market share, whether by capitalizing upon industry critic ratings for reserve wines or shunning industry critics for affordable (lower quality) wines. Mid-size wineries, in contrast, focus their attention on educating consumers about how the industry classification system operates (both in terms of product differentiation and quality, as well as, the way consumers “should learn to appreciate wine”). Exclusive/elite wineries offer yet another response to industry classifications, as they either utilize them to create scarcity and status for themselves (through enormous investments of capital that ensure that wines that

will appeal to the palates of industry critics) or seek to break out of rigid classification systems through the creative marriage of vintners and winemakers who produce “unclassifiable” wines. Taken together, all of these organizational types effectively uphold the universality of the critic generated classification system through the divergent ways that tasting room host intermediaries (as well as the visual markers within the tasting rooms) enact rituals that enforce these symbolic boundaries.

The classifications that differentiate and hierarchically order products (and wineries) take on social significance as they function to separate people into distinct spaces throughout Napa Valley. Chapter 5 explores this process, whereby consumers with different levels of economic, cultural and social capital enter Napa Valley and are effectively funneled into distinct tourist experiences either through to their prior knowledge and/or where they gain information while in the valley (e.g., sommeliers at exclusive restaurants vs. volunteers at the Visitor’s Center). Moreover, once in Napa, consumers express very different (class specific) ways of understanding and appreciating wine. For instance, consumers who frequent mass commercial tasting rooms appreciate the intoxicating effects of wine, without much consideration for quality or critic ratings. Consumers in mid-sized wineries express a recurrent desire to utilize wine as a means of social mobility, in large part by mastering the expert classification systems that help them navigate a complex range of products, as well as, the best (i.e., legitimate) ways to appreciate wine. More economically affluent consumers cluster in one of two categories. Recently wealthy consumers use critic ratings as a way to boost the status of their own wine cellar. Whereas, equally affluent consumers who have internalized a sense of taste

(i.e., developed higher levels of cultural capital), believe that industry critics are limiting the creative potential of vintners and winemakers in Napa Valley.

The following dissertation will proceed as follows. Chapter 2 will provide a historical overview of the U.S. wine industry, paying particular attention to the regulatory changes that shape the classifications, marketing and sale of wine for Napa Valley wineries. Chapter 3 will describe the research methodology and design used for this project. Chapters 4 will explore the way in which differently oriented tasting rooms (e.g., whether toward profits or symbolic forms of legitimation) engage critic generated classifications and how these visual displays and performances by tasting room host intermediaries uphold or transcend symbolic boundaries. Chapter 5, then, turns to consumers and how they understand and utilize classifications depending upon their own levels of economic, social and cultural capital.

CHAPTER 2

OUT OF THE DUST OF THE PROHIBITION: U.S. WINE CLASSIFICATIONS AND NAPA VALLEY

Introduction

The U.S. wine industry in general, and Napa Valley in particular, provide an ideal case for the study of symbolic and social boundaries for several related reasons. First, wine represents the largest finished agricultural product in the United States. In 2005, wine, grapes and allied industries made an economic impact of over \$162 billion to the U.S. economy and paid over \$33 billion in wages to over 1 million full-time workers (MKF Research 2007). Many of these jobs are located within the service sector, in which workers interact directly with consumers by helping them make wine selections and learn about product distinctions generated by federal and state agencies, as well as, evaluations offered by critics within the industry. Second, wine has become the most popular alcoholic beverage among consumers in the United States, purchasing over \$26 billion in wine per year (MFK Research Report 2007). Industry projections show that by 2010, the United States will have the largest consumer market for wine in the world as it gains ground among all generational segments, all ethnic groups, all regions, and across women and men (Ibid). Third, the industry offers a highly differentiated set of products to meet this segmented consumer demand, ranging in price from \$2.00 per bottle to over \$1000 per bottle. Consumption sites are also highly segmented to accommodate elite as well as mass consumers and must be staffed by a service sector of employees charged with the

promotion and sale of a product that has been previously unknown by the majority of consumers.

Additionally, the wine industry has been organized around the categories of mass wines versus elite boutique (or more recently “cult” wines) so that status is always present when making product distinctions. As will be discussed below, after the Prohibition, the few wineries that were still operating in the United States targeted low-income urban populations with poor quality, mass-produced wine products, while elite wine consumers looked to Europe for quality wines. But, even as the U.S. industry only offered wine to the lower classes, there existed a small European-inspired group of aficionados that considered wine a component of high culture (McCoy 2005). During the 1960s and 1970s, some determined wine producers, such as Robert Mondavi, sought to alter the public perception of U.S. wine by linking the beverage with culture, art and sophistication.¹ Other producers of wine, especially in the Napa Valley region of California, joined this venture and began to reinvigorate the U.S. wine industry by improving the quality of wine products and focusing on the artistic and cultural aspects of wine. As the U.S. industry gained momentum, producers pushed toward increasing demand among mass consumers—not by lowering the quality or image of wine, but by raising the sophistication and knowledge of the masses through publicly accessible standards of “quality,” expert rankings of products, and education programs intended to turn neophytes into experts.²

¹ Without question, external forces such as a rising standard of living and the expansion of higher education among middle class Americans informed this transition as well (Baumann 2001).

² In many ways this process of “aesthetic mobility” is similar to the one described by Baumann (2001), in which films are elevated from an association with the masses to a status appreciated by the educated and more cultured segments of society.

This chapter will provide a general overview of the wine industry in the United States, especially focusing on shifts in the structure of the industry, expanded occupational categories (including the role of critics), market demand, and the legal framework that regulates the industry. Notably, the U.S. wine industry is quite diverse, with significant differences from state to state and growing region to growing region. Therefore, this overview will preference the Napa Valley area of California for its obvious relevance to this project and for its enormous significance to the success of the U.S. wine industry.

From Prohibition to Present

As producers of one of the most regulated products in the United States, wineries have been largely shaped by a regulatory framework that sets the rules of their existence, distribution, and expansion. And, despite the fact that most organized efforts toward the national prohibition of alcohol were advanced to limit the production and sale of hard liquors (such as whiskey), wine and beer were ultimately included in the National Prohibition Act (or otherwise known as the Volstead Act) of 1919, which defined “intoxicating liquor” as any beverage that contained more than .05% alcohol (Pinney 2005). More specifically, the legislation that became the 18th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution stated:

The manufacture, sale or transport of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States and all territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof for beverage purposes is hereby prohibited.

While there were notable loopholes in this Act, the fourteen years of its enforcement

resulted in a radical restructuring of the wine industry in the United States.

First, this Act targeted the producers of alcoholic beverages rather than the consumer of such products. Therefore, while wineries were able to continue to produce wine for their own “home” consumption, they were unable to sell or transport their products to consumers. It is not surprising, then, that the number of bonded wineries decreased from 919 (694 in California) to 268 (177 in California) by the time of the Repeal in 1933 (Pinney 2005).

Second, the Act allowed for the production and distribution of “non-beverage” wines for sacramental and medicinal purposes. Therefore, wineries that had a direct connection with the Catholic Church were able to continue to produce and sell wines. As one example, Beaulieu Vineyards (often referred to as BV) became known as “The House of Altar Wines” and was able to expand production to over a million gallons in the midst of the Prohibition Era (Conaway 1990). While sacramental wine production during Prohibition was minimal (never exceeding 3 million gallons per year), wineries that forged these connections were able to maintain ownership of land, accumulate cellars of aged wine, establish marketing networks and build name recognition that greatly aided their success post-Prohibition (Conaway 1990; Pinney 2005).

Third, while bonded wineries were on the decline, the number of households in the United States that began making their own wine for personal consumption made roughly 111 million gallons of wine per year from 1922 to 1927 (Pinney 2005). To meet the demand for inputs, grape production (including the planting of new vines) and sales actually accelerated during the Prohibition period. Notably, however, the grapes that could withstand transport to large northeastern cities (such as New York and Boston)

were not varietals suitable for high quality wine. Simultaneously, the demand for table grapes and raisins was also on the rise. Together these trends meant that even though the nation's vineyards doubled in size during the Prohibition period, the wine industry would later face significant problems related to the oversupply for poor quality grapes and an undersupply of grapes needed to make high quality wine products.

While the Prohibition was ineffective in eradicating alcoholic beverages from the U.S. consumer market, the vigilant enforcement that prohibited the sales and distribution of intoxicants by wine producers altered the institutional and organizational structure of American wine industry for decades to come. As best summarized by historian Thomas Pinney:

When Rip van Winkle of American wine woke up again, it was to find its cooperage had dried out and fallen to pieces, its machines had rusted and become obsolete, its channels of distribution had clogged, its markets had dissolved, and its name had been forgotten. No research had been carried out. No instruction had been given to a younger generation. A tradition had been broken, and an orderly growth cut off (Pinney 2005: 33).

In other words, when the Prohibition ended, the U.S. wine industry faced enormous obstacles including an oversupply of low quality grapes, lagging technological innovation, very few trained professional, a consolidated market that coalesced around a few bulk producers, a burdensome and complicated regulatory system, a lack of shared classifications for wine types or quality and small and uneducated consumer base. Not surprisingly, then, that it would take most of the 20th Century for the industry to rise from the dust.

During the first eight years after the Repeal, about 60 wineries had emerged in Napa Valley, even though they were all undercapitalized and dominated by one large

corporate winery (i.e., BV). New Deal agricultural supports (mostly in the form of loans) helped establish several co-ops that created protection from dominant firms and helped fragment the industry into a few vibrant small producers. According to Lapsley (1996), even though the co-ops were not able to successfully market their branded wines, they did “provide a more assured livelihood and economic return to between 30-40 percent of Napa’s growers through market power that none could have achieved individually” (27).

Even with the minimal success of a few small wineries, bulk wine producers dominated the market throughout the mid 20th century by focusing their attention on standardization and mass production (Friedland 1984). In fact, until the late 1960s, the U.S. wine industry was controlled by high-volume producers, that marketed poor quality wines to a “misery market” of consumers who were down on their luck and in need of a cheap drink (Lucas 1998). Over 70 percent of the wines sold to U.S. consumers were fortified with spirits to boost the alcohol content from 10-12 percent to 17-20 percent (Pinney 2005). Wines in the U.S., therefore, were made in order to appeal to consumers who sought out the intoxicating effects of alcohol.

Of these large producers, Gallo Winery and the Allied-Growers United Vintners competed for top sales until Gallo finally won out in the mid 1960s. Gallo’s success has largely been attributed to the brothers’ cooperative ability to secure low cost grapes (Julio) and influence distribution channels and retail outlets (Ernest). In many regards, Ernest Gallo was the forefather of aggressive mass marketing for wine in the United States. For instance, he trained a large sales team to go across the country and visit retail stores to ensure that retailers understood the advantages of carrying their products, that

Gallo wines had the most prominent shelf position and that brightly colored bottle collars and sales materials were easily visible to consumers (Gallo and Gallo 1994).

According to Ernest Gallo, the key to dominating world wine markets was to give consumers what they wanted, which could diverge greatly from what might be considered “quality” wine. Therefore, Gallo Winery often fortified its wines with sweeteners, artificial flavors or carbonation. Gallo’s aggressive sales and marketing efforts toward lower class (especially African American and Native Americans) are well documented (see Hawke 1993). The most famous of these wines was fortified with lemon flavoring and marketed under the brand *Thunderbird*, which quickly became Gallo’s most popular (and lucrative) product. The company also marketed similar products such as Maverick, Gypsy, Golden Spur, Tom-Tom, Red Rooster, Pink Pussy Cat, Tingle Pink, Ripple and various flavors of the widely known Boone’s Farm (Gallo and Gallo 1994; Pinney 2005).

All of these (and other similar) products highlight the fact that mass-commercial wineries such as Gallo (which grew to be the largest wine company in the world) were largely successful by saturating the U.S. market with cheap “novelty” wines that lacked any standard of quality. So, even though Gallo’s efforts expanded wine markets in the United States, most of these consumers purchased wine for the purpose of intoxication rather than wine appreciation. This meant that collective beliefs about wine in the United States were tightly linked to stereotypes of low socioeconomic consumers and their impoverished lifestyles.

During the same period (late 1950-1960), smaller wine producers, especially in Napa Valley, were solidifying a shared commitment to higher quality wines and altering

this negative perception of wine in America. Arguably, Robert Mondavi did more to spark the creative and aesthetic potential of wines in the United States than anyone else in the United States (Personal Conversations 2006, 2007, 2008). By embracing the philosophy of European winemakers, he lamented the market-driven objectives of American wine firms and sought to elevate the cultural aspects of wine over purely economic incentives. In his autobiography he explained,

For some people in the Napa Valley, wine was just a business, an agreeable way to earn a living. Not for me. Wine for me had always been something much larger and it still is. Wine to me is passion. It's family and friends. It's warmth of heart and generosity of spirit. Wine is art. It's culture. It's the essence of civilization and the Art of Living (Mondavi 1999: 3,4).

While other people shared this perspective, Mondavi was quite instrumental in creating a market for fine wine in the U.S. by solidifying links between European “high art” and the craft of wine making.

First, this meant improving the quality of wine in the United States. He (along with other small producers in Napa Valley) argued that wine production required a shift away from standardization and toward specialized grape varieties and an emphasis on the French notion of *terrior*.³ Both of these factors will be discussed in detail below (i.e., varietal classification and American Viticulture Areas: AVAs). Second, adopting the philosophy of European winemakers involved a deeper connection between wine and

³ In its most basic sense, the French term *terrior* is used to explain the unique characteristics that a specific growing region (i.e., soil and climate) will have on particular grape varieties. *Terrior* cannot be understated for Old World Wines (e.g., French, Italian) because this notion is the basis of the entire French legal system (and more recently the EU regulatory system) that frames the production, labeling and sales of agricultural products. Wine is one of many products regulated by the Appellation d'origine contrôlée (AOC), which provides certifications for distinct geographical regions that share climate and soil characteristics. During the mid-1960s, this system of certifying geographical space as distinctive growing regions was embraced by wineries in parts of the United States where quality was the main objective of wine production (e.g., Napa Valley).

other forms of cultural expression, such as food, art, music, and literature. Therefore, when Mondavi established his Napa Valley winery in 1966, he initiated a series of winery sponsored cultural events such as symphony concerts (beginning in 1969), wine tours, tasting events, and educational programs that would provide a cultural experience for wine consumers. He explains, “everyday we would invite visitors in to taste our wines, and via tours and educational events, we would help them learn how to appreciate fine food and wine” (Mondavi 1999: 23). Educating consumers extended beyond the appropriate modes of appreciation for wine products, into the realm of living a “cultured” life. For instance, Mondavi sponsored the Great Chefs program (1976), which was the first culinary program in the United States to emphasize the “pairing” of wine with regional and gourmet foods. Also, various literary programs such as “California Wine History” and “Wine, Art, and Civilization” served to connect this newly designated cultural product to history and geographical locations that would emphasize the importance of *terrior* for crafting quality wines.

Perhaps somewhat ironically, Robert Mondavi’s ambitious vision has had a significant influence on both the mass production of wines in the United States and the trend toward highly specialized quality wines. So, while Mondavi championed quality wines (and was instrumental in their evolution), the multinational corporation bearing his name has been rightly accused of the homogenization and mass marketing of wine (see the recent film *Mondovino* (Nossiter 2004)). In many ways, the Robert Mondavi Corporation embodies the divergent trends in wine production in the United States, one

toward mass production and one toward specialized quality production.⁴ Many other firms in Napa Valley area also successfully balance these two extremes (e.g., Trinchero), thereby creating wines that appeal to mass consumers as well as elite consumers. Moreover, even though Napa Valley markets itself as the home of the small family winery, many of the tasting rooms in the Valley are owned by multinational corporations (including ones that market their products using phrases like “family tradition”). Outside of Napa the consolidation in the industry is even more pronounced, where six multinational alcohol corporations control over 80 percent of the U.S. wine market (Marin Institute Report 2009; also see Table 8 for a list of Top 10 wine producing companies in the U.S.).

Despite the strength of these few firms, the United States wine industry has also experienced a good deal of differentiation over recent years. As of 2007, there were over 4,929 domestic wineries registered in the U.S., with at least one in every state (MFK Research Report 2007). Still, however, California dominates the U.S. wine industry and provides over 90 percent of the wine products to the domestic consumer market (Ibid). In fact, California is ranked fourth in production as compared to other wine producing *countries*. The total revenue generated from this production and sales, totaled over \$19 billion in 2007 (Hodgen 2008). While wine is produced throughout the entire state of California, Napa Valley is widely regarded as the most prestigious viticulture area in the

⁴ Robert Mondavi Corporation was sold to Constellation Brands in 2004 for over \$1 billion. The corporation had been struggling financially for several years in part due to conflicting visions for the winery. Robert and his son Michael Mondavi wanted to invest in their elite brands while other board members (including Tim Mondavi) wanted to invest in their mass commercial brands (Personal Conversations 2007, 2008 and also see Emert 2004b). Currently the winery operates two tasting rooms on its historic Oakville property, one catering to mass consumers and one catering to elite/exclusive consumers.

country and is home to about 450 wineries (Napa Valley Vintners). In large part, this is due to the vision and influence of industry leaders (such as Robert Mondavi) and powerful trade organizations (such as Napa Valley Vintners and the Wine Institute). Additionally, Napa has been the center of technological innovation and the birthplace of the first internationally recognized U.S. wines (e.g., the infamous *1976 Paris Tasting*, when two Napa wines outperformed French wines in a blind tasting).

From this discussion, it becomes clear that Napa is a complex place, where mass-commercial wineries operate literally next door to some of the most elite wineries in the world. As explored in other sections of this dissertation, these differently oriented wineries capture a very different consumer population. However, in order to contextualize these differences I will briefly contrast the marketing strategies (and successes) used by mass-commercial wineries versus elite wineries that focus on quality.

Market Expansion vs. Quality

In contrast to strategies during the mid 20th Century (e.g., Gallo), mass-commercial firms have shifted their marketing efforts away from the “misery” market toward middle-income consumers. These changes can be linked to two important factors that have altered consumer perceptions about wine consumption, namely health and social mobility. First, many industry insiders attribute the growing acceptance of wine to the “French Paradox,” as popularized in the United States by the news show *60 Minutes* in 1991. According to a study done by Serge Renaud (of Bordeaux University), Frenchmen suffer lower incidents of coronary heart disease, despite their high rates of saturated fat intake and smoking (Simini 2000). In 1995, *60 Minutes* re-aired the same

segment based on other scientific studies that suggested a relationship between red wine consumption and lower heart disease. Then, in January 1996, the U.S Dietary Guidelines were revised to suggest that moderate alcohol consumption was beneficial to a person's health (see <http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/document/html/chapter9.htm>). Consumer researchers have found that these scientific (and widely publicized) studies on the French Paradox have fueled increases in the consumption of red wines as much as 40 percent (and an estimated 49 percent during the first 4 weeks after the first *60 Minutes* report) (Abramson 2000).⁵

What is striking about this boost in sales is the fact that health researchers are still debating the validity of the French Paradox. However, wine marketers jumped on the opportunity to exploit the original (and subsequent) reports that connected health benefits with wine consumption. As a result, according to a *U.S. Consumer Reports on Health* survey, three out of four alcohol consumers in the United States believe that wine consumption is good for their health and have made choices to incorporate it in their diet (Ibid).

Second, rather than targeting the perpetually poor, wine producers (as well as influential trade groups such as the California Wine Institute) have built upon Mondavi's vision of linking wine with sophistication and upward social mobility. Therefore, the industry has set out to educate potential new consumers by bombarding them with wine-related information that offer many opportunities to expand their experiences with wine. One example of this trend can be seen in the growing number of "wine tastings," in

⁵ Interestingly, one study found that net returns increased the most with larger sized winery (up to \$84,426 annually for the 100,000 gallon wineries) and the least for smaller wineries (5000 capacity wineries) (Dillon et al 2002).

which consumers pay a nominal fee to “taste” several (usually 4-6) wines representing specific grape varieties and growing regions. Many of these wine tasting events are located in high-end restaurants or in, what have become known as, wine bars. In wine bars, wine may not be the only alcoholic beverage on the menu, but it is the focus of the marketing, sales, and activities of the establishment. Usually wine bars offer a menu of small plate food items that “pair” well with wines and can be easily shared among patrons. Wines on the menu are most often placed within “flights,” or price categories, which include wines that share quality and price points. The wait staff offers information about the wines on the menu and demonstrates how wines “should be” consumed (e.g., standardized rituals around bottle opening and pouring the wine, appropriate stemware, deference to the person who orders the wine). In their most fundamental sense, wine tastings are intended to be educational, both in terms of offering consumers insight into new wine possibilities and in terms of building the consumers confidence around wine consumption.

For consumers who want additional educational experiences there are countless Internet sites, books and “wine classes” throughout the U.S. that teach consumers the basics of wine consumption. Moreover, the mass media have also contributed the expansion of consumer acceptance and appreciation of wines. The most obvious examples include wine-oriented publications, such as *The Wine Spectator* or *Food and Wine Magazine*, or television stations entirely devoted to food and wine, such as the *Food Network*. Beyond these clear examples, lifestyle magazines, such as *Sunset* and *Southern Living*, and television channels, such as the *Travel Channel*, frequently feature wines, wine and food pairings, wineries and/or famous viticulture areas around the world.

While these examples highlight the push toward middle and affluent social classes in the United States, the industry has also been successful in attracting lower class groups as well (e.g., meaning people who may earn over \$50,000 but who may consider themselves to be “rednecks” or “blue collar workers”). For instance, several wineries across the country have solidified ties with NASCAR, either through aggressive advertising campaigns or through purchasing racecars (e.g., Ravenswood in Sonoma, which also sports the slogan: “No Wimpy Wines”). In fact, Sonoma County recently built a state of the art raceway that is the site for large NASCAR events that are co-sponsored by local wineries (notably this raceway is on the south eastern part of Sonoma County less than 5 miles from Napa County). According to reports generated by wine research groups, these trends have had an incredible impact on wine sales in the United States. For instance, the industry calculates that 30 million Americans consume wine regularly (i.e., approximately 60 bottles per year) and that more and more adults are enjoying wine as part of their overall lifestyle (Goodhue et al. 2008).

Today, the vast majority of wine consumers in the United States are affected by the mass marketing efforts of large commercial wineries (either through brightly colored labels in supermarkets or by producer or distributor-sponsored wine tasting opportunities that link wine to upward mobility). However, based on data collected for this project, mass marketing efforts are far less influential for elite consumers, whether they are status oriented or omnivorous in their consumption patterns. In fact, both groups actively shun the wines of the masses, in favor of wines that are known for their high quality (either as determined by industry critic ratings or by their own internalized sense of taste). Therefore, there are many wineries throughout Napa Valley that avoid mass marketing

efforts, trusting that their emphasis on quality wines will generate the “right kind of consumers” (Personal Interview: David 2008). Research-driven innovation and the introduction of expensive new technologies throughout Napa Valley combine to make it one of the most technologically advanced and credentialed wine region in the world (Lapsley 1996).

A thorough explanation of the technological innovations related to viticulture and wine making are well beyond the scope of this project. Indeed, the entire process has changed so radically in the 20th Century that there are entire books related to the topic (for a survey see Lapsley 1996; Pinney 2005). What is relevant to this project, however, are the ways in which technological innovation and specialization have granted wineries the ability to produce higher quality products that gain international recognition by industry critics. The use of scientific precision by credentialed chemists, plant biologists, computer programmers have allowed for wines to become homogenized to appeal to palates of leading wine critics such as Robert Parker (i.e., Parkerization of wines).

One instructive example illustrates this point. Today, the consensus throughout the Valley holds a simple fact that quality grapes are the prerequisite for earning high ratings from industry critics and producing the highest quality wines. Not surprisingly, then, in premium AVAs such as Napa Valley, viticulture has become increasingly important because “even great winemakers cannot make good wine out of bad grapes” (Personal Conversation 2007). Therefore, there has been a huge intellectual and financial push toward improving the quality of wine grapes throughout the region. This requires more careful attention to what European producers (especially French producers) have long-referred to as *terrior*, meaning the soil and climate of where specific grapes will be

grown. Thus, winery owners, vineyard consultants and managers are investing millions of dollars in improving their understanding of how grapes will grow within specific AVAs and even within specific vineyard blocks.

Significantly, higher quality wines require more uniform grapes, meaning that the grapes from a single vineyard or block should ripen at the same rate, thus sharing the same sugar content and acidity. However, the soil type (i.e., physically and chemically) varies considerably throughout AVAs or growing blocks within vineyards. Hence, soil mapping is a major thrust in viticulture because it documents the exact chemical, physical and biological properties that will affect the rate of growth (i.e., vigor) and health of the vine. By using sensors, Environmental Visual Imaging (EVI) techniques (e.g., infrared imaging) and/or software mapping techniques (GIS or GPS) vineyard consultants and vineyard managers can assess the soil variability (e.g., soil acidity, slope, moisture) across vineyard sites. This data provides valuable information about how to plan new vineyards and how to alter the existing irrigation and fertilization practices in order to improve grape uniformity and ripening schedules (see Greenspan 2006).

On my most recent trip to Napa Valley I met a prominent vineyard consultant who took me into his clients' premium vineyards (the 100-point earning Harlan and Screaming Eagle being among them). While in the vineyard we compared the vineyard itself to color-coded topographical maps that indicated soil types (e.g., clay, volcanic, etc.) and water patterns (also see Skinner 2005). From these images, he showed me variations in irrigation techniques (e.g., quantity of water) and placards that displayed differences in chemical additions to the soil. Significantly, these variations could be as

close together as two planted vines, demonstrating the high level of precision that is achievable through these technological innovations.

As this example illustrates, occupational specialization and technological advancements that facilitate this high level of precision in planting and managing vineyards are integral to the success (and status) of premium producers of U.S. wines. In fact, from my field research, it seems that all of the wineries that earn the highest ratings from Robert Parker and *The Wine Spectator* utilize sophisticated soil-mapping techniques either as implemented by vineyard managers (and/or winery owners) or by hiring private consulting firms. Without question, the private consulting firms have the latest technology and computer software, as well as, the most credentialed consultants who provide a state of the art service at premium prices (e.g., ranging from \$100,000-\$200,000 per vineyard contract per growing season according to the above-mentioned respondent).

As this brief overview of the commercial and quality ends of the wine spectrum demonstrate, occupational categories within the wine field have expanded considerably the last half-century. As a few examples, entire academic departments within the University of California school system have been established to support viticulture and oenology, branding and marketing, and the business management of wineries (see University of California Davis or Berkley websites). Additionally, there are credentialing and licensing systems in place for various aspects of the production and distribution chain, ranging from viticulturist, to wine master, to distributor, to service staff. All of these occupations have accompanying courses of study, even though much of the service staff credentialing process is informal and based on individual initiation or the

requirements of a local context (e.g., a particular restaurant). The emergence of wine-specific magazines, journals, and other printed material also require educated professional who can offer editorials, context pieces, reviews, and other industry related information to the consumer (whether in the industry or out). Related, there has been a proliferation of legitimating occupations that provide critical evaluations of quality, criteria for authenticity, and specific wine recommendations for consumers (see below regarding the role of industry critics). Also, the expansion of global wine production and the consumption of wine within the United States shares a correlation with the growth of retail spaces tailored specifically to wine sales. Whether at wine shops or wine bars, sales and wait staff occupations have grown to provide consumers with wine as well as education about the products (see Chapter 4). Lastly, there are growing numbers of professionals (whether employed by producers, distributors or retailers) dedicated to reaching mass markets through advertising and sales campaigns.

Many of these occupational categories would not have emerged without shifts in federal and state-level regulations that provide the legal framework for the U.S. wine industry. In many ways, the industry and its successful evolution cannot be properly understood without examining the classification system that legally differentiates wine products and provides the foundation for the hierarchically organized classification system that governs wine products, geographical regions and wineries themselves. Also, as mentioned above, no other commodity in the United States faces as many restrictions or hurdles to get products in the hands of consumers than alcoholic beverages, thereby shaping the “winners” and “losers” within the industry.

Federal Regulations and Industry Classifications

By 1932, there were many social organizations, business associations and political groups dedicated to the Repeal of the 18th Amendment. In the minds of a great many influential people (including Rockefeller, who was known as a life-long abstainer from alcohol), the Great Social Experiment had failed to produce the outcomes it was intended to address. Instead, crime rates were higher and mob violence had escalated due to the illegal production, distribution, transport and sale of alcoholic beverages across the United States. Therefore, the momentum of a Repeal crystallized as part of the National Democratic Party platform during the 1932 election season, during which time Roosevelt pledged to end the Prohibition if elected as president (Lucas, 1998). Upon his election to the presidency, Roosevelt did indeed sign the 21st Amendment of the Constitution, repealing the prohibition of alcohol sales in the United States. Before he did so, the president created the Federal Alcohol Control Administration (FACA), which operated through the Department of Treasury as part of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA).

Even though the FACA was dismantled in 1935 by the Supreme Court ruling on NIRA, Congress quickly restored federal supervision over alcohol through the Federal Alcohol Act and the Federal Alcohol Administration (FAA), which also operated under the Department of Treasury (rather than the Department of Agriculture, as some critics have argued it should be governed) (see Pinney 2005). Over the course of the 20th Century the name (and some of the responsibilities) of the FAA have changed, but the actual regulations and supervision of the alcohol industry have not changed much since the enactment of the 21st Amendment. This is due to the fact that all of the organizations

(i.e., the FAA; the Department of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms; and the current Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB)⁶) have all functioned to enforce the Federal Alcohol Act, which provides the overarching regulatory framework for alcoholic beverages in the United States. While the TTB has many functions, the most relevant to this project are the legal classifications related to wine growing regions and bottle labeling requirements.

American Viticultural Areas (AVAs)

One significant regulatory issue has involved the establishment of an appellation system to classify wine growing geographical regions in the United States. In large part, these changes were initiated by the lobbying efforts of Napa Valley wineries who wanted to protect the status of the region that they had worked so hard to build. As argued by Zhao (2005) these efforts emerged as an attempt to gain status within the centuries-old French *terrior* system, in which the climate and soil of a particular place determined quality, rather than the grape vines planted or the production processes involved in making the wine. In brief, the same grape vines planted in Burgundy and Napa Valley were thought to yield very different types and quality of wine. Thus wines produced in Burgundy bore the higher status due to the legitimated international classifications of the time. Given the long history of wine production in the Old World countries of Europe, this system acted as barriers to the production and distribution of “quality” wines in “non-traditional” growing regions like the United States (Conaway 1990). By establishing

⁶ The TTB was established as part of the Homeland Security Act, which separated the organization that oversees tobacco and alcohol from the organization that regulates and enforces firearms and explosives. Alcohol is still regulated by the U.S. Treasury while Firearms and Explosives fall within the jurisdiction of the Department of Defense.

Napa Valley as the first American Viticultural Area (AVA) in the United States, wineries located there could claim a higher status position than wineries outside of a recognized growing region. This classification system has offered a unique identity to Napa Valley wines, which is accompanied by legitimacy and status within the industry (Zhao 2005).

Notably, AVAs can be either based on an entire county or by registered blocks of land within counties. Therefore, Napa Valley is a registered AVA but within Napa Valley there are 14 separate AVAs that are legally recognized by the TTB (e.g., Howell Mountain, Oakville, Stag's Leap). The Napa Valley AVA has a very diverse landscape ranging from wet in the south to dry in the north and fertile in the valley to rocky on the mountains. This extreme variation in soil and climate is part of what makes the region so interesting for wine insiders, yet it makes the Napa Valley AVA designation pretty meaningless to wine aficionados. For instance, even though much of Napa is known for its Cabernet Sauvignon grape varieties, each growing region produces a different type of Cabernet wine (e.g., some fruitier, some more tannic).

Additionally, AVAs lend themselves to different grape varieties. For instance, Oakville is especially known for its bold Cabernet Sauvignons, while Howell Mountain has an esteemed history of producing premium Merlot grapes (e.g., the infamous Duckhorn Howell Mountain Merlot). Therefore, federally sanctioned AVAs take on special significance among industry insiders or wine aficionados who work in or travel through Napa Valley. Thus, some consumers simply say that they enjoy a Napa Valley Duckhorn Merlot, which indicates that they more than likely drink Duckhorn's lower quality wine that is made from grapes from multiple vineyards across the county. Only a

very sophisticated consumer (typically either in the status-oriented or omnivorous consumer categories) would specify that they enjoy Duckhorn's Howell Mountain Merlot, which would indicate that the grapes were grown within the Howell Mountain AVA, which is known for its rocky soils that produce bolder and more tannic Merlots (or other bold red varieties).

In order to place a wine within a specific AVA category, eighty five percent of all the grapes in a wine must be grown in that bounded (and registered) territory (see the Electronic Code for Federal Regulation). Moreover, the winemaking process must be carried out within the state of that AVA. Therefore, the vast majority of wines available to consumers today across the United States are not directly affected by AVA distinctions. Instead, these wines may be labeled as simply "California wine" or "Coastal," which do not hold any legal meaning or signal any particular quality (especially since California is a very large grape producing state that is not uniformly oriented toward quality viticulture). Moreover, my research hints that only a small segment of the consumer population in the United States may really understand the complexity of AVA distinctions when differentiating and classifying wines. Therefore, it seems that federally regulated geographical classifications function to protect the interests of top-quality wineries that either grow or buy their grapes from within high-status AVAs (see Zhao 2005).⁷

⁷ Arguably, these geographic classifications also protect the interest of affluent consumers who choose wines made from these AVAs either for their higher quality or their status appeal.

Labeling

Related to the designation of AVAs in the United States, the TTB also regulates the labeling of all alcohol products. Label requirements have shifted throughout much of the 20th century and seem to have been driven by consumer safety concerns and/or the influence of wine industry trade groups (such as the Wine Institute and Napa Valley Vintners influence on the establishment of AVAs). Many industry insiders argue that these divergent concerns (e.g., a lingering moralism over alcohol consumption from the Prohibition Era and/or industry attempts to standardize its product labels in order to improve its competitive edge in the world wine market) have coalesced into the most regulated labeling requirements of any other commodity (Informal Conversations 2007, 2008).

The minimum labeling requirements include the following categories: Government Warnings (one related to health effects and one related to sulfites), Alcohol Content, Volume, Location of Bottling, Brand and Class/Type (all table wines are considered Class 1 but can be labeled several different ways, such as “sweet white table wine” or “red wine”) (LaMar 2009). All wine labels must have prior approval through the Advertising, Labeling and Formulation Division of the TTB before they are cleared to appear on bottles of wine. This allows for some uniformity across labels (i.e., the five categories mentioned above). However, the TTB allows for other information to be included on labels as long as it meets certain classification standards (as discussed below).

In terms of the required information, warnings about sulfites and potential adverse health effects of consuming wine have been required on all wine labels since the late

1980s (1987 and 1989 respectively) and were largely considered to be a direct attack on the alcohol industry by the Reagan Administrations close ties with the Christian Right. While sulfur has been linked to some negative health consequences (e.g., headaches), studies suggest that this occurs in only about 1% of the healthy population (Preiser and Preiser 2008). Moreover, not all wine makers add additional sulfites to their wine products, but because the natural fermentation process produces some sulfites, all wines (regardless of the levels) require a sulfite warning label.

Likewise, all wine requires the following Surgeon General Warning, regardless of the amount of alcohol present in the wine:

GOVERNMENT WARNING: (1) ACCORDING TO THE SURGEON GENERAL, WOMEN SHOULD NOT DRINK ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES DURING PREGNANCY BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF BIRTH DEFECTS. (2) CONSUMPTION OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES IMPAIRS YOUR ABILITY TO DRIVE A CAR OR OPERATE MACHINERY, AND MAY CAUSE HEALTH PROBLEMS.

Industry studies suggest that these two labeling requirements have not harmed the consumer demand for wine products like many people within the industry feared they would (LaMar 2005; Andrews et al. 1993; 1999). Instead, consumers rarely reference the government warning (or know what it says in its entirety) and only report being swayed from wines consumption because of their own personal experience with headaches when drinking red wine (Ibid).

The volume and alcohol content are both required on the label because of taxation issues. For obvious reasons, the Department of Treasury wants an accurate report of exactly how much wine should be taxed so all labels (or bottles) include a printed (or etched) declaration of volume within 1% of the actual contents. Significantly, this has

created a widely accepted industry standard of the 750 ml wine bottle, which has historic links with high quality fine wines around the world. Additionally, when the alcohol content of a wine is over 14% then the product is considered “fortified” (even when this level is reached through natural processes) and is taxed at 4 times the “table wine” rate. This is significant because recent trends in industry critic ratings have preferred wines with high alcohol content, such as big bold Zinfandel that have up to 17% alcohol content.⁸ Several winery owners reported that they are willing to accept the four percent tax hit because they believe they will make it up in consumer demand for these “fruit bombs” (Informal Conversations 2008).

The interesting thing about the requirements for the “brand” and “location of bottling” is that these designations do not really provide the consumer with much useful information. By “brand” the TTB allows any name created by the winery that will best market the product without providing false information (such as a brand name that suggests an inaccurate origin such as “Vino Napa” that is made from grapes grown in Arizona).⁹ Therefore, the brand does not offer any actual facts about the wine. Likewise,

⁸ Alcohol content in wine has a lot to do with when the grapes are picked from the grapevines. The longer the grapes are allowed to ripen the more sugar they have. During the fermentation process, sugar becomes alcohol. Therefore, the more sugar that is in the grapes the higher the alcohol content will be of the finished wine.

⁹ In 2006, Napa Valley Vintners (NVV, which represents over 260 Napa Valley winegrowers) won a landmark victory when the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal brought by Bronco Wine Company. Bronco had been sued by NVV for using the name Napa in its branding efforts for wines that did not have any Napa Valley grapes (Rutherford Vintners, Napa Ridge and Napa Creek). The California Supreme Court had ruled in favor of NVV, citing the law requiring wines to have at least 75 percent of grapes grown in an AVA to use the name on its label. Bronco argued that they were using Napa as a brand rather than as an AVA designation. Upon the loss of the court case, Bronco was required to stop production (and labeling) of over 16 million cases of wine and had to forfeit all wines that already bore the Napa label. The California Supreme Court and the U.S. Supreme Court decisions effectively strengthened the AVA designations in general and the Napa Valley AVA more specifically. Currently, there are 30-40 European and Chinese-owned alcohol companies that are using Napa in their branding efforts. The NVV is aggressively pursuing these companies in international courts. According to the NVV website, Napa Valley

the bottling location tells consumers very little about the wine since grapes can be harvested from anywhere and then transported to bottling facilities to be processed. In fact, the federal requirements do not even necessitate the wine producer's name to be on the label. Therefore, labels may not provide the actual name of the wine company, the grape growers or any other node of the commodity chain other than the bottling facility (which may provide crush services for hundreds of wineries).

It is common in lower quality, mass-produced wine to only include the basic information required under federal law (or the state laws where the wines are made or where they will be sold. Some of these standards are slightly more restrictive than the federal regulations). Moreover, these wine labels may include additional information that does not have any legal meaning. For instance, wineries can include words like "Reserve" on labels without them having any uniform meaning throughout the industry. Typically consumers assume that a Reserve wine is of higher quality, but there is no legal or commonly held standard of that assumption within the industry. Instead, terms such as Reserve (or Proprietary, Elite, or any other such designation) are used for marketing purposes.

Some designations that are optional do have regulatory oversight by the TTB. For example, a label can include a vintage date, meaning the year the grapes were grown, as long as 95% of the grape in the wine were harvested in that year. This designation is significant for fine wines because each growing season produces a unique harvest of grapes (e.g., with different sugar, acid, Ph levels) depending on the temperature and rainfall/moisture. Among educated wine consumers, the vintage year holds enormous

will soon be recognized by the EU with Geographic Indication (GI) status, meaning that the Napa name will be restricted from branding use in all EU member countries (see Sogg 2006).

significance because it signals what to expect from a specific type of wine. For instance, 1997 was a particularly exciting year for Cabernet Sauvignon from the Napa region. As described many times while I was in Napa, “it was a year of extremes” (Personal Interview: David 2007; Informal Conversations 2007, 2008) because of flooding in January, a dry spring that led to an early budbreak, and record-breaking heat throughout the late summer (well over 110 F in August). All of these conditions created high yields of very intense fruits (early rains led to high yields and the hot dry summer made the vines struggle for water which caused intense and bold flavors). All of this translates into better quality and higher prices for 1997 Cabernets and Merlots (which are typically intended to be bold, intense red wines) grown throughout the Napa region. Affluent consumers and industry insiders readily know this fact and will reference 1997 vintages that they have enjoyed or have in their wine collections.

Moreover, many elite/exclusive wineries have vertical selections of their wines, meaning that consumers may taste or purchase wines in vintage year sequence. For instance, tasting room hosts will pour a 2002, 2003 and a 2004 Cabernet from the same AVA (or vineyard) to allow consumers to experience the different characteristics of these wines. From my own participant observation tasting these wines, the differences are quite striking. And, some consumers might want the entire vertical library of wines for their home cellar. More common, however, are status-oriented consumers who wanted the vertical collection as a way of improving the status of their wine cellars. Several times during my data collection period, tasting room hosts in elite/exclusive wineries reported that consumers called and asked for a particular vintage to complete their wine library for

that winery (Informal Conversations 2008). From these few examples, one can easily see the importance for quality wineries to include vintage years on their wine labels.

Additionally, wineries may opt to include the specific grape varietal on the label. When wineries choose to include the vintage year and the varietal, they are also required to include the AVA where at least 75 percent of the grapes were grown. As discussed above, it is in the best interest of exclusive/elite producers to include the narrowest AVA possible because it signals distinct wine characteristics and quality to the consumer. However, in cases where the grapes are grown from across multiple AVAs, producers may provide the name of a more generalized region, such as Napa County or even California Northern Coastal.

Before moving forward with other regulations related to distribution and sales of wine products, the legally sanctioned varietal classification system needs further explanation because it has such huge significance in the United States. In the years immediately following the Repeal of Prohibition, the quality of U.S. wines was quite low and there was no agreed upon classifications for wine distinction (let alone quality). For instance, historian Thomas Pinney (2005) describes the wine competition at the 1939 Golden Gate Expo by explaining that none of wine types that were submitted to judges actually meant anything:

If there was no discoverable standard uniting the wildly varying samples of a given wine type, there was conversely, no way to separate the various wines called by different names: riesling, hock, moselle, and chablis might all be effectively indistinguishable. Some white wines were dry, some were slightly sweet. But one looked in vain for any reliably distinguishing characteristics. As for the red wines called burgundy, claret, and chianti, it was equally impossible to distinguish among them by any analytical test... the consumer had no way of knowing... what kind of wine he is getting except that it is red—unless it happened to be white (91).

In other words, there was no clear set of categories that allowed the buyer to distinguish one wine and another, whether on the basis of shared characteristics or quality standards. In large part, this was due to the fact that there were no shared industry practices or legal standards in place that regulated how much of the wine must be made with a particular varietal to bear that distinction. Most wineries throughout the country labeled their wines following Old World names of European regions (e.g., Burgundy or Chablis). Additionally, the industry was still plagued with an oversupply of poor quality grapes (often using the left over raisin grapes to blend with bulk wines). Taken together, this meant that poor quality wines were labeled using generic names that shared little uniformity in styles, thus rendering these classifications useless to consumers.

As several influential individuals and trade organizations (e.g., Wine Institute) attempted to move U.S. wines in the direction of quality, they recognized the supreme importance of implementing a classification system that would allow consumers a consistent means of product differentiation. A well-known and reputable historian and insider to the industry, Frank Schoonmaker, was the first to vigorously advocate for basing the U.S. classification system on grape varietals (see Schoonmaker 1964). In a widely circulated (and often referenced) brochure, Schoonmaker urged people from throughout the wine commodity chain to advocate for federal policies that would make varietal designations the dominant classification system in the United States. For instance he writes:

If you are: 1) A grape grower in one of the superior districts of California. 2) A wine producer interested in quality. 3) A distributor convinced that the world moves. 4) A retailer restaurant owner or hotel manager having a better class of clientele. You will find the following worth reading...

Frank Schoonmaker & Company, in the last three years, has acquired the reputation of being the champion, through hell and high water, of something known as VARIETAL WINES—wines made entirely, or in large part, from a single variety of grape marketed under the name of that grape and under the name of the district, county or valley, mountain range or hillside, where that grape is grown (Schoonmaker 1942 as published in the Wine Institute's 75th Anniversary of the Repeal Presentation 2008).

The same brochure then addresses each group within the wine chain (i.e., grower, producer, distributor, retailer), making the case for them to adopt varietal designations as their standard practice. For instance, to the producers he writes,

Some of your wines are better than others, and you should get a premium price for these superior wines. So, we urge you to keep your superior varietals apart, to give special care to such wines, to age them and bottle them yourselves, and to sell them for what they are worth. You will be able to do so when the public comes to understand the meaning of varietal names" (Ibid).

Notice that his plea to producers emphasizes the necessity of classifications for improving quality and for generating market demand for higher quality products. Indeed, as varietal classifications have become the standard for the U.S wine industry (as well as for all New World producing countries such as Australia, South Africa and Argentina) both wine quality and consumer demand have followed suit. In fact, the classifications for wine quality through industry critics (e.g., Robert Parker) rely upon varietal distinctions because they assess wines within their grape category, whereby wines such as a Pinot Noir are evaluated based on what a Pinot Noir "should" taste like. This evolution into varietal labeling was a slow process beginning with Schoonmaker during

the 1940-50 and culminating in 1973 when the TTB took over the oversight and enforcement of varietal distinctions that require 75 percent of wines to have a particular grape varietal in order to bear that label. Notably, however, by the time the TTB (at that time the ATF) began regulating varietal designations, the practice of using grape names in the United States was already becoming common practice among quality wine producers. In Napa Valley, for instance, almost all the producers of fine wines were using varietal labeling by the mid-1960s (e.g., Robert Mondavi, Charles Krug, Andre Tchelistcheff the infamous winemaker at Beaulieu Vineyards) (see Lapsley 1996). Then, this practice trickled down to the mass markets in 1974, when Gallo (which produced 1/3 of all wines sold in the United States) decided to market its products using varietal names (McCoy 2005).

Beyond Legal Classifications

Without question, the varietal classification system enforced by the TTB seems to have fulfilled the purpose Schoonmaker envisioned. Namely, it promoted advancements in quality grape growing that were necessary to move the U.S. wine industry forward and it provided consumers a practical framework to differentiate wine products. However, perhaps equally significant for this project is the importance of legal designations (e.g., AVA and labeling requirements) for the institutionalization of a hierarchically organized classification system related to wine value and quality. As suggested above, the entire wine industry in the United States has evolved around status distinctions that clearly separate “worthy” wines from “unworthy” wines. And, even though federal classifications do not provide a sanctioned hierarchy for products, numerous studies have

highlighted the way in which these categories have taken on vertical significance. For instance, (Zhao 2005) argues that the categories that define grape varietals, geographical regions (AVAs), and vintage year confer identities upon wines, thereby allowing consumers the ability to evaluate and rank products based on these distinctions. Likewise, Benjamin and Podolny (1999) emphasize the fact that particular geographic origins (AVAs) provide the basis for a durable and hierarchical status order within the U.S. wine industry. Moreover, they find that choices about quality “are not independent of the tangible status ordering in which market participants are situated. A firm’s position in the status ordering influences the attention that others pay to quality, their assessment of quality, and their regard for the product more generally” (1999: 585). In other words, the federal regulations provide the framework for a relatively stable classification system that not only identifies wines based on geographical regions, vintage year and varietals, but it also provides cues for consumers and other wineries about value (and status) within this organizational field.

Other “signs” or cues about vertical classifications emerge from institutional actors, such as critics, within the industry itself. These “experts” score wines based on a standardized set of criteria that suggests the product’s quality. While there are numerous critics within the industry, Benjamin and Podolny (1999) emphasize the convergent validity of experts who share an overarching classification system (most often on a 50-100 point scale). Moreover, these critics have a significant effect on price (Shrewbridge 1998) buying patterns (Rivlin 2006) and the status of wines and wineries within the industry (Benjamin and Podolny 1999).

Robert Parker has emerged as the industry's leading expert and has a significant influence on buying patterns in the United States. In fact, his biographer argues, "[Parker] has saved wineries from bankruptcy and turn winemakers into millionaires and unknown wines into sought-after collectables, but his low scores for other wines have meant lower prices and diminished reputations" (McCoy 2005: 3). Not surprisingly, then, some wineries have adopted winemaking strategies that appeal to the palate of the influential critic—otherwise known as "Parkerizing" their wines¹⁰ in order to ensure that they sell at premium prices. His ratings and reviews are published in the bi-monthly magazine, *The Wine Advocate*, which can be purchased in retail stores across the U.S..¹¹

A second influential source of wine scores comes from the monthly lifestyle magazine, *The Wine Spectator*, which provides 50-100 point ratings for thousands of wines per year. In 2005, *The Wine Spectator* reached approximately two million readers within predominantly affluent consumer groups. While this publication provides reviews and ratings for wines around the world, the magazine is known for offering disproportional attention to California wines. A panel of wine critics, who specialize in particular varietals and wine regions, score the wines based on blind tastes.¹² The power of the magazine to guide consumer choice has been documented by industry studies (*Wine Opinion* 2007) and has been substantiated in data collection for this project as well.

¹⁰ "Parkerized" wines are ones with high alcohol content, complex flavors, and lots of ripe fruit.

¹¹ Notably, this magazine does not sell advertisements, thereby minimizing the perception that his ratings are led by financial incentives (Rilvin 2006).

¹² In contrast to Parker's *Wine Advocate*, *The Wine Spectator* sells advertisements, thereby raising speculation among winery representatives about the objectivity of some of these scores (Personal Interviews: Jack 2006, Cathy 2006, John 2007).

Perhaps one of the most commonly cited examples occurred in 2004 when a well-known critic (i.e., James Laube) for *The Wine Spectator* detected 2,4,6-trichloroanisole (TCA) in a wine produced by Chateau Montelena, which is one of the most historically renowned wineries in Napa Valley (Emert 2004). This winery enjoys a strong reputation in the industry and is perhaps most well-known for its victory in the 1976 Paris Tasting, which effectively altered the international perception of California (and U.S.) wines. However, with this poor review (69 points), not only did some consumers cancel orders and return unopened wines, the winery spent millions of dollars upgrading the century old wine cellar. Upon a recent visit to the property, the wine tasting hosts still referenced this “debacle” and reassured consumers about the steps taken to correct any problem detected by the wine critic (Personal Observation 2008).

While professional critics such as Robert Parker and experts at *The Wine Spectator* provide scores for wines themselves, they also link wines with the wineries or wine makers who produce these goods. Therefore, these experts not only provide consumers scoring information about particular products (e.g., 1997 Estate Screaming Eagle Cabernet Sauvignon), but they also grant legitimacy to specific wine organizations (i.e., Screaming Eagle) or winemakers (i.e., Heidi Barrett). Wineries and/or winemakers that consistently produce a 95+-point wine (or a history of wines in the high 90s) enjoy a much higher status than wineries or wine makers that consistently earn scores in the 80s or low 90s.

Some of the most interesting findings related to this project involve when wine producers utilize classifications (e.g., as markers of success) and when they attempt to transcend them (e.g., as overly rigid). One example of an attempt to “move beyond”

classifications involves the legal and expert use of varietal designations. While the practice of using varietal names as a standard classification is commonplace in New World producing countries, European countries have continued their tradition of using regional distinctions. This has led to different styles of wine being produced in New World vs. Old World countries. For instance, using regional distinctions allows winemakers much more flexibility in blending different varietals to create unique wines with more complexity than a single varietal can offer. In fact, some of the most expensive and prestigious wines of the world are Bordeaux reds, which are allowed to include a blend of grapes common to the Bordeaux region of France (i.e., Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petit Verdot, Malbec, and Carmenere).

Because of the labeling requirements that protect varietal designations, winemakers (and wineries) in the U.S have been unable to make these Bordeaux style wines and still include the varietal names on the labels (since none of the single varietals would comprise 75 percent of the wine). For obvious reasons, high-end producers did not want to simply label their highest quality grape blends as “table red,” which could undoubtedly be confused for low quality bulk wine. Therefore, in 1989, a group of Napa Valley wineries trademarked a label designation called “Meritage” (a name that blends “merit” and “heritage”) that would provide a legal framework for making Bordeaux inspired wines. They created three significant requirements for the use of the designation, which were intended to ensure quality and “authentic” wines (for a complete discussion see www.meritagewine.org).

First, grape varietals must be the same ones used in French Bordeaux wines (listed above) and may not include more than 90% of a particular varietal (e.g., Cabernet

Sauvignon). Second, wineries cannot produce more than 25,000 cases of Meritage per year, thereby making sure that they are not mass produced or mass marketed. Third, quality is ensured because these wines must be the first or second most expensive wines produced by the winery. Currently, there are over 250 member wineries of the Meritage Alliance, ranging from elite/exclusive wineries to corporately owned wineries that offer high-end reserve wines (e.g., Robert Mondavi). Significantly, the TTB does not oversee the use of the term Meritage on labels, but instead considers it part of the “brand” designation, which is used exclusively for marketing purposes. Therefore, legal enforcement of the brand name falls under the jurisdiction of U.S. Department of Trademarks and Patents (Gilberti 2004).

The designation Meritage is significant for this project for two reasons. First, more and more wineries in Napa Valley are making exceptional quality and very expensive (i.e., over \$100 per bottle) blended wines that challenge the varietal regulations enforced by the TTB. So, while in the 1950-70s the push by quality producers was toward varietal designations, currently the trend is toward quality-blended wines (whether in the Bordeaux, Super Tuscan or Cuvee styles). The incorporation of several high quality grape varieties into a single wine allows for many more opportunities for the winemaker to express her/his creativity as an artisan and tends to create a much more interesting and balanced wine (Informal Conversations with winemakers and winery owners 2008). Arguably, however, this recent evolution in Napa winemaking would not have been possible without the push toward varietal designations, which forced (allowed) vintners to radically improve the quality of their grapes during the mid to late 20th century.

Second, these blended wines cluster at the very top of the quality continuum in Napa Valley, whether they are produced by elite wineries or mass commercial firms that produce higher end wines for affluent consumers. Not surprisingly, then, only the most affluent consumer groups are aware of what terms like Meritage actually means. And, in most cases, these consumers prefer to talk about blended wines of this style as “Bordeaux blends,” even as they are aware that they cannot legally call them such under the World Trade Organization regulations that govern the use of specific Geographical Indicators (GI). Therefore, it seems that the copyright of Meritage offers producers a way to distinguish their quality-blended wines (with less than 75% of any particular varietal) from mass-produced blended wines of much lower quality. Likewise, it offers knowledgeable consumers (who are affluent status oriented and/or have high levels of cultural capital) the ability to know with pretty high certainty the style of wine they will experience when choosing a Meritage blend. In contrast, consumers in the mass commercial and limited commercial tasting rooms were unaware that this designation existed, and either used generic terms like “red” (in mass commercial tasting rooms) or followed the more commonly accepted single varietal classifications when discussing their favorite wines (e.g., Pinot Noir).¹³

This discussion illustrates that while the varietal labeling restrictions have shaped the industry (i.e., creating comparative categories for consumers and industry critics to

¹³ Interview data suggests that consumers from limited commercial wineries seemed to distance themselves from blended wines because they believed that they were mass produced “red table wines.” However, because of the data collection process (interviewing limited commercial consumers before I understood the significance of Meritage or other high-end blended styles in Napa), I did not have the appropriate follow up questions that would have probed this line of inquiry. However, interviews with omnivorous consumers clearly demonstrated a patterned preference for blended wines that many critics would say are “unclassifiable.”

evaluate wines), artisan winemakers and consumers with the most internalized sense of taste are now trying to move beyond the rigid parameters of this classification system by developing branding strategies that preserve quality (and symbolic boundaries) while encouraging creative expression.

Distribution and Sales

Beyond these federal regulations, the 21st Amendment grants individual states the right to determine their own laws around the regulation of alcohol. Therefore, many states continued to maintain state-level prohibitions (Mississippi was the final states to repeal its prohibition on alcohol in 1966). State level jurisdiction has created a complex maze of regulatory laws and taxes that alcohol producers must navigate. This makes the interstate transport of wines incredibly complicated, which has led to several important court cases that pit the 21st Amendment against the Interstate Commerce Clause and Sherman's Anti-Trust Act (e.g., *California Retail Liquor Dealers Association v. Midcal Aluminum, Inc*; *Bacchus Imports, Ltd. v. Dias*; *Brown-Forman Corp. V. South Carolina Alcoholic Beverage Control Commission* (see <http://www.wineinstitute.org/initiatives/stateshippinglaws/background> for other recent examples of cases that involve wineries). Simply stated, states want to maintain regulatory control of alcohol (including its sale and marketing) and protect state agricultural interests through taxation for imported alcohol products. Wineries (and other alcohol producers) want the freedom of commercial transport across state lines, advertising and sale that have been afforded to every other commodity in the United States.

The 1933 Repeal of the Prohibition designated wine as a controlled substance and subjected it to a three-tier distribution system designed to mediate the transport of wines from producers to retailers. These regulations restrict the direct sale of alcohol consumers and require a middle party (e.g., a distributor or the state) to be an intermediary between the producer and the sale of the product. Because of the sole authority states exercise over alcohol, individual states enact this system differently. For instance, in ‘alcoholic beverage control states,’¹⁴ the government becomes the distributor and/or the retailer. In other states, the government only operates as an enforcer of the laws that regulate private corporate distributors who act as the intermediaries. In these states, retailers purchase alcoholic beverages directly from wholesale distributors who have been given exclusive rights by producers to market their product within a certain geographical space (e.g., only one distributor can carry Mondavi wines in Atlanta markets). Not surprisingly, these state laws have created a regulatory context favorable to third party intermediaries (such as wholesale distributors that cannot be partially or wholly owned by any company owning alcohol production facilities),¹⁵ which effectively shape the distribution networks and the availability of wine products in local markets across the United States. Not surprisingly, then, wholesale distributors have also become key players in legal battles between states and local wineries, as their economic interest lie in maintaining the three-tier system.

¹⁴ "Control states" include Alabama, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wyoming (Wine Institute).

¹⁵ While wholesalers cannot be owned by wine producers, Gallo’s success during the mid-20th Century was made possible because Earnest Gallo gained financial control over “independent” distributors. Once under Gallo’s control, a distributor would vigorously promote Gallo wines to their retail customers. Despite trouble with the Federal Trade Commission during the 1970s for “exclusive marketing policies,” Gallo was allowed to continue this practice by negotiating to place Gallo sales representatives within wholesaler organizations (see Pinney 2005).

To complicate matters, wholesale distributors and retailers have faced increasing consolidation in recent years. For instance, from 1990 to 2000, the number of wine wholesalers and distributors in the U.S. declined more than 50%, mostly through mergers and acquisitions (MKF Research Report 2007). Likewise, retail consolidation is also on the rise as “big box” retailers (e.g., Sam’s Club) are becoming the largest outlets for wine products. Together, these consolidations translate into a more mass produced and homogenous product offerings for consumers and fewer ways for producers to get their products to national markets.

The legally sanctioned power of alcohol wholesale distributors and these trends toward consolidation create two related hurdles for small wineries. First, large mass commercial producers (e.g. Constellation Brands) that own multiple brands (or wineries) within their corporate portfolio have easy access to supermarket shelves and restaurants around the country. They can readily incorporate new products into their distribution network using pre-existing relationships with large distributors (e.g., Southern Wine and Spirits of America). In contrast, small wineries have a very difficult time entering new markets outside of their local region. In fact, if a distributor is the sole wholesaler for an entire state and they decide not to carry a particular wine, then that winery is cut off from the entire state’s consumer market. This effectively limits availability of diverse wine products in national markets and solidifies brand recognition (and consumer allegiance) for major wine producers.

This process was readily apparent during my data collection period in Napa (and conversations in Atlanta), in which many consumers demonstrated a clear awareness of multinational brands that they could easily find in supermarkets (or liquor stores) across

the country. This pattern was evident across price points, meaning that even the most affluent consumers reported that their “daily wines” included “fine wines” (\$10+ per bottle) owned by multinationals such as Constellation Brands (e.g., Ravenswood, Blackstone or Franciscan).¹⁶ Significantly, then, the three tier distribution system preferences mass commercial wineries by limiting the availability of wines from small producers. Moreover, consumers must be actively engaged in learning about wines from smaller wineries if they are to ever increase their knowledge of non-commercial (i.e., artisan) products.

The three-tier system creates a second barrier for small wineries because states inconsistently ban the direct sale of wine to consumers from wineries themselves. For instance, in states like California, wineries (and breweries) are allowed to sell products that they make on-site in tasting rooms, retail shops, or restaurants. Most states have adopted this legal position because it can boost tourism dollars for local agriculturally based products (e.g., beer, wine, whiskey). Even among these states, some have restricted (or prohibited) the transport and direct sale of alcohol to residents who live in their state from wineries from outside states. This means that someone from Alabama who is visiting California can buy directly from wineries while in the tasting rooms but they cannot have wines shipped to them in their home state. Not only does this limit tasting room sales (Informal Conversations 2007, 2008), but it also means that these visitors

¹⁶ Differences in state taxation also affects distributor choices for what wines they carry and what wines consumers will purchase. For instance, California charges a \$.20 tax on table wine while states such as Florida, Alabama and Georgia charge \$2.25, \$1.70 and \$1.51 respectively (<http://www.taxfoundation.org/taxdata/show/245.html>). Distributors who operate in these states report that not all markets will bear this increase for expensive wines, meaning that consumers are more likely to buy a \$12 bottle of wine (after taxes) which eliminates products that retail at \$12 in other markets (Informal Conversation with Empire sales representative, 2007).

cannot join Wine Clubs, which is a major way that consumers gain valuable wine/winery-related information, discounts and access to limited release wines.

Small wineries have brought legal challenges to the three-tier distribution system in recent years, which culminated in a landmark Supreme Court Case entitled *Granholm v Heald* (for an excellent summary of this case see <http://topics.law.cornell.edu/supct/cert/03-1116>). In a 5 to 4 decision, the Supreme Court ruled that the enactment of the 21st Amendment in New York and Michigan (which allowed direct sales to consumers from in state wineries but prohibited direct sales from out of state wineries) was unconstitutional because it violated the Commerce Clause of the Constitution (prohibiting states to enact anti-competitive laws that disadvantage sellers in other states). Significantly, though, the Court's decision upheld state level authority to regulate alcohol any way they chose, even as it disallowed them to do so in a way that would unfairly disadvantage out of state producers. In other words, the states could choose to ban direct sales altogether (including in-state wineries) or they could allow all direct sales to consumers. Individual states have reacted differently to this ruling, with some (such as Michigan, which does not have a large in-state wine industry) banning all direct sales and others (such as New York, which has a thriving in-state wine industry) opening up direct sales from wineries in other states. Other states have responded by altering the application process and raising fees or placing household case limits that make direct shipping cumbersome and cost ineffective for wineries to seek access to these markets (see <http://wi.shipcompliant.com/WhoShipsWhere.aspx> for a full listing of requirements, fees and limits).

Small wineries are clearly affected by these direct shipping restrictions and trends toward consolidation; however, most respondents in Napa argued that mid-sized producers are the most disadvantaged by the three-tier system. While elite/exclusive wineries limit in their production capabilities (in order to increase quality) they rely on insider networks (e.g., friends of friends) or high critic scores (among wine aficionados or status conscious consumers) to sell products. In fact, they may even place sales limits on wines in order to hold back enough products to reach more consumers (and arguably to maintain the status of these highly coveted wines). However, limited commercial wineries are situated in between insider consumers in search of “cult” quality and status products (whether based on internalized tastes or 96+ point critic scores) and consumers who are reliant on increasingly consolidated distribution networks that are dominated by mass commercial wineries. As argued by Napa based industry analysts, “Except for a few top (A) brands, most mid sized wineries are being locked out of the current three tier distribution system” (Hinman and Steinthal 2005). An outcome of this regulatory system is an increasing consolidation of the wine industry, in which mid-sized producers are likely candidates for buy-outs by multi-national beverage companies (Sparker 2002). As will be discussed in Chapter 4, these are the wineries oriented toward educating consumers about industry classifications and “legitimately sanctioned” wine appreciation. As these wineries are bought by large corporations, it will be interesting to see if tasting rooms shift to incorporate mass commercial marketing strategies (e.g., large retail spaces, segregated wine tasting spaces) intended to capture the largest market share.

Conclusion

While there are many more historical details related to the U.S. wine industry, and Napa Valley more specifically, this chapter offers a focused context for the rest of this research project. Namely, it highlights a remarkable evolution of an industry that has arisen from the dust of Prohibition to one of the most dynamic wine industries in the world. In fact, the U.S. wine industry had a \$162 billion economic impact in 2007, which included 1.1 full time jobs and \$33 billion in annual salaries (MFK Research Report 2007). While the vast majority of these dollars are concentrated within a few multinational corporations that market to mass consumers, small producers have managed to target niche markets of elite consumers who understand and expect high quality wines. Federal and state-level regulations have shaped the ability of these quality-oriented producers to thrive, sometimes working in their favor (as with the establishment of AVAs or varietal labeling) and sometimes working against them (as with the three tier distribution system). Specifically, classifications have been key to the success of the quality oriented producers in Napa Valley for three reasons. 1) They have provided legal protection of Napa Valley, and independent AVAs within Napa Valley, which have distinct growing conditions and are known for technological innovation and high quality wine. Without question, the establishment of legally sanctioned AVAs has firmly established Napa at the top of the hierarchy of viticulture regions in the U.S (and around the world). 2) They have provided legal protection for the use of the vintage year, which would have different growing conditions (e.g., wet vs. dry). Over time, both of these requirements have pushed Napa Valley vintners and winemakers alike toward an appreciation of *terrior*, as it is traditionally understood in Old World countries. In theory,

this increases the potential diversity and complexity of Napa Valley wines (unless winery owners prefer to homogenize their wines in accordance with the palates of industry critics). 3) They have provided legal protection for the use of varietal labeling, which forced vintners to improve grape quality and winemakers to learn to work with specific varietals. The establishment of grape varietals as the normative standard of product differentiation offered a framework that was intelligible to new wine consumers and granted a foundation for the establishment of quality standards (via industry critics). Thus, while varietal labeling requirements have increased quality they have also threatened the creativity of winemakers who wish to blend high quality grape of multiple types. Elite wineries have found creative alternatives to these requirements (e.g., Meritage brand), even though these wines have not yet made their way to mass consumers.

As mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, in order for classifications to have social meaning they must provide a widely accepted ranking for cultural products. The following chapter turns to the research approach I used to investigate how these classifications are enacted by service workers and consumers in a particular context, namely tasting rooms in Napa Valley, California. More specifically, Chapter 3 will explore the qualitative methods I used to understand the different contexts of interaction that create distinctive wine cultures for differently oriented wineries and consumers who visit this agro-tourist region.

CHAPTER 3

IN VINO VERITAS: RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA

Qualitative Research

In its most robust sense, qualitative research focuses on the study of people in their natural settings by trying to make sense of the meanings that they bring to specific phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). This type of approach was best suited for this project since it allowed for an investigation of the context-specific processes of constructing meaning about wine and wine culture among differently situated consumers and service workers (Creswell 1998; Lofland and Lofland 2004). More specifically, a qualitative research orientation provides tools to uncover the subjective experiences and interpretations of wine held by people who were part of the “wine world,” whether as consumers or producers of the commodity.

Within the qualitative research tradition there are a number of philosophical considerations that orient a research project, namely its ontological, epistemological, and methodological underpinnings. Without going into detail on any of these three foundational concerns, this project begins from a constructivist interpretative paradigm that assumes multiple realities (its ontology), a subjectivist epistemology (researcher and respondent co-create understanding) and an empirically rooted methodology (data can be readily observed or uncovered in the natural world) (see Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Lincoln and Guba 1994; Lincoln and Guba 2000). Within this interpretive paradigm the researcher goes beyond actual observable phenomena so as to uncover the meanings

associated with particular actions (e.g., why a person buys a particular wine or chooses to visit a specific winery) (Schwandt 2000).

This study also contributes to the rich body of research conducted within cultural sociology, meaning that while the focus of the project highlights wine as a commodity the overall thrust of the research is concerned with the “whole way of life” of people in Napa Valley. This wine culture includes the dense network of embedded practices and representations (e.g., texts, images, speech, codes of behavior, etc.) that organize social life and give meaning to the way in which people interact with wine and their fellow wine enthusiasts. Rather than assuming that wine culture in Napa is monolithic, this project attempts to uncover the subtle boundaries that encircle social groups, as well as how individuals understand themselves as participants within these groups through their expressions (e.g., verbal and nonverbal) of identification and/or social distancing. Also, consistent with other studies in cultural sociology, this project investigates a “site,” which serves as the intersection of complex interactions and interpretations that are shaped by localized factors (e.g., the organization of wineries themselves and norms in tasting rooms) as well as forces that influence the region from outside (e.g., critic reviews and a constant flux of tourists) (see Frow and Morris 2000).

Case Study and Grounded Theory Research

Research on a particular field site has commonly been referred to as a case study, whereby the researcher concentrates on an integrated and bounded system that has an internal logic and that creates predictable patterns of behavior (Yin 1984; Stake 2000). While many researchers find Napa Valley interesting in its own right, this project uses

this field site as a way to provide insight into theoretically rooted questions about how and when symbolic and social boundaries are created, maintained and transgressed.

Thus, this project operates as an instrumental case study, through which we may learn the extent to which wine functions as a site of social reproduction (see Stake 2000).

Using Napa Valley as a single case has benefits and drawbacks for understanding the reproduction of symbolic and social boundaries. The obvious drawback of this type of single case study rests in questions about the research's generalizability to other possible sites of investigation (whether related to wine consumption elsewhere in the U.S. or to other cultural products). The purpose of this research, however, is to demonstrate how existing theories and the findings from previous empirical studies relate to the reproduction of symbolic and social boundaries in this particular case setting (Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg 1991; Miles and Huberman 1994).

By thoroughly investigating one site (i.e., wine tasting rooms in Napa Valley), I was able to engage a complex wine culture, complete with the nuanced codes of conduct, styles of communication, and ways of interacting that reveal clear social patterns. As outlined by Yin (1984), I used all six sources of evidence recommended for case study research, namely direct observation, participant observation, interviews, documentation, physical artifacts and historical sources (e.g., books on the area). These data sources provide a robust account of the Napa Valley field site and offer a comprehensive look at the dynamic social interactions related to wine production and consumption in this area (Each method will be discussed in detail later in this chapter).

It was through spending time there observing people in coffee shops, restaurants or on patios adjacent to wineries that I could piece together patterns of what cars people

drove (as rentals or not), how people dressed, ways they talked to one another, how they groomed themselves, ways they told inside jokes, who they made fun of, how they perceived the winery they were visiting, and where they would be having dinner. This kind of silent observation of their lives revealed much about social boundaries and about how they understood themselves to “fit” in Napa or at particular wineries. Moreover, the extended time I spent in the field provided the foundation for building rapport with key informants who I have now known for several years. The longevity of these relationships provides assurance about the accuracy of the information they provided, and has also allowed me to routinely check information provided by other informants and my own interpretations of the data.

In addition to ensuring validity of the data through multiple conversations with respondents, I also used other sources of information from Napa to ensure accuracy. Many qualitative researchers refer to this process as triangulation, whereby a researcher utilizes multiple data sources to clarify meanings and to verify the reliability of patterns and interpretations (Denzin 1989; Miles and Huberman 1994). I used a variety of strategies for triangulation, namely written sources such as national publications (e.g., *The Wine Spectator*), books on Napa Valley and the U.S. wine industry, Internet sources on California Wines (e.g., California Wine Institute), local marketing advertisements (e.g., brochures), Napa wine guides (e.g., weekly publications that feature wineries and offer a listing of upcoming events), winery-specific consumer publications (e.g., tasting notes). I also triangulated data through formal and informal conversations with many different people within the Napa wine industry, including winery owners, representatives from the Napa Valley Vintner’s Association, tasting room hosts, public relations staff

from large wineries, private marketers, vintners, wine makers, wine writers, consultants, wait staff in restaurants, bartenders and a whole range of consumers of wine inside and outside of Napa. In addition to checking data and my interpretation through local sources, during the course of my three years of field research, I invited two qualitative sociologists to join me for participant observation. Both people were familiar with the literature that frames this project and were very helpful in discussing my observations and perceptions of emergent patterns. The extent of this data collection, triangulation and data checking provides confidence in the accuracy of this case under investigation.

One of the most important factors to consider when conducting case study research is which case to choose (Miles and Huberman 1994; Strauss and Corbin 1990). For this project, I chose to focus on the most *influential case* in the United States (see Seawright and Gerring 2008). This means that while Napa may not be representative of wine consumption in all parts of the country, it carries historical significance as the birthplace of the U.S. wine industry, it remains the most highly regarded region in the U.S. for quality wines, and it shapes the rest of the U.S wine industry through its large volume of production, primacy for industry critics and high status within the international wine economy. In fact, in the United States, the most celebrated and esteemed “wine world” can be found in Napa Valley, where wine functions as the center of commerce, leisure, culture and social relationships (whether professional or personal). As I grew to call it during three years of field research, there exists a “Napa bubble,” in which one becomes engulfed in a culture that is distinctly wine-centered. From billboards on the side of the road, to restaurant menus, to conversations on the street corners, the

consumption, production and distribution of wine become the focus of attention for local residents as well as visiting tourists to the Valley. Therefore, by using Napa Valley as the field site for this case study, I was able to enter fully into a clearly bounded culture of wine production and consumption where people interact entirely around this cultural product. This provided the best possible site to explore the ways in which symbolic and social boundaries are created, maintained and traversed.

As mentioned above, the purpose of this research strives to contribute to the body of empirical and theoretical research that investigates symbolic and social boundaries. Thus, this project builds on the qualitative tradition of grounded theory research, in which there is a continuous comparison of data and the orienting theoretical tradition beginning with data collection (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987). While there are several divergent trends in grounded theory research, I utilize a combined objectivist and constructionist approach to this project. This means that while I assume that there is an external reality that can be uncovered through data collection and systematic analysis, I also contend that the interactions between the respondents and me (as a researcher and co-participant) shaped that reality as part of a social process (see Charmaz 2000). This dual approach provides validity and reliability of the findings through systematic testing and extension of existing explanatory theories (e.g., using identified variables and systematic data collection procedures and analysis), while still offering a reflexive awareness that I exist as the subjective “human instrument” (Guba and Lincoln 1981).

Therefore, I began with a priori specifications of theoretical constructs generated from previous research in the study of the production of culture (see Peterson and Anand 2004), artistic classifications (see DiMaggio 1987), cultural capital and tastes (see

Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1997, 1998) and symbolic and social boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2004). As the research unfolded, I augmented this deductive start with a more inductive approach in order to extend and refine theories on how people use and interpret wine and when these interactions reproduce symbolic or social boundaries in Napa Valley. For instance, at the beginning of the project I created a theoretical diagram that attempted to illustrate similarities in the literature on production and consumption of cultural products [See Figure 1]. DiMaggio's (1987) four dimensions of Artistic Classification Systems (i.e., differentiation, hierarchy, universality and symbolic potency) were featured prominently in the overall design of the project so as to understand how (and to what extent) symbolic and social boundaries are reproduced in Napa Valley wine culture.

On the left side of the page, I showed the field of production in which the cultural capital of intermediaries (i.e., tasting room hosts) and the orientation of the organization she/he worked within (i.e., mass produced, limited commercial, elite) affected the meanings they attributed to wine as well as the performance rituals and communication exchanges that they expressed around wine. These factors, as well as intervening variables such as critics, market orientation of the winery, and the person's occupation within the winery would then affect how and to what degree that symbolic boundaries were maintained around wine products within tasting rooms. On the right side of the diagram, I included a similar map indicating that the cultural capital of consumers (along other indicators of their class position) would affect the meaning they attribute to wine as well as their communication and mode of appreciation. Again, I suspected that markets, critics, and the person's occupation would have an intervening effect on their beliefs and

performances around wine. Investigating the field of production (e.g., wineries, tasting room hosts) and the field of consumption (e.g., consumers) together would enable me to understand how and to what degree symbolic boundaries were maintained around wine products within tasting rooms and if and when this translated into social boundaries for consumer groups. From this diagram, I then developed a research methods table, which outlined the research questions, data sources, measures, and how I would operationalize these measures [see Table 2 and Table 3]. From this chart, I developed an interview guide for tasting room hosts and for consumers, which probed the four dimensions of symbolic boundary maintenance needed for the enactment of Artistic Classifications [see Table 4, Table 5 and Table 6].

These theoretical categories provided the original underpinnings of the project, yet, I allowed details of research design shift as the project unfolded (see Charmaz 2000). There were two important benefits to this flexible research approach. First, the adaptability of the questions throughout the data collection process allowed me to fine-tune my inquiries over time as I learned more about wine, Napa Valley (e.g., tourist opportunities, restaurants, hotels/inns, etc.), the U.S. wine industry, the production and market process, as well as, consumer interests. As an initial outsider to wine culture, many of my questions shifted as I learned what tasting room hosts, consumers and other industry personnel believed was most relevant to share about how they understand wine, marketing, critics, and the landscape of the wineries in the valley. Moreover, I was able to tailor questions to recent articles in industry publications and/or critic reviews, making the questions relevant to current wine knowledge and market trends.

Second, a less rigid interview protocol accommodated the diverse styles of interaction, dress, mannerisms, interests and knowledge about wine expressed by differently oriented consumers, tasting room hosts and other industry insiders. This meant that I could tailor the interview questions (and the way I worded the questions) to people who had a very different knowledge of wine, information about Napa or levels of affluence. For instance, if I asked one consumer what kind of wine he preferred and he said “red” and another consumer said “full-bodied, fruit forward Merlots with a relaxed tannic structure” then my interview questions could be adapted to reflect the difference in wine interests and knowledge.

Thus, by the end of the three-year data collection period the more formal interview questions had evolved into a fluid conversation that accounted for the respondent’s knowledge and my growing understanding of this complex wine culture. This project highlights the benefits of a lengthy research period to thoroughly investigate a single case, as well as, the combined objectivist (e.g., beginning with clearly defined, and theoretically driven research questions, measures, and data collection techniques) and constructivist (e.g., allowing for shifts based on the social interactions and accumulation of situated knowledge) approach to grounded theory.

Research Methods

The specific qualitative research methods I used for this project included text analysis, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations. Below is a brief synopsis of each.

Text Analysis

Before going to Napa Valley to begin data collection there, I subscribed to several wine related publications including *The Wine Spectator*, *The Wine Advocate* (which is Robert Parker's magazine), *Sunset* and *Food and Wine*. There is overall agreement within the wine industry that the two first magazines are the most influential for the United States wine industry (including production decision and purchasing trends). This is largely due to the fact that these publications feature ratings and reviews from two of the most celebrated and influential wine critics in the New World, namely Robert Parker and James Laube (senior editor of *The Wine Spectator*). Both of these men focus the majority of their attention on California wines and devote much of their tasting efforts to Napa Valley, in particular. They also both rate wines based on 100-point scoring system and are understood by most people inside the industry to share consistency with each other in their overall assessments of wine product quality. Hence, these two publications are the foundation for the Artistic Classification System that structures wine classifications in the United States. Therefore, before going to Napa Valley, I began reading the magazines and making notes on the featured Napa wineries, ratings, advertisements, and trends within the industry (e.g., types of featured varietals). I began looking for patterns of which wineries were most often featured or highly rated in order to understand the hierarchy of the classification system provided by these magazines. I also made a list of the largest advertisers (and which brands they advertised) so that I could get an overall sense of which wineries were marketing to mass consumers. From these notes, I began to do Internet searches for the wineries and to see if they had tasting rooms open to the

public. Out of the ones that were open to the public, I made a list of the initial tasting rooms I would visit on my first data collection trip to the valley.

I also systematically examined *Food and Wine* and *Sunset* magazines for their larger readership outside the wine world. Both of these magazines could be considered lifestyle magazines in that they feature a more robust incorporation of wine into everyday life. The first magazine is often referred to as the “foodie” magazine because of its wealth of information about restaurant trends, recipes, travel destinations, exotic spices, or top chefs from across the country. Wine still has a prominent place in the publication but it is a cultural product that interacts with wider aspects of culinary life. Even beyond that scope, *Sunset* is applauded as the west’s best lifestyle magazine, featuring sections on food and wine, travel, home decorating and gardening.¹⁷ Routinely, *Sunset* offers articles on wine-related travel destinations (e.g., best place to stay in Napa Valley or which wineries to visit there) and sections on wines from western states. From this magazine I was able to gain a more generalized idea about how wine is presented (and may function) as part of a lifestyle of affluence. In both of these publications, I made notes of how wine was discussed, which wine bars were featured, wine related travel destinations, etc.

These four of these magazines helped me navigate my way through Napa Valley, both in terms of the actual destination to visit and how to interact within Napa wine culture (e.g. knowledge about wine, as well as, general knowledge about which tomatoes

¹⁷ *Sunset* could be understood as the western United States’ version of *Southern Living* magazine, which caters to the middle to affluent classes in the south by featuring articles that reinforce a culture or lifestyle of comfort and elegance. The difference in these publications rests in regional variations, in which *Sunset* is geared to a more outdoorsy culture of affluence (e.g., outdoor kitchens, bocce ball courts, spa-centered safari tent camping) and features travel destinations in the western U.S. rather than the south.

or herbs were in vogue at the time of my visits). All of the tasting room hosts and all of the consumers I interviewed reported knowing about some or all of these magazines and most of them were regular readers of one or more of them. Out of my overall sample, *The Wine Spectator* and *Sunset* were the two most widely read publications, but all four could be readily found in homes, restaurants, wineries and hotels throughout the Valley. In many ways these magazines offered an early “map” of the Valley and the structure (e.g., classifications and specific wineries, brands, etc.) and culture (e.g., norms of appreciation, aesthetics, etc.) of the U.S. wine world.

Once I was in Napa Valley I began textual data collection of tourist publications, winery-generated information and tasting notes from throughout the area. I accumulated stacks of free magazines, tasting coupons and color brochures from the Napa Valley Visitor Center, hotel lobbies and restaurant entryways. And, I picked up as much written information as possible from individual wineries, including the history of the winery, tasting options, price sheets, wine club information, tasting notes and event calendars. I began sorting these documents into different categories based on the size of the winery (and if it was part of a multinational corporation). I then coded the documents based on the number and type of advertisements and explicit references to critic ratings or reviews. Later on in the data collection process, as I began going to more elite/exclusive wineries, I included codes for differences in paper quality or aesthetic design, as well as the divergent styles of language used to describe wine or the winery. After completing several initial interviews with consumers, I began asking myself: Who is the target consumer group for these marketing or educational texts and how are they “selling” their product or winery? Several patterns emerged from these questions, revealing that

different documents emphasized price, quality, critic reviews, history/tradition, education, sociability, connections with other arts/cultural events or the pairing of wine and food. From these documents I was able to paint a much more robust picture of the wineries under investigation and locate them within my sampling categories discussed next.

Sampling in Napa Valley

Unlike a quantitative approach to research that seeks to find a random sample of respondents, qualitative approaches highlight the importance of theoretically relevant sampling techniques. As convincingly argued by Charmaz (2000), grounded theory utilizes theoretical sampling in order to “develop our emerging categories and to make them more definitive and useful...[and] helps us to identify conceptual boundaries and pinpoint the fit and relevance of our categories” (519). In other words, we choose data (e.g., people, written documents, events, scenes, etc.) that offer clarity to our categories and provide ample evidence for comparison. For this project, I sought to compare the categories of differently oriented *wineries* (i.e., mass commercial, limited commercial and elite/exclusive) and the *people* who work and play there. Specifically, I wanted to uncover the different ways that people in differently oriented organizations understood wine, it’s meaning in their everyday lives, and how they used it as a complex cultural commodity.

Therefore, based on Fine’s (1992) research, I planned to stratify the tasting rooms in Napa Valley based on the organization’s orientation toward market incentives or cultural preservation. The first step in this process was to determine how to best select

and differentiate tasting rooms to be included in the overall sample. I used a combination of participant observation, informal conversations, Internet searches of multinational corporate ownership listings, production quantity, and content analysis of critic ratings and reviews in order to determine which tasting rooms fit into which of the three categories. Early in the data collection process, I believed that these distinctions would be relatively straightforward based on whether wineries focused on mass production and had large distribution networks or were boutique wineries with limited production and distribution. However, over time, these categories became much more complex. My first awareness of this complexity was recognizing that most mass commercial wineries do not have tasting rooms in Napa Valley. And, the few that do have two separate tasting rooms, one for their mass-produced and widely distributed wines and one for their reserve (and highly rated) wines. This segregation of space creates two distinct wine cultures within the same organizational type, meaning that both the mass tasting room and the reserve tasting room required extensive data collection in order to understand how wine is understood, discussed and used by tasting room hosts and consumers.

My second major awareness of the complexity of constructing comparative categories based on market orientation (e.g., size, production, distribution) was when learning about the elite/exclusive tasting rooms in the Valley. While boutique wineries may share a commitment to producing the highest quality wines, they have distinct markets and divergent motivations for accomplishing this objective. For instance, long term resident viticulturalists and winemakers in the Valley vocalize a strong dislike for the role that industry critics have in guiding the production and consumption of wine in

the United States. Many of these people, therefore, do not submit their wines for critic review or ratings, and instead, rely on their longstanding reputation among affluent consumers who share an internalized taste for quality wines. In contrast, newer winery owners in the valley, who also produce high quality, limited production wines, thrive on the ratings of industry critics because high scores boost their status among other people in their affluent lifestyle groups.

In terms of sampling, then, it took significant time in the field to observe, read and ask enough questions to uncover these categorical distinctions (which are not readily visible by examining production reports or critic ratings). Therefore, I spent over 500 hours engaged in direct observation or participant observation in Napa Valley tasting rooms and/or private wine tasting events. This included visiting approximately 75 tasting rooms (or private wineries) and considerable time (ranging from 4 hours to 20 hours) in about 25 differently oriented tasting rooms or wineries (see more details on this process below). Thus, even though when the project began, I expected three categories of comparison (i.e., mass commercial wineries, limited commercial wineries and elite/exclusive), after three years of fieldwork, I am confident that there are more like five distinct categories of *wine cultures* that exist in tasting rooms throughout Napa Valley. Two segregated wine cultures in mass commercial wineries cater to 1) new consumers who are oriented toward quantity and lower quality wines and 2) affluent and status-oriented consumers who buy fine wine in large part because of its critic generated status. One wine culture within limited commercial wineries that focuses on quality wine at a reasonable price and that provides a standardized (i.e., industry legitimated) wine education to upwardly mobile consumers. And, two wine cultures in elite/exclusive

wineries that cater to 1) cultural omnivores with high levels of cultural capital and 2) status oriented consumers who are focused on critic ratings as a source of legitimacy (these are some of the same consumers who go to reserve rooms in mass commercial wineries). Each of these five different cultures share similarities in how people understand wine, how they talk about wine, the role they believe critics do (or should) play in the value/price of wine, and who they recognize as part of or distinct from their lifestyle group.

Throughout the process of establishing these theoretically relevant categories for my sample, I identified people as informants who I believed were representative of that particular wine culture. More specifically, through participant observation, I got a “feel” for the tasting room by paying attention to the aesthetics, reading the literature, listening to conversations, and identifying respondents who seemed representative of tasting room hosts and consumers who worked in or frequented these different types of tasting rooms. For tasting room respondents, I chose people who appeared to be most comfortable and knowledgeable within their particular context. And, for consumers, I tried to approach respondents who I had seen in other wineries in the same category. By choosing tasting room hosts and consumers who seemed “at home” in the particular wineries, I was able to clarify the boundaries of the categories and to explore the context-specific content of people’s interactions, knowledge, experiences, and meanings. Also, by identifying other respondents (e.g., winemakers, owners, marketing personnel), I was able to further clarify the boundaries of the categories under investigation.

Participant observation

As argued by Adler and Adler (1987), observation is the “fundamental base of all research methods” because it builds upon the direct knowledge and judgment of the researcher who engages a rich social and cultural milieu (389). The researcher is the constant or the interpretive lens through which this complex social world can be made intelligible and explained to outsiders. Certainly this does not imply a blind objectivism, and as discussed below, this project begins with an awareness that my own subjective experiences as a human researcher are integral to the research design, the data collected and the interpretation of the findings. However, as argued convincingly elsewhere, standardized methods of observation can minimize bias and allow for the replication and validation of research findings (see Angrosino and Mays de Perez 2000). As an initial outsider to Napa, I followed Adler and Adler’s (1987) observational strategy of “active-member researcher” by becoming involved in the central activities of the culture under investigation without adhering to the values and goals of any particular industry or consumer group. Through this type of participant observation, I sought to deliberately achieve a degree of immersion in the Napa wine culture, while still recognizing the diverse meaning systems, values and motivations held by differently located consumers and service staff workers.

Early in the data collection period, I used “descriptive observation” techniques, which involved taking notes on everything I saw (e.g., cars in the parking lot, what people were wearing, directional signs at wineries, mannerisms of guests, etc.). Because I was unfamiliar with the area, this allowed me to get a grasp of the overall landscape of wine culture in Napa without limiting my scope of inquiry. Later in the data collection

process, I began limiting my efforts to “focused” and “selective observation” techniques based on theoretically relevant variables in order to clarify the specific boundaries for each of the categories within the case study (see Angrosino and Mays de Perez 2000). By concurrently observing in the field, examining data, and writing up analytical memos I was able to narrow my observational focus to particular events, interactions, or processes that would answer my specific research questions.

One of the primary methods for this shift in observational technique was through actively recording field notes several times per day while in Napa Valley. Systematically recording field notes allowed me to document key information, as well as, discover new questions or interpretations about industry workers, consumers, the wine culture and myself during the data collection period (Richardson 1997). I carried an audio recorder with me everywhere I went throughout the 3 year data collection period and would routinely step outside the tasting room and record observations or highlights from conversations with people at the tasting bar. Once back to my apartment or hotel I would listen to the recordings and take notes on my computer of important points that supported or challenged my impressions or interpretations, questions to clarify related to the relevant theories or past empirical research, and general new insights about wine, consumers, wineries, potential contacts, or which restaurant I needed to try next.

Interviews and Informal Conversations

Qualitative interviewing assumes a conversational style of interaction where the researcher asks questions and listens carefully while the respondent responds (Kvale 1996; Rubin and Rubin 1995). In contrast to standardized survey approaches to data

collection, the epistemology of the interview leans toward constructivist and views participants as active meaning makers who provide subjective interpretations of their daily lives as much as they offer objective facts about a phenomenon (Holstein and Goubrium 1995). Moreover, this perspective presumes that the interview itself is a site of interaction that allows for the negotiation and maintenance of individual identities. In other words, the interview is not just a place where information can be exchanged, but also a site where identity and self-preservation are accomplished through interaction (Abell and Stoeke 2001). This interview perspective was important to this project because of the type of the data required to investigate the nature of symbolic and social boundaries. For instance, during interviews the respondents actively “managed” their own class identities through the ways in which they discussed wine, wine culture, status, aesthetics, culture and arts. In this sense, interviews themselves became a performance in the “presentation of the self” using wine as a prop while on the prominent wine stage of Napa Valley, California (Goffman 1959). As a researcher, I witnessed individual identity transformations as they moved from laughing with their friends or partner to sitting and discussing wine with a “wine researcher” who was interested in wine as a status indicator. Depending upon the respondents (specifically in which category they were located: mass commercial, limited commercial, status conscious affluent or omnivorous), the content of their interactions ranged from a disinterest in “impressing” me, to convincing me of their knowledge, to proving their status, to a genuine curiosity of reciprocal information exchange. From a qualitative research perspective, all of these varied responses become relevant data in understanding how differently positioned actors enact symbolic and social boundaries and understand their own social identity and group

level affiliations or separations. Moreover, some qualitative researchers have found that respondents fit themselves into categories of “experts” or “learners” through the interview process itself by associating themselves with legitimately acknowledged group of actors (e.g., scientists) (see Lee and Roth 2004). This similar process emerged during the interviews for this project, whereby respondents often aligned themselves with people they viewed as the most legitimate sources of wine knowledge (e.g., critics or winemakers). In either case, the interview event provided an interaction site whereby respondents could promote their own sense of self and align with or distance from other social groups or industry “experts.”

In total during this project, I conducted 61 one hour to three hour interviews with 37 consumers (N=7: mass commercial, N=8: limited commercial, and N=22: elite/exclusive) and 24 staff working inside tasting rooms (N=4: mass commercial, N=5 limited commercial, and N=15 elite/exclusive). These interviews followed the interview questions on the interview guide provided below and most of them were audio recorded and transcribed. In the case of several elite/exclusive consumers, they requested not to be recorded so I took hand written notes during (or after) the interview conversation and then expanded those notes at the completion of the evening. In addition to the interview, most of the respondents also filled out a brief demographic questionnaire that I used to compare variables such as age, occupation, education, and income with the meanings that they attribute to wine, their knowledge about wine, where they obtained their knowledge, their perceptions of other wine consumers and industry workers, who they view as “experts” in the field, and how they understand wine as a status symbol. In order to address variables related to cultural capital, I also asked respondents to describe an ideal

tasting environment and a “good bottle of wine,” so as to assess the extent to which their use of language and product choices conform to High or Low Cultural Capital distinctions found by Holt (1997; 1998). I also wanted to see if their descriptions cohered with existing distinctions and classifications found in industry publications (e.g., *Wine Spectator*) or that were used by tasting room hosts in the Valley.

In addition to these formal interviews, supplemental data for this project comes from countless informal conversations with people throughout Napa (e.g., other consumers, wine makers, journalists, staff at the Napa Valley Vintners, consultants). Whether I was walking the aisles of Trader Joe’s, sitting in the park or having a beer at the local brewery, I was asking questions to anyone and everyone who would talk to me. Random strangers provide helpful contacts to wineries and potential informants for the project, as well as offered a robust perspective of the history and trajectory of wine in the United States. This included everything from marketing efforts, projected growth sectors, and benefits of American Oak barrels, to strategies for decreasing root rot. Depending on their knowledge level, I would bounce my interpretations off of them to gain their perspective or to ask how they thought I could improve my analysis of the data. Often this resulted in private tours of vineyards or wine cellars and on a couple of occasions led to free (behind the scenes) tickets to exclusive wine events in the Valley.

I also talked about the project with numerous people across northern and southern California, Atlanta and Memphis TN (where I currently live). These people ranged from casual consumers to wine aficionados and they provided a more general perspective of wine in the United States. Interestingly, they could easily be classified as one of the four types of consumers that I discuss in Chapter 5 (i.e., mass consumers, upwardly mobile,

status-oriented or omnivorous). The relative ease of placing them into these categories increased my confidence in the patterns I found in Napa Valley and offers some guarded encouragement about the potential generalizability of these findings.

Analysis

Most grounded theory perspectives share a common commitment to collecting rich data from multiple sources—observations, conversations, interviews, advertisements, organizational reports, personal memos, etc. Thus, the analysis of this much data requires early attention to coding, organizing and recognizing patterns and emergent themes (Charmaz 2000). As suggested by Glaser (1992), I chose to engage in a constant comparison of the data (across wineries, types of wineries, the style of communication of tasting hosts, as well as consumer dress, mannerisms, and knowledge of wine). As detailed below, my data collection strategy involved going to differently oriented wineries (e.g., mass commercial, limited commercial, elite) over the entire study period, so as to keep the different types of organizations (space, staff and consumers) fresh in mind when going to other wineries. Thus, I would collect brochures and tasting notes, as well as transcribe interviews into written text so as to hand code significant differences and similarities across organizations, tasting room hosts, and consumer groups. So, from early in the data collection process, I engaged in a rigorous coding scheme that began with codes from I generated from existing theory and empirical research that has been conducted on the production of culture, artistic classifications, cultural capital and symbolic and social boundaries. Over time, they evolved into emergent codes that were more specific to the data generated in the field and fell under several sub-categories,

including general themes, action codes, knowledge, social contacts, feelings, Us/Them distinctions or social distancing and experiences of wine [see Table 7].

Also throughout the data collection process, I used theoretical and methodological memo writing as an intermediate step between coding and the final analysis in order to track emergent themes, relationships and patterns (Charmaz 2000). These were written “hunches” about the data and interrelated processes that I was observing and hearing from participants that I later synthesized into analytic memos (Glaser 1978). From these memos, I could ask follow up questions or find out additional information to confirm or supplement my initial interpretations. I also used memos to generate conversations with “experts” in both the field of wine and the field of sociology. In the former discussions, I checked the accuracy of the data or my understanding of the wine industry; in the later conversations, I checked my sociological interpretation and how the data connected to theories in stratification, mobility, and cultural sociology. The memos aided in this process because I could refer back to them once I was in the company of other wine “experts” or sociologists. Overtime, this allowed me to gain confidence in the connections between the data and the theoretical conclusions that were becoming evident.

From these analytic memos, I created summary tables to visually display the data and to aid in the writing of the final analysis. These tables allowed me to present a systematic snapshot of the data that I discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. I also offer quotations from the coded transcripts as examples that best represent the overall sentiment of people within in that particular category of tasting rooms (see Ryan and Bernard 2000).

Qualitative Research: Subjectivity and Reflexivity

While this project is not “feminist” in the sense that it focuses on the gendered dimensions of the production and consumption of wine in Napa, my orientation to the project builds on the rich tradition of feminist qualitative researchers. Namely, I align myself with feminist theorists who argue that research emerges from the situated experiences of individual researchers and participants. In other words, all knowledge claims emerge from socially embedded researchers, who have particular life experiences that shape their research design, data collection process and findings (see Harding 1987; Smith 1987; Collins 1990/2000). Without question, my own situated experience as a white, upwardly mobile, educated, androgynous woman shaped the questions I asked, my access to wineries and respondents, as well as, the conversations and interactions I had with people in the Valley. Moreover, my subjective understanding of myself was changed by the research process. Many qualitative researchers call this reflexivity, or the process of reflecting on the self as a “human instrument,” who is transformed by the research experience (Guba and Lincoln 1981). Or as Reinharz aptly states, “we not only bring the self to the field...[we also] create the self in the field” (Reinharz 1997 quoted in Lincoln and Guba 2000: 183).

The three most salient dimensions of my situated experience dealt with the commonly discussed triad of race, gender and social class. For instance, being white was a huge asset in Napa Valley, where I could easily blend in as either a consumer or someone who worked in a winery. In fact, the vast majority of tourists and front stage industry workers are white. So, it was not until I had been there for several visits that I began to reflect on the racial aspects of this project and wine consumption patterns in the

United States. The reproduction of racialized social boundaries through information exchanges, informal networks, marketing efforts toward non-white consumer groups (i.e., lower quality sweeter wines) and other social processes could prove to be a very interesting line of research that falls outside the bounds of this project. My own personal experience of race (whiteness in particular) was very much shaped by this project because I could see how racial privilege reproduces itself through predominately white cultures (such as wine culture), in which affluence, social mobility and cultural capital are tied to wine as a cultural product.¹⁸ Certainly, there are no gates to restrict access to Napa Valley, yet it is striking how whiteness dominates the region, both in terms of the people and the enactment of normative and legitimate culture. I became increasingly aware of this racial process of social reproduction while doing exploratory data collection in Atlanta, where I attended wine tastings at a range of restaurants and wine bars. For instance, chain wine bars (such as *The Grape* or *Wine Styles*) are far more likely to cater to African American clientele (through sweeter Rose wines, jazz music events, and a more Southern style food menu) than affluent wine bars (such as *Eno*), which cater to more omnivorous and white clientele. Again, a systematic analysis of this racial variation in social space is beyond this parameters of this project; however, these observations and experiences became a salient feature in my own reflexive experience as a white researcher, at times manifesting as guilt over my own white privilege and the not so subtle ways that white culture is related to economic affluence and mobility.

While my race (as dominate and normative in the Valley) was initially invisible to me, my gender and social class were salient from my very first trip to the area. While I

¹⁸ By “white culture” I mean the normative ways of interacting that remain invisible to most white people, and yet confer legitimacy to people (white or non-white) when they master these codes of conduct.

comfortably identify as a woman, my dress, mannerisms, and style of interaction would not be easily classified as feminine based on normative understandings of femininity in the United States. During my early trips to Napa, my hair was cut very short and I routinely wore men's clothing items that were probably too big for me. I did not wear make-up and I rarely wore jewelry other than my men's Timex watch with a Velcro band. It was not uncommon for me to get mistaken for a man and I was called "sir" more times than I can count. While this never bothered me in Atlanta (in fact, I enjoyed blurring distinctions between man and woman), I found myself increasingly self-conscious in Napa Valley, where the gender differences are highlighted through designer clothing, glitzy sunglasses and a lot of jewelry. I cannot pinpoint exactly why, but I began to feel that gender (especially performance of femininity) was tied to legitimacy and social class mobility (see West and Zimmerman 1991; Lorber 1994).

Many of my field notes reveal that my performance of femininity made me feel like an outsider to the culture of Napa. Not only did this make me self-conscious, but I was also concerned that it would affect my ability to gain access to more affluent tasting rooms and consumer interviews. So, before my second trip I bought a whole new "Napa wardrobe," which included more feminine looking clothing, a women's watch and some simple silver jewelry. I am not really sure that any of these initial efforts made any difference in diminishing how much I felt like an outsider, but it did begin a process of becoming "more feminine" over the next several years of fieldwork. By 2008, when I gained access to the elite/exclusive tasting rooms and more affluent consumer groups, my hair was longer and my dress was consistent with what other women were wearing in Napa. My mannerisms are also more feminine (e.g., how I sit, use hand gestures, etc.),

which has altered my interactions especially with men in the Valley. In fact, some of my more “behind the scenes tours” of vineyards and cellars have been with men (who are consultants or winemakers) who viewed our time together as “dates” or potential dates. I sincerely doubt that I would have been able to gain access to these respondents (and their professional knowledge or contacts) without altering my appearance and performing femininity in ways that are more attractive to men. Significantly, then, my initial intuition about needing to alter my gender performances to align with normative notions of femininity seems to have yielded more complete data for this project.

Likewise, my social class upbringing and personal experiences with social mobility shaped how this project evolved, from the research questions to the data collection and analysis. My childhood class socialization (lower working class from rural North Carolina) did not prepare me for how to dress, what to say, or how to interact with people with high levels of cultural capital. That is not to say I was completely unaware of the codes of conduct for affluent and well-educated professionals. Indeed, my education (especially at Emory), as well as, my professional socialization had already revealed the bridge between growing up in a lower class family and my middle class adult lifestyle. Not unlike working class students in other elite universities, I had learned to hide my class background in order to manage my identity and convince myself (and others) that I legitimately belonged there (see Granfield 1991). And yet, this on-going process of identity maintenance (which arguably included some unnecessary posturing) and my perpetual efforts of “trying to pass” as an insider within a foreign class culture eventually shifted from personally exhausting to intellectually interesting. In fact, my

personal experiences with social class and acquiring cultural capital became the impetus for this research project.

By becoming a participant observer to Napa Valley wine culture for extended periods of time (ranging from 2 weeks to 6 months) over a three-year period, I was able to transition from an outsider to an (passing) insider. This meant not only gaining a considerable amount of intellectual knowledge about wine, wine culture and the Valley, but it also included learning the often unspoken codes of conduct, mannerisms, and subtle ways of acting and communicating that are normative in this affluent culture. Without question, I was forced to develop cultural capital (which generalized well beyond wine) in order to gain access to some of the wineries and individual respondents for this project. This was a long, personally challenging process. As other field researchers have explained elsewhere, the transition from outsider to relative insider pushed me out of my comfort zone on numerous occasions and eventually stimulated a shift in my own personal class identity. For instance, I began this project with a very elementary understanding of wine (probably somewhere among the early learners who frequent the limited commercial wineries and understand wine as a source of upward mobility).

Because of strong religious beliefs held by my family of origin, wine was not part of my early socialization, and in fact, was (and still is) viewed as morally objectionable. Therefore, my knowledge about wine began from the media and working part time for a year in a very small (and struggling) family winery in the Willamette Valley, Oregon before Pinot Noirs exploded to put that area on the “legitimate” wine map. Looking back now, I would be hard pressed to provide an accurate assessment of the quality of the

wines we sold; at the time, I viewed the experience as a great way to meet people and consume large amounts of left over wine (regardless of the quality).

When I moved from Oregon and began attending Emory, I felt a strong feeling of being an outsider to the social class position of the vast majority of people around me. At the time, I was very unaware of anything remotely associated with high culture, including art, theater or music. However, I noticed a consistent fascination with my experience working in a winery by people at Emory. There was an automatic assumption that I knew a lot about wine, which in turn gave me a feeling of legitimacy as someone who belonged in this higher-class context. In fact, I recall a very “cultured” professor contacting me and asking which U.S. wine he should serve to a group of colleagues who were visiting from Italy. I had no idea! But, I at least knew people I could ask. So, I called a wine “expert” friend in Oregon for recommendations and he was able to provide a list of wines (most of which I had never tried) that would be good suggestions. In much the same way as some of the consumers in this study, my heterogeneous networks with industry insiders translated into a subjective sense of belonging among more affluent professors who displayed much higher levels of cultural capital than I did. As this one example suggests, wine and wine knowledge promoted my own professional advancement and facilitated more reciprocal interactions with people from higher-class positions.

Throughout the following years and into this project, I have made an active attempt to understand wine classifications as publicized and taught by wine “experts” (e.g., *Wine Spectator*, the Atlanta Wine School, public wine tasting events, bartenders, etc.). It was not until my last several trips to Napa and through interactions with people with high levels of cultural capital (i.e., both generalized and related to wine) that I

suspended my preference for external knowledge and classifications in order to have a more sensual and internalized experience of wine. Hence, my own wine knowledge has been a steady process of adult level acquisition through the progression of drinking wine as an alcoholic beverage for intoxication, to recognizing it as a potential source of upward mobility, to understanding wine in a manner that conformed to external standards, to internalizing a subjective awareness of exceptional wine (even though I still cannot always describe it with complex and nuanced detail).

Data Collection¹⁹

Spring 2006

Field research for this project began in the spring of 2006. At that time, I was an extreme outsider to the region, having only been to Napa Valley twice as a weekend tourist. During those trips, I had visited approximately 5 tasting rooms, all of which would be considered mass-commercial wineries that catered to tourists (like me) who had very little appreciation for wine culture. Therefore, my first research visit to the Valley I spent following a tourist map from one property to the next throughout the region. I took copious notes that included the types of vehicles in the parking lot, clothing style of consumers, the décor of the tasting room, the visibility of accolades (e.g., framed magazine articles, numerical ratings and medals from wine tasting festivals), type and quality of landscaping, merchandise in the gift shop and the tours available. I also picked up countless brochures that detailed wine club membership benefits and costs.

¹⁹ See Table 8 for a Summary of the Data Collection for this project.

In the evenings, I compared these experiences with Internet lists that indicated the ownership of the wineries I had visited. For instance, Foster's and Constellation offers an on-line listing of all their brands and properties, including very large producers in Napa Valley such as Beringer and Robert Mondavi and smaller producers such as Franciscan. Regardless of whether the winery is a large producer or a smaller producer, I noticed striking similarities among the tasting rooms owned by parent corporations. As one example, my field notes indicated that all of these properties had extensively stocked gift shops that featured products only loosely related to wine consumption (golf balls, jewelry, baby blankets, etc.) [See Jamerson 2009; and Chapter 4].

I also used *The Wine Spectator* on-line resource guide to search for wines that had been produced by these wineries I had visited. From this investigation, I began to see how the tasting rooms had been structured to separate consumers into different consumption spaces. For instance, wineries that had high ratings (92+) for some of their Reserve wines were the same properties that had two separate tasting areas (e.g., rooms or buildings) for guests to enjoy their wines. My field notes showed clear distinctions (in dress, mannerisms and visible intoxication levels) between consumers who visited the Reserve and non-Reserve areas of these same properties.

During this research period, I conducted semi-structured interviews with tasting room hosts and consumers in the mass-commercial tasting rooms. My choice to start with consumers in mass-commercial tasting rooms was based on my own comfort level with wines in Napa and the friendly way these consumers interacted with each other and with me during their tasting experiences. In some ways these interviews were hilarious because it was clear that the willing respondents had already consumed some wine that

day and were in the mood to drink more wine. The wineries would not allow open containers on the property, so in several cases I purchased a bottle of White Zinfandel, grabbed some paper Dixie cups and headed over to the local park to conduct the interviews at a picnic table in the sunshine. These were very enjoyable interviews because the conversation flowed easily and playfully. Moreover, I got the impression that they felt comfortable to share whatever thoughts, stereotypes or stories that illustrated their understanding of wine, wine culture, critics or Napa Valley as a tourist region.

I also conducted five interviews with the tasting room hosts during this visit. Three of these interviews occurred somewhat organically from interactions and conversations with tasting room hosts during my own tasting experiences. These were all tasting room hosts in limited-commercial wineries who had spent a good deal of time “educating me” about wines and wineries in the area. In fact, they were invaluable resources in my own learning about wine. For instance, I began to learn about swirling wines, flavors to expect from particular varietals, food pairings, growing regions and climate variations in and around the valley, and where I could go for a delicious, yet affordable (by Valley standards), dinner. From my personal experience as a Napa (and wine culture) outsider, these tasting room hosts were true educators, patiently explaining the answers to all my questions in ten-minute detail. They never seemed rushed by my questions and seemed genuinely interested in my learning. Not surprisingly, then, they were enthusiastic participants in this study and spent several hours discussing their experiences with wine, their role in the tasting room and their overall understanding of the industry.

Interviews with tasting room hosts in mass-commercial tasting rooms were more difficult to secure, even though the service staff themselves were open to participating in the study. However, they had to get “permission” from corporate representatives (e.g., Public Relations Representatives) who requested to meet with me before they would grant me access to their staff. When I offered them written and verbal information about the purpose of the project they seemed quite interested and open to the interviews. But, they wanted to ensure that the interviews would not include any questions about the “production aspect” of the winery, which meant the farm workers who work in the vineyards. These interviews were conducted in large boardrooms that had been reserved for our meetings so they seemed much more formal than the interviews with people from the limited commercial sites (which we did on beautiful patios overlooking the vineyards or gardens). They were also shorter in length (about 45 minutes) and offered much less information about wine, wine culture or the position of their winery in the overall Napa landscape. In part, this was due to their own length of time in the industry (under 2 years as part time employees) and their lower level of formal and informal training around wine.

This first trip to Napa was instructive in gaining an overall landscape of the wineries in the valley and the diversity of experiences that are offered to tourists to the region. Much of this information I learned from tourist publications and brochures about tasting rooms, balloon tours, the Wine Train, spas, restaurants and art galleries. Conversations with tourists, tasting room hosts, wait staff in restaurants and other locals were also helpful in understanding how the region functions as an agro-tourist destination

that features a range of lower quality mass-commercial wines to some of the coveted wine in the United States.

Winter 2006

The next data collection period included participant observations in 12 different wineries and visits back to several of the wineries I had visited during my previous trip. I also interviewed two tasting room hosts who worked the Reserve rooms of mass commercial wineries. One of these interviews is particularly striking because she insisted that we conduct the interview in her home down in American Canyon (about 30 south of the City of Napa). I arrived to a gated subdivision and was welcomed inside with a glass of red wine, which she poured from a decanter etched with a Silver Oak emblem. This seemed significant to me for two reasons. First, Silver Oak is one of the most historic and prestigious producers of Cabernet Sauvignon in the Valley, ranging in cost from about \$75 to \$250 per bottle. As she sat the decanter down on the table in front of me, she was certain to turn the etching toward me, so as to imply that this was indeed Silver Oak that she had poured. As that time in my data collection process I had never tasted a coveted Silver Oak Cabernet so I have no idea if that was truly what was in my glass. However, what struck me was just how much she wanted me to believe that it was this very high priced and high status wine.

Second, as we began the interview I noticed that my respondent did not pour a glass of wine for herself. When I inquired about it she said she did not like red wines, and preferred sweeter white wines (even a White Zinfandel). While her willingness to offer me a glass of wine was a wonderful act of hospitality, I felt that the way in which

she presented the wine (in a Silver Oak decanter) and the fact that she was not sharing it with me was intended to impress me, as someone she knew was doing research on wine and status. I learned in the interview that her previous career was as a flight attendant on private executive planes, where she learned about high status wines (not by taste but by label) and how to serve them to her executive passengers. Her work in the Reserve tasting rooms of Napa (she had worked in several) was motivated by her desire to stay in the hospitality industry and to cater to the needs of affluent guests.

Also during this trip, I chose to focus attention on the limited commercial tasting rooms by doing hours of participant observation in just a few tasting rooms. This allowed me to stand at the tasting bar and watch many consumers walk up and begin their tasting experience. I was able to observe the ways in which the hosts greeted the guests and tailored their information to the knowledge level and/or interests of the visitor. I could also tell which consumers “fit in” at these sites, namely the ones who asked many questions, expressed an open mind about trying something new, and were excited about learning about wine or wine culture (e.g., food, restaurants, local galleries). These were very dynamic interactions, meaning that there were very few rote phrases or canned lines that the host used from one group of consumers to the next. Instead, the host tailored the wines she/he poured and the information about the wines (and/or food pairing suggestions) to the consumer’s tastes and interests. These observations provided a very helpful foundation for the interviews with the consumers and tasting room hosts, especially since it seemed that they shared similar expectations about each other’s roles as teacher and learner.

This trip was helpful in many regards. Not only did allow for a good deal of data collection (participant observation and interviews), but I learned a lot about wine and how to talk about wine. In many respects, this is why I chose to target my research efforts on these limited commercial educational venues. I became a true student of these hosts, who taught me how to know what flavors to expect from a Sauvignon Blanc and what foods pair best with a Zinfandel. Moreover, they offered me an insider perspective on consumers and the industry as they chatted with me in between guests and pointed out their own observations about the consumers who entered the tasting room. Also, they shared contact information for other tasting room managers and winery owners in the valley who became willing respondents to this project.

Spring/Summer 2007

The impetus for this trip began while having dinner with some wine-loving friends in Atlanta who became very excited about my project. As we talked, the rough details of a joint trip to the Valley took shape. We flew out on separate flights and met each other in the Valley for about 5 days of wine adventuring. I could not afford to stay in their choice of accommodations (about \$500 per night) so I stayed up the road in one of my favorite local Inns (\$89 per night). Also, I had to skip out on several of their evening meals because the cost would be far outside of my budget. Otherwise, I shadowed them throughout the Valley from one winery to the next, appreciating their ability to gain access to tasting rooms that had long waiting lists and watching in awe as they purchased about \$6000 worth of wine to be shipped back to Atlanta.

At the time of our visit I did not think of these friends as cultural omnivores (instead just very wealthy wine aficionados), yet, in retrospect I would place them in this category (see Johnston and Baumann 2010 for a discussion of “foodies” as cultural omnivores). For instance, a common lunch spot was a little outdoor hamburger stand called Taylor’s Refreshers, where the most “authentic” burger in the valley is served along side some terrific local wines. Upon first glance, I did not realize the significance of Taylor’s because it doesn’t look like anything more interesting than your typical 1950s style hamburger stand. Only when you step up to the counter to glance at the menu can you see that they use mostly local and all organic ingredients, as well as, the highest quality of meats available (e.g., Kobe beef). A basic hamburger costs \$7 but an Ahi Tuna burger will run closer to \$14. Add the coveted garlic or sweet potato fries (\$4) and a beverage (and/or milkshake!) and one can expect to pay \$20+ (depending on beer or wine selections) for lunch at an outdoor hamburger stand. During the summer, the line of people waiting to order may wrap around the front patio and take over an hour to get to the counter.

If we did not go to Taylor’s for lunch then we would go to either Dean and Deluca’s (a very high end market found in expensive urban areas such as Manhattan) or the Oakville Grocery. From the exterior of the building one might mistake the Oakville Grocery for a simple general store; however, once you go inside you can quickly see that it is a true “foodie” paradise, with a range of international cheeses, meats or chocolates, specialty mustards, local olives, homemade breads, and freshly prepared gourmet dishes. All of the products are of the highest quality (including a impressive wine selection) and one could expect to pay anywhere from \$50 to several hundred dollars for a “simple”

picnic lunch of bread, roasted vegetables, cheeses, olives, and pâté (note that this would not even include the wine, which may have been purchased at a winery earlier). Once they purchased the food we either took it back to their own beautiful patio (overlooking the vineyards) or to a winery that offered a quaint picnic area.

The wineries they selected were also indicative of a sophisticated palate, choosing tasting rooms that feature small-batch production wines or limited release vintages that can only be purchased in the Valley. While most of the wineries that we visited required prior appointments, a few were even more exclusive because the tastings were for “library wines” (meaning older vintages that have been stored in the cellar and are typically only available for wine club members or “friends” of the winery). These tastings were conducted in the cellar of the winery and they ranged in price from “free” to around \$80. Typically they included about five wines and several “re-visits,” which means that the host was willing to re-pour our favorite wines from the already opened bottles. The purpose of these visits was to add to my friend’s cellar (she knew exactly what she wanted before we even arrived) and so she bought a case of wines that ranged in cost from \$125 to \$325 per bottle (with a 10 % discount for buying a case). Notably, this was the first time I had seen bottle maximum purchases for wines, which meant that she was only able to buy 2 bottles of some of the limited wines.

This was my very first experience tasting wines of this quality (and at this price point) and I was blown away by the quality. Specifically, I loved the full-bodied red wines that had so many different flavors piled on top of each other I could not even begin to decipher them all. Even before seeing the price sheet, I knew these wines were going to be the most expensive (which they were). One of the things that fascinated me most

about these tasting experiences, however, was the friendly way that the tasting room hosts interacted with my friends and me. Despite my own preconceived ideas about how pretentious these high quality wineries would be, the people who conducted the tastings were friendly, inquisitive and certainly not what I could classify as “snooty.” In fact, they treated us as if we were truly “friends” of the winery (one of my friends had visited several times and is a wine club member). Also, there were zero indications that these wines had received any ratings from industry critics, either in the literature or in the conversations with the staff people there. It was only later when I looked up the wines on the tasting sheet that I discovered that some of these library wines had received 95+ points from industry critics. No doubt these high critic ratings contribute to both the high prices as well as the purchase limits on these bottles. In fact, in later conversations with an informant from one of these wineries, he shared that the \$325 wine was one of the first “cult wines,” which means that they only offer it to “exclusive” wine club members.

There is absolutely no question that this set of experiences completely altered my personal as well as research experience of wine and wine as a lifestyle culture. In fact, this was the turning point of me not being able to enjoy mass-produced wines in Napa or back in Atlanta. Unfortunately, this shift in my preferences for wine came at some cost because wines of this high quality are far too expensive for a graduate student (or even visiting faculty member). However, on a more positive note, the new personal contacts and my newfound comfort level with fine wines gave me access to much more exclusive tasting rooms. While I could not readily identify the specific flavors in high quality wines (i.e., fit them into the rationalized set of classifications that were common in

limited commercial tasting rooms), I was learning a much more sensual appreciation for wine.

Moreover, being a part of this high-class lifestyle in Napa was unlike anything else I had ever experienced. My friends were generous enough to include me in many of their wine and food adventures at no cost to me and were gracious hosts in their own “home” (which included two well-appointed bedrooms, a spacious living room, gourmet kitchen, and a spectacular patio overlooking the vineyards). Sitting around the outdoor fire pit, drinking a \$100 Cabernet and enjoying decadent dark chocolate truffles, was indeed a very comfortable place to relax after a day spent wine tasting. The food, the wine, the linens, the patio furniture, the crystal stemware, and other high quality “props” contributed to the overall lifestyle aesthetic of this experience and altered my perception of what it means to visit Napa Valley for people of different class positions. Even driving around their convertible rental car added to the feeling of freedom to express my own legitimacy as a researcher and to expand my own comfort level and feel like I fit into the “real Napa culture.”

Additionally, my perception of affluent consumers (and tasting rooms that cater to these consumers) significantly shifted during this week. Prior to this visit, I had felt my own lower class socialization telling me that I was an outsider, that I did not really belong in the Napa wine world and that I was not going to be accepted as a valued consumer (because I didn’t have money to buy the wines) or a “real researcher” (because I was an outsider to wine culture and the prominent social class of most people who live and visit there). However, my experience with the people from higher-class positions (whether consumers or industry insiders) whom I met during this trip expressed kindness,

thoughtfulness, generosity, and a genuine interest in my work. In fact, they became invaluable resources for anything ranging from wine and food “bargains” (e.g., a \$300 bottle of wine for \$150) to relevant articles they had recently read, to contact names of people in and out of the Valley, to excellent hiking or picnic locations. Moreover, since I stayed in the area for another month after my friends left I was able to continue conversations with these new friends over meals or movie nights (at the local St. Helena movie theater). They also invited me to several fundraising events (which I declined due to the high costs) and to observe at their wineries (e.g. private tastings for other guests).

In total during this trip to Napa Valley I visited 17 wineries and spent approximately 100 hours collecting data from participant observations in tasting rooms and wine events (e.g., Saturday Bubbles and Oysters or Spring Fling Extravaganza). This data collection effort included all three types of wineries in this study, namely mass commercial, limited commercial and elite/exclusive. This allowed for clear comparisons across these different tasting rooms, including the information communicated by the tasting room hosts and the types of consumers who visited them. I also conducted a total of 11 interviews during this research period, including 2 mass commercial and 4 limited commercial consumers and 5 tasting room hosts from exclusive/elite wineries. By this time, I began to see overlapping themes in the consumer interviews and felt that there were clear patterns that distinguished these consumer groups from each other in terms of where they gained their information, how they decided where to visit in Napa, as well as their interpretations of wine and wine culture.

It was also during this trip that I started to sense that elite/exclusive wineries were actually divided into two distinct groups, namely “farmers” who had been in the valley

for generations and “new money outsiders” who were interested in generating high scores from industry critics. My friends had introduced me to the former category of wineries, namely those owned by people who had long been insiders to the industry and who understood wine as an art form. Ultimately, their goal in winemaking is to work with nature to produce a wine that is respectful to the region and that showcases the unique talents of skilled viniculturalists and artisan winemakers. The unintended consequence of this passionate collaboration often results in high scores and accolades from industry critics. Yet, during conversations with these respondents and by reading some recent books on the area, I began to see that there was a whole other group of top producing wineries that were 1) not represented on the tourist maps and 2) were not highly thought of by these particular respondents. When I did locate the address of one of these wineries I was blocked from the entrance by a large gate with a punch key entry pad. When I attempted to call the winery for an appointment I was informed that the wines were not available for tasting (which I found out later meant that they were only available for tasting by a select group of high status consumers) and that the property was entirely private (except for invited guests). This data collection period did not allow for me to do any further investigation with this type of wineries or the consumers who visited them, but I knew that a future data collection period would be required to understand this growing segment of the Napa wine industry.

Spring/Summer 2008

Through the generous funding from a National Science Foundation Dissertation Improvement Grant I was able to go back to Napa Valley to better investigate

elite/exclusive wineries and their consumers. I was able to call a previous contact (a chef from Graystone Culinary Institute of America) to secure a place to live in a small vineyard in St. Helena (which I had learned was the most expensive and exclusive area of the Valley). Significantly, this small (yet beautiful) cottage was on the gated property of an elite/exclusive winery that fell into the latter category of wineries mentioned above, namely the owner had only recently bought the multi-million dollar property through successful business ventures in southern California and knew relatively little about wine production. Through the paid assistance of numerous consultants (both in the vineyard and in the cellar), his first vintage had earned 96 points from the top industry critic, Robert Parker. Therefore, he was quite proud of his own “cult wine,” and expressed zero desire to sell it to mass consumers. Instead, he reserved it for “special guests” who were looking to purchase a high status wine for several hundred dollars per bottle. The cottage where I stayed was not available to the public and the owner had never “rented” it to anyone else. Instead, it was kept exclusively for friends or family members who visited the area. My friend from Greystone contacted the owner directly and worked out the financial details, then let me know the price and the available dates that the owner would allow me to rent it. When I did meet the owner of the property, I sensed some skepticism about this arrangement and my sense was that he was only doing this as a favor to his chef friend. His wife, on the other hand, was quite welcoming during the entirety of my visit and went out of her way to make sure that I had everything that I needed. In fact, she invited me to dinner a few times while her husband was out of town and gave me a very nice bottle of wine when I left.

This was a very insightful look into a high status wine culture, which I am grateful occurred after I had spent considerable time in the Valley. First, the property was immaculately appointed and included a gorgeous pool, an outdoor kitchen (with Viking appliances and a wood burning oven), a bocce ball court, a fireplace patio, an expansive organic garden, an open air sitting room overlooking a stream—all of which was surrounded by an olive grove and Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard. My cottage was near the back of the property and is of the highest quality construction and aesthetic, which included marble floors and countertops, vaulted ceilings, French doors that opened off several rooms, a spectacular private patio, a gourmet kitchen, a state of the art audio/visual system with indoor and outdoor speakers, adjustable gallery lighting, and a master bedroom complete with the finest Italian linens.

While I was here I witnessed (from afar) a number of private tastings, which were offered by the owner out by the pool and included a full spread of cheeses, breads and chocolates. From these observations, it seemed that the visitors were either friends or friends of friends who were visiting the area. According to the wife, no one pays for these private tastings which offer an opportunity for the husband to “show off.” This description struck me because it seemed very consistent with how I had experienced him, and the visual cues of his estate, including his luxury ski boat (i.e., MasterCraft which I learned retails for over \$100,000) and his four cars (i.e., BMW 7000 series, a convertible Mercedes SL, a Jaguar XJ and a Toyota Land Cruiser. Notably all of these vehicles retail for somewhere between \$75,000 to well over \$100,000). While he and I did not discuss these observations (in fact, he was uninterested in discussing much with me), I very much felt like external signals of wealth and affluence were central to his orientation toward the

world. This perspective was supported by conversations with his wife, who had much less interest in these particular displays of status (although she clearly appreciates the luxuries afforded to her by their wealth, such as not working outside the home and spending time at the tennis club or on hobbies like interior design).

One of the clear benefits of staying in this guesthouse was that it offered a very lovely space to entertain affluent and well-connected guests who were either industry insiders or visitors to the Valley. While I was there, I invited a number of people over for dinner and/or wine, which allowed us to discuss wine, wine culture and the wine industry in a comfortable space that was consistent with their own surroundings. In many ways, I felt as though this arrangement offered me an added layer of legitimacy as an “insider” to a higher-class lifestyle and fostered connections with other affluent consumers. Therefore, during this visit I conducted 10 formal interviews with omnivorous consumers and joined several dinner parties where I informally interviewed 10 status-oriented consumers. The distinctions between these two consumer groups were quite striking, especially related to the topics of conversation and their level of engaging me as a participant in the conversation. Admittedly, I felt far more uncomfortable with the latter group. As an obvious outsider to the status-oriented group, I had very little to contribute to the conversation and they seemed more interested in conversing with each other than with me. Despite my discomfort, I feel confident in the data collection process because my apparent invisibility offered me a chance to observe the dynamics between people within this category without the distractions of conversations with any particular individual.

Also during this visit, I had many informal conversations with winery owners, winemakers and people who work with the fruit (from field support people to viticultural consultants). These conversations were helpful in understanding the production process and the local history of Napa Valley wineries. What stood out to me most about these interactions was the small and tight-knit community of people who work in the industry and how much they believe that Napa Valley wines are the best in the world. In every conversation, the respondent expressed extreme amounts of pride for being part of the larger Napa wine community and shared their personal commitment to support other growers, winemakers and winery owners produce the highest quality wines possible. Instead of competition, they communicated co-operation and mutual respect for other wine producers in the area. Certainly, one could argue that this desire for competitors to do well is good for their own businesses given everyone's shared tie to Napa Valley (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of this point); however, the concern seemed to extend beyond personal interests into a genuine care for other people in this small and tight-knit wine community. Therefore, it was common to hear stories about how people come together and support each other when they face personal or professional challenges (e.g., family sickness, financial difficulties).

Conclusion

By utilizing theories and methods (of data collection and analysis) within the qualitative tradition, this project offers a vivid insight into the tasting rooms of Napa Valley, California. After over three years of participant observation at differently positioned wineries in Napa, examining texts from a range of sources (both inside and

outside of Napa), semi-structured interviews with tasting hosts and consumers, countless informal conversations with people inside and outside the industry and personal tours of vineyards and wine cellars I feel quite confident in the data presented in the following pages. Moreover, the concurrent process of data collection and analysis allowed me to follow up with key informants or with colleagues familiar with my project when difficult questions emerged, thereby ensuring accuracy in my interpretation of the data.

The following chapter will discuss the theoretical issues related to the construction of critic generated Artistic Classification Systems (ACS) and how intermediaries (e.g., service workers situated between the producer and consumer of cultural products) enact rituals that reinforce symbolic boundaries that encircle these distinctions. Then, using the data gathered for this project, the chapter will proceed to demonstrate how ACS are enacted in differently oriented wine tasting rooms in Napa Valley.

CHAPTER 4

INTOXICATORS, EDUCATORS AND GATEKEEPERS: THE ENACTMENT OF SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES IN NAPA WINERIES

Introduction

Wines in the United States are unquestionably encircled by symbolic boundaries that create conceptual distinctions that define quality and value, as well as, provide markers of status and prestige. While there exists a long history of these symbolic boundaries, they have gained a formal character during recent decades as critics (such as Robert Parker) or lifestyle magazines (such as *The Wine Spectator*) have institutionalized the process of consecration. Therefore, ratings and reviews for wines and wineries (and to some extent, winemakers) offer clear product categories and a coherent and hierarchically organized classification scheme that confers value and worth to some products over others. According to some scholars, these types of symbolic boundaries have the potential to translate into social boundaries when they are enacted as rules that govern interactions among or between social actors (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Fournier 1992). In these cases, symbolic boundaries are practiced in ways that create distinctions between people who are deemed less worthy or valued, based on factors such as economic success or cultural sophistication (see Lamont and Small 2008). Previous empirical studies raise questions about the links between symbolic and social boundaries, suggesting that symbolic boundaries provide necessary but not sufficient conditions for the emergence of social boundaries (see Lamont and Molnár 2002).

For instance, in the United States, knowledge about high culture has often included a familiarity with fine wine, thus offering wine aficionados a significant amount of cultural currency among high status social groups. While this knowledge was once communicated through tight-knit, and affluent, social circles, it is now widely available through wine-related publications, wine schools, television stations, executive training programs, the Internet and other venues for mass audiences. In effect, then, wines, as well as, wine-related knowledge (e.g., ratings and reviews) have become much more accessible to all income groups, offering a wider array of consumers the ability to develop their “tastes” and to access this once restricted realm of cultural knowledge. To some, this mass dissemination of symbolic knowledge about a status-infused cultural product may suggest that old social hierarchies are being replaced by more democratic spaces of consumption, where anyone can enter or leave without concern for social boundaries that once divided the affluent from the masses (see Featherstone 1991). From this perspective, while symbolic differences in the value of wines may exist, these would not necessarily structure wine consumption sites in a hierarchical order or enforce social boundaries between consumer groups who visit these sites.

While previous studies related to the relationship between symbolic and social boundaries have often focused on the consumer and his or her taste preferences (see Bourdieu 1984; Lamont 1992; Halle 1993; Holt 1997, 1998), this project begins its investigation with sites of consumption, including how they are structured in relation to national markets (e.g., market oriented v. cultural preservation) and how symbolic boundaries are enacted by workers who have face-to face contact with consumers within these sites. More specifically, it offers insight into the role of tasting room hosts in Napa

Valley, California who act as intermediaries between the experts who generate classification systems and the consumers who enters the consumption sites. Building on the rich body of research related to the culture of production (see Peterson and Anand 2004) and sociological research on symbolic and social boundaries (see Lamont and Molnár 2002; Lamont and Small 2008) this chapter examines how tasting room host intermediaries communicate and perform rituals related to expert-generated classifications and when these interactions enforce or lessen hierarchical social boundaries among consumer groups.

Artistic Classifications

Sociological research has long highlighted the way in which classification systems structure social interactions and our understanding of the world (Durkheim and Mauss 1903/1963; Douglas 1986, Zurubavel 1991). Classifications offer a coherent and pervasive set of categories and patterns that make social order possible (Douglas 1986; Estes 1994), and are maintained at various levels of analysis (institutional, organizational and interpersonal). Humans internalize these classifications to the extent that they are often overlooked as “common sense” explanations about how the world works. While classification categories can be primarily descriptive (e.g., wine varietals categories such as Pinot Noir and Merlot), in many cases classification systems provide a hierarchical structure that place more value on certain categories relative to others. Take for instance, the effect of the popular box office hit, *Sideways*, on the hierarchical ordering of these two varietals of wine. Throughout the movie, the varietal category of Pinot Noir is

elevated as a more complex and sophisticated wine relative to the simplistic and lower quality Merlot grape varietal.²⁰

In this way, classifications confer identities to objects that provide normative grounding for hierarchical arrangements that preference “authorized” categories of actors, products, actions, etc. Interestingly, authorized categories may or not cohere with the content or intrinsic quality of a particular product (Regev 1992; Grazian 2003, 2004; Peterson 1997). For instance, in the case of music, positive labels of “authenticity” have been applied to performers who project a range of contradictory images and sounds, thus suggesting that authenticity relates to social processes of legitimation rather than the inherent characteristics of a cultural object (see Dowd 2007). This social process occurs as cultural entrepreneurs develop a general consensus on how genres should be classified relative to each other and how to garner the institutional and organizational resources that will secure wide acceptance of this classification system. Arguably, then, in the case of wine varietals, the quality or aesthetic superiority of Pinot Noir is not inherent in the grape itself, but part of a larger social process whereby Pinot Noir gained consecration and audience appeal through cultural entrepreneurs (e.g., the character Miles) and the institutional support (e.g., media distribution) of this particular classification scheme.

In various fields of cultural production, actors often compete for these symbolic forms of capital including prestige, consecration, or celebrity status obtained through legitimating actors and institutions (Bourdieu 1983/1993). Here, various forms of high culture are often described as “priceless,” or beyond the principles of crude economics.

²⁰ As one example, take the often-quoted statement by Miles as he and Jack are walking into a dinner: “No, if anyone orders Merlot, I’m leaving. I am NOT drinking any f**ing Merlot! See Gray 2005 on the decreasing sales of Merlot following this film’s reclassification of Merlot as similar to vinegar.

Therefore, artists, writers, or artisan winemakers may disavow commercial interests in favor of symbolic or cultural accolades that recognize the sacred qualities of their works. Similarly, consumers familiar with these products (or legitimated ways of consuming these products) may enjoy higher status through their familiarity with these products (DiMaggio 1982a, 1987, 1991; Bourdieu 1984). For instance, Bourdieu (1984) argues that consecrated objects operate as social signifiers for more prestigious segments of society and effectively reinforce social divisions. Hence, legitimating institutions—established and maintained by elites—facilitate social reproduction through the consecration process that identifies particular products as “authentic” and/or “superior” (e.g., more valuable) and distinguishes consumers familiar with these products as more “cultured” (e.g., having higher status).

Previous studies in cultural sociology emphasize the historical processes that lead to the solidification of legitimate categories. For instance, DiMaggio (1982a) argues that classifications of “high” and “low” culture in 19th Century Boston were part of a historical process that had institutional and organizational origins. In this case, the formation of “high culture” rested on the ability of urban elites to create an organizational base that was isolated from market pressures (i.e., the need for profits) and that could institutionalize an artistic classification system that exalted specific genres of music, visual arts, dance, and theater above the entertainment enjoyed by the mass population. By monopolizing the classification schemes for artistic forms (and modes of appreciation), elites were able to protect their status and maintain social boundaries around valuable cultural currency.

ACS and Market Societies

While these forms of symbolic capital are internal to the field of cultural production, external variables (such as the need for profits) can compromise the ability of elites to preserve cultural dominance [See Figure 2]. For instance, market pressures may de-center symbolic classification systems in order to enlarge the access of cultural goods for mass audiences (Weber 1922/1968; DiMaggio 1982a). Firms that generate profits through the expansion of market demand must compromise classifications around art forms in order to make products accessible to wider audiences. Therefore, cultural producers may develop “cross-over” genres, in order to entice larger audiences to purchase their products (see Peterson 1978). For example, DiMaggio (1991) shows that privately owned, for profit firms, such as the Boston Museum during the 1840s, mixed fine art and popular culture in order to increase commercial appeal and sales to audiences less knowledgeable about high art.

During recent decades, large-scale, for-profit firms have had increasing success in the mass production of cultural products by expanding audience demand for symbolic and lifestyle products. These marketing strategies (as well as other changes in the social structure, see DiMaggio 1987) may have eroded traditional distinctions between “high” and “popular” culture in the United States, especially given that most consumer groups can purchase goods that will mask their class position (Featherstone 1991). Moreover, marketers use strategies to either capture mass audiences or “subculture” groups such as “foodies,” Harley Davidson riders or “wine enthusiasts” (See Brake 1985) that are not explicitly linked with hierarchically ordered status groups.

According to DiMaggio (1987), these commercial classifications often conflict with Artistic Classification Systems (ACS) because they are imposed upon cultural products by corporate firms in order to generate a profit. Here, producers use the aid of advertising, television, and specialized distribution networks to segment markets that may or may not cohere with status groups. DiMaggio explains this difference between ACS and commercial classification in the following:

More often commercial processes erode ritual classification [i.e., ACS]. Commercial producers seek large markets and economies of scale. By contrast, status groups try to monopolize symbolic goods for use in rituals of inclusion or differentiation. Because artworks that sell to small percentages of large publics usually net more profit than art that appeals to a small set of aficionados, commercial producers try to expand markets even at the risk of reducing the ritual value of the products they sell. This discrepancy between symbolic and commercial value creates an opposition between ritual and commercial principles of classifications (1987: 450).

Given our increasingly market-oriented society, DiMaggio (1987, 1991) contends that historical changes have contributed to an erosion of ACS in the United States, thereby minimizing the effectiveness of elites to monopolize symbolic goods and maintain cultural hegemony. Moreover, urban elites have become a less cohesive social group, organizations have faced increased market pressures, and educational institutions have offered fewer avenues for cultural appreciation (e.g., the humanities). These patterns have increased the role of the middle class in shaping culture-producing organizations, thereby weakening the symbolic logic of cultural production in favor of profit-driven commercial logics. Arguably, then, the institutionalized cultural authority has grown less capable of producing a coherent artistic classification system (ACS) that is universally accepted.

In his seminal work, “Classification in Arts,” DiMaggio (1987) provides four dimensions through which we can assess the rigidity of ACS in contemporary societies [again, see Figure 2]. More specifically, in order for ACS to function as a foundation for social ordering, societies must have a high level of object *differentiation*, these objects must be *hierarchically* organized, this hierarchy must be commonly accepted as *universal*, and the boundaries of this hierarchical ordering must be maintained through *symbolic rituals*, norms and sanctions. Applying these four dimensions to research on the symbolic value of wine offers the opportunity to understand the extent to which institutionalized classifications in this industry function to reinforce hierarchical status distinctions (i.e., boundaries) among organizations (i.e., wineries), cultural products (i.e., wine) and consumer groups within a thriving commercial field. There are two important factors to consider in this investigation, namely, the role critics or experts (i.e., cultural entrepreneurs) play in structuring ACS in for-profit realms (i.e., constructing a hierarchy) and how these classification systems reach consumer groups (i.e. generating universality and reinforcing symbolic boundaries).

The Role of Critics as “Experts”

Recent scholarship has focused attention on the consecration of popular cultural products that exist within the commercial realm (Santoro 2002; Baumann 2001; Schmutz 2005). As observed by Baumann (2001), these shifts take place, in part, due to changes related to consumers such as an increased dissemination of information through the media and the expansion of higher education to consumers. As consumers become more knowledgeable and discerning about cultural products such as film, these forms of

entertainment gain higher “status” as legitimate art forms. Simultaneously, art forms once marketed to working class audiences enjoy an expansion of a classification system that seeks to define the categories of “artistic worth.” As argued by Baumann (2001):

A classification as art rather than entertainment implies that the artistic value of a cultural product can be justified according to a set of conventions. The intellectualization of film involved the application of aesthetic standards and so was a crucial development in the promotion of film to the status of art. Film reviews available to the public in popular periodicals provide evidence for the evolution of an aesthetic in the field of film (411).

Creating a discourse about criteria that qualify a cultural product as “art” offers both legitimacy to the classification process and provides a rigidity or standardization to the classification system itself (Bourdieu 1993). Hence, these classifications tend to be professionally generated by “experts” within a cultural field (see DiMaggio 1987; Dowd 2004). Previous studies on cultural production point to the predominance of “critics” among these experts within the realm of music (DiMaggio 1992; Dowd et al. 2002; Schmutz 2005), film (Kapsis 1992; Allen and Lincoln 2004; Hicks and Petrova 2006) and literature (van Rees 1983). Where critics have successfully solidified artistic classification system around cultural products, we may see less of an erosion of the cultural authority of elites and more pronounced social boundaries than DiMaggio (1991) originally theorized.

Likewise, in the marketplace for traditionally non-cultural goods, critics play a key role in helping consumers navigate the vast array of product distinctions available in the marketplace. These “experts” have a unique place in this legitimation process as they provide product reviews, recommendations, and endorsements that may influence both producer decisions and consumer choices. For instance, Zuckerman (2004) finds that in

financial markets where consumers have difficulty making evaluative decisions about product offerings, experts help classify products and offer rankings that help consumers navigate complex and competing information claims. The critics who provide such investment advice are most successful when there is a high level of coherence within an industry. Therefore, when critics share consensus about an overarching classification system that differentiates products into coherent categories, analysts are more capable of predicting future patterns of success for investors (Zuckerman 2004). Or, to restate in relation to DiMaggio's four dimensions of cultural authority, classifications are more salient when they enjoy universality among institutional actors, including critics.

Arguably, then, in industries where consensus exists among "experts" about categories and value, then we might expect a more coherent system of classification that would inform consumer tastes and preferences and reinforce symbolic boundaries for products and contribute to social boundaries across consumers groups. This might be especially true in markets where products act as social signifiers and critics can offer legitimacy to the products of consumption, firms who produce these objects, and the consumers who are familiar with these products (Douglas and Isherwood 1979/1996; Bourdieu 1984).

Not only are products themselves subject to classification systems, but also the manner in which products should be consumed gains value through expert discussions of "appreciation." For instance, classification systems established by institutional actors (such as critics, experts or educators) suggest a rationalized structure for assessing beauty and engaging in the practice of cultural appreciation (Bourdieu 1984). This makes the consumption of cultural objects difficult for people who do not have refined sensibilities, a language to discuss distinctions, or a set of skills needed to understand the cultural

product. This difficulty for the untrained consumer is easily seen in the example of wine, given that wines can express hundreds of aromas and flavors that take years of training to identify and develop a vocabulary to describe. Again, we can reference the movie *Sideways* as an illustration, in which Jack is interested in the intoxicating effects of wine (i.e., function) in contrast to Miles' appreciation for the nuances (i.e., form) that various grape varieties can express through the artistic process. Hence, for truly appreciating consumers (like Miles), the complex nuances found in wine are artistic expressions that combine the specificity of the *terroir* (e.g., soil, weather, elevation, etc.) with the vision, creativity and skill of the wine maker.

Service Workers as Intermediaries

The study of ACS has long highlighted the way in which on-going social interactions inform the ranking of cultural products, whereby genre distinctions and classifications are created and maintained by institutional actors within the field of production and enacted by consumers within the field of consumption. Therefore, DiMaggio (1987) argues, “an ACS reflects both the taste structure of a population and the structure of production and distribution of cultural goods” (441). In order for classification systems (of both legitimated products and modes of appreciation) to be universal they must be widely disseminated, actively acknowledged, and acted upon by actors within the field of production *and* field of consumption. In other words, classifications must order the social relations within and among the status categories of organizations (e.g., wineries), products (e.g., wines) and consumers (ranging from aficionados to the mass consumer). Classifications must find their way to social actors in

such a way that they structure social relationships, including the organization of social boundaries among groups.

Recent scholarship in the area of cultural production emphasizes the role of intermediaries, who occupy a position between the original producer of a good and the consumer of that product. These actors are afforded the responsibility of maintaining the symbolic value of the object throughout the production chain (see Ahikvist and Faulkner 2002; Fine 1992). The role of intermediaries has been documented in many cultural industries where an “advanced service class” or professional class acts as an “expert” or “gatekeeper” by adding legitimacy to particular cultural products before they reach consumers (Becker 1982; Lash and Urry 1994; Bauman 2001; Schmutz 2005). To date, relatively little research within the production of culture literature has investigated the way in which service workers act as intermediaries who interact directly with consumers about institutionally legitimated cultural objects. Yet, the explosive growth of the service sector in the United States parallels the emergence of consumer goods that have increasing complexity and symbolic significance (Sassen 1999). And, even though over seventy percent of the United States workforce is currently employed in the service sector, very little empirical information exists about how these intermediaries aid in the production or preservation of symbolic value or social boundaries at the site of consumption.

Service workers are most often situated between the production and consumption of a commodity, whether the commodity is a tangible (e.g., car) or an intangible (e.g., mortgage) product. Many case studies suggest that these occupations necessitate face-to-face interactions with consumers (Hochschild 1983; Ehrenrich 2001), require tacit

knowledge to perform jobs (Fuller and Smith 1991), and expect workers to manufacture social relations to create a particular environment for consumers (Filby 1992). Moreover, these workers help consumers differentiate among products and understand expert generated values attached to objects, thus requiring an accumulation of cultural knowledge and skills (Hochschild 1983; Macdonald and Sirianni 1996; Sherman 2007).

In her case study of luxury hotels, Rachel Sherman (2007) offers an exceptional account of how service workers, who have direct contact with guests (e.g., front desk clerks, concierge), participate with consumers in reinforcing status differences between luxury hotels and non-luxury hotels, workers and guests, and guests from different class positions. While her work does not explicitly utilize the production of culture literature (or ACS), her research effectively points out the interactive process in which service workers either reinforce existing classification (for high culture consumers) or “educate” new consumers about the categorical ranking of Luxury Hotels related high culture products (e.g., restaurants, theater) and appropriate modes of appreciation. Interestingly, Sherman makes numerous references to the role of “professionals” or “critics” in maintaining the elevated structural position of the luxury hotels in the study, as well as, the producing and consuming actors who ensure the rigidity of symbolic and social boundaries. For instance, Sherman explains,

Managerial rhetoric explicitly highlighted the status of the hotel and its guests, allowing workers to glean a sense of prestige by association. Training sessions were peppered with references to the elevated status of guests (“the top 1 percent”), as well as to the high ranking and multiple awards of the Luxury Garden properties around the world (177).

These findings may not be surprising given that this study focuses on organizational types that are oriented toward cultural forms of legitimation (vs. mass-commercial organizations). In fact, other studies show that the extent to which workers participate in the cultural production of symbolic boundaries varies by organizational type. For instance, workers employed in organizations motivated by market logics (e.g., focus on profits, organizational growth, or bureaucratic efficiency) are less capable of maintaining boundaries around cultural goods than workers employed in organizations that are more insulated from these pressures (DiMaggio 1987; Ahikvist and Faulkner 2002). As a specific example, Fine (1992) discovers that market pressures and consumer demands confine the ability of chefs to create aesthetic products that accentuate sensory-based form over function. However, responses to this pressure are based on whether the restaurant was driven by cultural factors (e.g., culinary expertise) or economic factors (e.g., practical considerations). Given these findings, service workers in other fields may differ in their ability to reinforce hierarchically ordered classification systems, depending on whether the organization is oriented toward market success or culturally-oriented validation. As discussed in detail below, this project offers some clarification about how service workers in differently oriented organizations (cultural vs. market driven) interact with consumers about artistic classification systems and how these interactions reinforce or lessen symbolic boundaries for products or social boundaries for consumers.

Wineries in Napa Valley

Central to the market expansion of wine in the United States has been the attempt to alter consumer perceptions about wine as a high status beverage through exposure (i.e.,

tasting wines) and education about wine appreciation. While this process of exposure and education occurs throughout the U.S., nowhere is it more prevalent than in Napa Valley, California. No one could argue against the fact that Napa Valley has a unique place in the U.S. wine industry—where high culture and wine converge into a visible, yet normalized, high status lifestyle. Indeed, the area was envisioned this way by Napa producers during the post-WWII decades, who opened their vineyards (and tasting rooms) to the public as an attempt to actively link wines with visual and culinary arts, symphony orchestras, and other forms of European-inspired sophistication and style (Lapsley 1996; also see www.mondavi.com).

Today, while driving through the 35-mile Valley one is surrounded by multi-million dollar vineyard estates, luxury automobiles, restaurants that offer the finest in world cuisines, boutique shops with imported Italian linens, and corner stores with picnic items rarely found in even the most cosmopolitan areas. The winegrowing region of Napa Valley boasts the highest cost for agricultural land in the state of California, averaging approximately \$180,000 per unplanted acre and \$300,000 per planted vineyard acre (Bryant 2009). Moreover, recent sales of Napa wineries have exceeded \$65 million (Franson 2005) and the cost of building a new winery in the area can range from \$8 million to over \$50 million (Conway 2002; personal conversation 2008). Given these initial start-up costs, it may take wineries several years (if ever at all) to make a profit on their investment.²¹ Instead, ownership of a winery offers the ability to compete in the realm of symbolic goods that can earn high accolades within elite circles (Barron 1995;

²¹ And, many investors never make a profit on their initial investment. In fact, a commonly told joke in the region highlights this point: Question: “How do you make a small fortune in the wine business?” Answer: “Start with a large fortune.”

Lapsley 1996; Conaway 2002). As area historian, James Conway (2002) describes, “This is the first time in history, people are spending fortunes to make chump change and in the process be associated with the most basic sort of enterprise—agriculture—which in its incarnation has become glamorous” (11). This quote points the fact that while wine is big business for mass commercial organizations, it remains tied to symbolic forms of capital for other wineries in the Valley.

Tourists from all over the world frequent Napa Valley to tour the vineyards and to sample wines at the tasting rooms. In fact, Napa Valley is California’s second most popular tourist destination (next to *DisneyLand*), with approximately 4.7 million visitors per year (Wine Institute). Tasting rooms in Napa tend to be adjacent to the wineries that produce the wines and offer a range of experiences to guests. Some of these experiences are exclusively wine related and others provide “cross-over genres” such as amusement park rides, popular culture museums (e.g., film or music), or connections with sports (e.g., NASCAR). Not surprisingly, then, wineries also vary in their orientation toward mass markets or exclusive markets, representing a spectrum of generalists and specialists that I have labeled Mass-Commercial, Limited Commercial and Exclusive/Elite. A description of these organizations and tasting rooms follow, and are summarized in Table 9 and Table 10, respectively.

Mass-Commercial (Generalists)

In terms of total sales, mass-commercial organizations dominate the U.S. wine industry with control of approximately 85 percent of all the wine sold to national and international markets (Goodhue et al. 2008). In most cases, international corporations

own these wineries and include wine as part of their larger portfolio of consumer products such as tobacco or beer. These generalists are large organizations (producing millions of cases per year) that often own multiple wineries or wine brands, and sell wines at various price points to a wide range of consumers. In order to attract the broadest consumer base, these wineries offer wines at costs as low as \$5.00 per bottle or as much as \$150.00 per bottle, hence they attract new wine consumers, as well as, wine collectors. These firms enjoy broad distribution networks and stock most grocery stores, chain restaurants, and large box retailers across the United States. Therefore, wineries in this category orient themselves toward market incentives rather than purely cultural forms of appreciation such as prestige. Given the broad distribution networks for these wineries, tasting rooms for these wines are fewer than one might expect. For instance, out of the top twenty-two California-based wine brands sold in the United States in 2005, only eight of them have tasting rooms open for visitors (IRI 2006). And, of the top ten new wine brands, none of them have tasting rooms open for tourists (Ibid). This factor significantly limits the range of possible tasting rooms that would fall in the mass-produced category.

Where tasting rooms for mass-commercial wineries do exist, they are oriented toward a highly segmented consumer population, with one tasting area open for mass distributed wines and one designated for reserve wines. These tasting areas are almost always geographically located in different buildings and divided by dense vegetation, gardens, or other physical boundaries. When this is not the case, there are distinctly separate tasting bars with different tasting room hosts and wine lists that reflect cost and quality. Access to both areas is open to the public without reservation or appointment;

however, visitors are physically directed to the main tasting bar by the arrangement of merchandise and directive signs. In contrast, Reserve tasting bars may be off to the side in a more private alcove. There are very few (if any) signs to direct consumers toward Reserve tasting areas so it is not surprising that they enjoy only about a quarter of the guest traffic compared to the main tasting area (Informal conversations 2006, 2007).

In the main tasting areas, guests are invited to taste approximately five wines (often available in the mass market) for between \$5.00 and \$10.00 per tasting. Often these rooms feature sweeter wines such as White Zinfandel or wines from white grape varietals such as Riesling or Sauvignon Blanc, all of which are common preferences for new wine consumers. While tasting hosts in these sites tend to be incredibly friendly and personable, they offer very little information about the actual winemaking process, the history of the winery, or the wines themselves. Several of these hosts confided that they were “just learning about wine” (Personal Conversations: Larry 2006, Mimi 2006).

While some tasting room hosts in this category are full time employees, many hosts are either part time or temporary workers, some of whom have retired from their full time professions outside the wine industry. In-house training programs orient these workers to the winery and the wines, however, the technical details regarding the wines are found on written “cheat-sheets” kept behind the tasting bar. Therefore, when consumers ask questions such as, “what is the residual sugar in this wine?” tasting hosts refer to sheets to ensure accuracy in their responses. If information is not readily available on these sheets, there are often managers who can be counted on to answer questions for consumers.

These main tasting rooms are typically loud and crowded, especially when a tour buses unload guests for tastings. Patrons are often seen wearing t-shirts, jeans, and tennis

shoes and tend to have cameras to document their experience in this tourist region.

Tasting hosts often make jokes (that are standardized from group to group) in order to elicit laughter from visitors and to create a very casual experience. While wines in these tasting rooms are served in glass stemware,²² visitors are either not allowed to take their glasses outside to consume the wine or they are given plastic cups to take outside onto the adjacent patios.

In contrast to this space, Reserve tasting areas are often a higher caliber of construction, complete with hardwood floors, crown moldings, crystal chandeliers, and/or antique furnishings. At times they boast tasting bars that have been hand carved out of rich woods, giving the room a feeling of formality and prestige. Private doors off of these rooms may open onto patios where tables are arranged to overlook gardens and provide a place to linger in private conversation in between tastes within the flight. These rooms offer “estate” or “reserve” wine²³ flights at costs ranging from \$15.00 to \$25.00 per tasting. While white wines are often included in these tasting flights, red wines garner a higher price and are the focus of the tasting experience. Estate wines or other high-end cuvee wines (which are blends of more than one varietal) could cost as much as \$150.00 per bottle if they have gained notoriety as “collectables” from industry

²² These glasses tend to be standardized sizes that are used for both the white and red wines.

²³ While the term “reserve” is often used for wines in the United States, it has no legal significance or any universal meaning. “Estate,” on the other hand, does have universal significance and legal protection, meaning that wines labeled with such designation must have 100% of its grapes grown on the winery’s property. In other words, these grapes are under the complete control of winery employees from planning, pruning, harvesting, winemaking, bottling, etc.

critics. Commonly, tasting experiences include two different styles of quality stemware²⁴ designated for white and red wines.

The tasting room hosts in these areas are more often full-time employees or part-time employees who have been in the wine industry for many years. Therefore, they have more wine-related knowledge than hosts in the main tasting rooms, often gaining their information from in-house trainings and personal initiative. This allows them to offer more information about the wines in each category, including where the grapes are grown, the ratings, and how the wines on the list compare with each other (e.g., “this one has more citrus as compared to the pear you tasted in that one”). While, these interactions could be labeled informative, they lack the broad educational content offered in the limited-commercial tasting rooms (see below).

Notably, in both the Mass and Reserve tasting rooms, wineries in this category offer consumers a broad range of wine-related and non-wine-related consumer goods in adjacent gift shops. In fact, it is common for consumers to walk through a large gift shop before finally reaching the tasting bar. In these shops, bottles of wine on the back shelf may be completely eclipsed by the serving trays, dog collars, ice coolers, photographs, books, magnets, sweatshirts, baseball caps, floral arrangements, playing cards, maps, golf bags, and countless other products intended to catch the attention of entering consumers. Many of the products within these gifts shops are not related directly to wine products, yet they are arranged within the context of the overall tourist experience of wine country. Notably, this trend coheres well with the theoretical concerns raised by DiMaggio (1991),

²⁴ Riedel stemware is most often used in these spaces. Riedel has emerged as an industry leader in high quality stemware, in part, because they have successfully marketed their products to affluent consumers through advertisements in *The Wine Spectator* and other wine publications, as well as, their national efforts to co-sponsor wine-related events that serve high-status wines in their glasses.

whereby commercial interests (i.e., generation of profits) foster “cross-over” genres of gift shop paraphernalia that might display a wine logo or wine reference (e.g., a cheese board labeled “would you like some cheese with your whine?” or a dress tie covered with various bottles of wine).

Limited Commercial (Specialists)

The first type of specialist organization can be understood as limited-commercial firms, or medium sized wineries, that produce between 10,000-250,000 cases of wine annually. Throughout the United States, consumers can locate these wines in retail markets that have wine managers (e.g., Whole Foods), affluent chain restaurants such as Ruth’s Chris or locally owned restaurants in metropolitan areas, and specialty wine shops. At the retail shops, wines in this category cost on average between \$18 and \$65 per bottle. Most of these wineries in Napa Valley have tasting rooms that are open and readily accessible to tourists, perhaps because their wines are more difficult to find in mass markets and wineries rely upon direct sales to distribute their products. Medium sized wineries have faced many challenges in recent years as the growing competition from smaller firms redirects visitors away from these tasting rooms, and larger firms enjoy economies of scale and control over increasingly consolidated distribution networks (Goodhue et al. 2008). This leaves many organizations of this size struggling to maintain their share of the market. Therefore, many mid-sized wineries have been absorbed by larger corporations, with only some of which maintaining operating control.

In the Napa Valley area, mid-sized wineries are well represented among tasting rooms. In fact, many of these wineries work very hard to boost tourist traffic to their

tasting rooms by linking the winery with other forms of popular culture, including films, music, NASCAR, elaborately landscaped grounds or amusement park-type rides. Despite these “Disney Land” effects²⁵, the wines found within mid-sized wineries are often highly regarded by wine journals, tourist magazines, and industry critics.

The feel of these tasting rooms can be described as casual, yet consumers who frequent these sites tend to dress more trendy than the tourists who go to main tasting rooms in mass-commercial wineries. For instance, patrons are typically dressed in attire identifiable as “designer fashion,” such as diamond and platinum jewelry, Chanel sunglasses, Prada handbags, and Cole Haan shoes. The grounds of these tasting rooms are often even more immaculate than the wineries in the previous category. And, in most cases, the flower gardens, fountains, rock walkways, and statues are spectacularly arranged with complementary colors and aesthetic styles, and the grounds are pristinely manicured. These wineries often host large wedding parties or cater various types of events so they also boast large dining halls or outdoor patios that overlook one of the estate vineyards. Rarely do these wineries offer services such as guided “garden tours,” but open the entirety of the grounds to guests, who can walk paths that have well-marked placards to display the names of various plants, flowers and trees. In some areas, there may also be informational signs that explain the history of winemaking, sculptured art on display, or the lineage of family members who have owned the property. This set up allows guests to complete self-guided informational tours at their own initiative. Notably, visitors can often buy glasses of wine at these wineries to take outside and enjoy as they sit on the patio or walk the grounds.

²⁵ As they are often referred to by commentators on the area (see Barron 1995; Deutschman 2003).

Tasting flights always include both white and red varietals, unless a consumer voices a preference to only taste reds or whites.²⁶ Occasionally, these lists will include a dessert wine or a Rosé, but this is much less common than in either of the other organizational types.²⁷ All of the tasting rooms in this category actively promote wine club memberships, whereby the winery will ship wines to someone's home several times per year at a discount that average somewhere between 10% and 15% per bottle. Along with these shipments, members are given educational information (such as recipes or serving suggestions) and "insider information" about winery sponsored events and limited releases. Also, these wine clubs allow member to taste wines free of charge. Costs for these memberships ranges between \$50 and \$100 per quarter for a sampler of two to three wines from the Reserve list, or as much as \$400 per quarter for three of the Limited or more difficult to obtain selections.²⁸

Tasting rooms in this category often have two different quality and price ranges for wine products, where the first will be between \$15 and \$30 for a bottle of wine that is limited in its availability in national markets. These wines are not impossible to find away from Napa, but they will be inconsistently stocked at large chain supermarkets and the may not be available in all regions of the country. While some higher end chain restaurants may offer these products, they are more likely to be found on the wine lists in smaller, privately owned restaurants or cafes, where they range in price from \$30 to \$75 a

²⁶ This is often the case in these tasting rooms, where visitors walk up the bar and announce that they "only drink reds."

²⁷ Interestingly, Rosé wines were rarely found in the mid-sized wineries in 2006, when data collection for this project began. However, after recent articles in *The Wine Spectator* (and other publications) about Rosé wines, they are far more common in these tasting rooms. See Chapter 5 for more details on this point.

²⁸ As discussed in Chapter 2, consumers from states with restrictive laws regarding wine distribution are blocked from becoming wine club members, thereby limiting sales to these customers and lessening the amount of insider information they can access once away from Napa.

bottle or \$8 to \$12 dollars per glass. Often these wines are given particular designations such as “Gold Label,” “Old Vine,” or “Provence,” which has no nationally accepted meaning or significance (in comparison to designations such as “Estate”). Many times tasting room staff will describe these wines as “more palatable to newer wine drinkers,” yet they are considerably less fruity and sweet than wines in the main tasting rooms at mass commercial organizations. Cost for these tastings ranges from \$10 to \$15 for approximately five wines.

The second tier of wines is only available at the winery, local wine merchants in the Napa region, or occasionally through high-end wine shops scattered in urban areas across the country. In the tasting rooms, these wines are designated with a “Reserve” or “Limited” distinction and range in price from around \$40 to as much as \$80 per bottle. They are identified by labels such as “Our Award Winning Wines,” “Proprietor’s Tasting,” “Library Selections” and “Limited Wines.” Commonly, tasting lists for these wines will include the number of cases that were produced in a given year, stating, for example, **600 cases produced** following the tasting notes. Consumers can expect to pay approximately \$12 to \$20 for 5 tastes from this list.

While these two tiers are clearly designated on the tasting menu it is very common for tasting room hosts to deviate from this list if consumers ask questions about wine or seem interested in learning new information about particular wines on the list or the winery more generally. This may mean that when a consumer pays for a less expensive tasting, the host may offer wine from a Reserve list if she/he believes the consumer will enjoy or appreciate the comparison. For example, if a consumer asks questions such as “How long will this wine cellar?” or “Was this aged in American or

French Oak?” or “How would you pair this wine?” the tasting hosts might enthusiastically engage these conversations and routinely pour additional wines from the Reserve list or open bottles to taste that were not included on any of printed the wine lists. Moreover, these tasting hosts often exercise their authority to waive tasting fees for wine purchases or in cases where she/he spent a good deal of time socializing and discussing wine with interested consumers. Therefore, unlike the scripted performances from the mass commercial tasting room employees (in both Mass and Reserve rooms), it is very common for hosts in this category to blur the distinctions between first tier and second tier wines, to exceed the number of pours that are listed on the menu, and to waive fees associated with tastings in exchange for engaged conversation or a wine purchase that has been recommended by the host.

Typically, hosts in this category are very knowledgeable about wine and have spent years learning about various distinctions in grape varieties, growing regions, climates, etc. While they often do not hold formal credentials, they have done an extraordinary amount of self-learning through books, classes, or other types of education open to the public. Even though many hosts are part-time or temporary employees, they often describe wine as their “passion” and treat it as a serious hobby, in which they have invested a lot of time and money.

Upon first glance, walking into a winery in this category may seem to share some of the similarities of the mass-commercial organizations because non-wine related commercial goods are still quite extensive as they greet guests on their way to the tasting bar. However, closer inspection reveals that merchandise in these wineries is of a much higher “boutique” quality than items in the previous category. For instance, rather than

mass-produced products, these places offer handmade pottery and art, homemade soaps, spa lotions, local olive oils and vinegars, high thread count linens (e.g., table clothes and napkins), autographed copies of Napa-inspired cookbooks that feature wines or wine pairings, and other items that one might find at a local boutique in the Valley. Therefore, while commercial interests still guide the positioning of an extensive range of consumer products, the higher quality and price seems to indicate that they cater to more of a “middle-brow” consumer population (Bourdieu 1984).

*Elite/Exclusive (Specialists)*²⁹

A second type of specialist organizations falls into the category that Swaminathan (1995) identifies as “micro-wineries.” These firms produce less than 10,000 cases of wine per year, and many are as small as 2,000 cases annually. While relatively new to the U.S. wine industry, wineries of this size are rapidly growing in prestigious viticultural areas such as Napa Valley, and are often referred to as “cult” wine because of their “cult-like following.” Rather than being oriented toward mass-markets, firms in this category often protect their products from the masses through exclusive distribution networks that limit accessibility. In the U.S. market, some vintages from these firms can be purchased from exclusive wine shops or top tier sommelier lists. Otherwise, sales are limited to on-site purchases at tasting rooms, wine clubs (which may have waiting lists), or direct contact

²⁹ The typical industry definition of a “boutique” winery once was less than 2,000 cases per year (see Swaminathan 1995); however, recently the industry has changed this designation to include wineries that produce less than 10,000 cases per year. Note, however, that many wineries in this category continue to produce closer to 2,000 cases annually (see Goodhue et al. 2008).

with a vintner or winemaker. Prices for these wines can range anywhere between \$30.00 to over \$200 per bottle,³⁰ depending upon the estate, vintage, winemaker, or expert rating.

While wineries and tasting rooms in this category share some similarities (which will be discussed in more detail below) there exists a significant division within this elite/exclusive category of specialty organizations. This divide rests in how long the people associated with a winery (e.g., owner, vintner, winemaker) have lived in Napa Valley, namely between people who are part of a long tradition of grape growing and/or wine making and those people who have only recently moved to the area. While these two groups share many similarities in terms of quality, access, tasting room space, they diverge considerably regarding how they understand wine and how they relate to industry critics and the ACS that structures wine quality and status. These differences will be briefly outlined below before moving to the common tasting room experiences that they offer to consumers.

Old Napa

Napa is rich with history and many people in the Valley can trace their genealogy back to prominent wine families from either Napa or Sonoma (the neighboring wine valley to the west of Napa) County. The description that people from this category most often use for themselves is “farmer,” indicating a tight connection to the land and a rich

³⁰ These prices reflect retail sales, however, once they are in the hands of consumers the price may increase to as much as \$1000 per bottle on E-Bay, public and private auctions, and as part of a persons’ library of wines. Notably, some of the wines in this category never make it to the general public at retail prices because they are sold out to wine club members before mass release. Therefore, it is rare that these highly coveted wines (such as ones that gain high accolades from critics) enter the marketplace at the prices listed here.

understanding of seasonal and environmental influences on wine production. It is quite common for winery owners in this category to work in the fields along with paid employees and to be an active part of the winemaking process. In fact, everyone within the organization is involved in some way or another in the creative process of producing quality wine. Therefore, these wineries are home to an enormous body of knowledge, most of which that has been past down through generations or learned through hard experience. Rarely do people in these firms conform to the standardized “rules” of wine making preferring instead to blend the “objective principles of the chemical sciences with personal artistic expression” (Personal Conversation Craig 2008). It is not surprising, then, that many of the wines that emerge from these winemakers are considered “unclassifiable” by industry critics. Therefore, these wineries may or may not choose to submit their “favorite” or “best” wines to critic to be rated. Instead, they may choose to submit an estate single varietal wine (e.g., Raven’s Block Cabernet Sauvignon, which indicates that it is made from Cab grapes grown from a particular block of vineyard). Without out doubt, the submitted wines routinely earn well over 95 points. The key point, here, however, is that the wines that the winemaker or winery owner believe to be of the highest quality or the “best” wines offered by the winery will never be evaluated by industry critics.

New Napa

In extreme contrast to the long-time Napa residents, people who move to the area to build a winery tend to do so in order to live their dream of creating something of a value that extends beyond the wealth in their investment portfolio. As mentioned above,

agricultural land costs in Napa County are higher than in any other part of California and building a functioning winery of this high caliber may cost as much as \$60 million. People who make this kind of investment tend to be exceptionally wealthy from corporate success (e.g., owners of software companies) or newly acquired celebrity status (e.g., actors or NBA players). From all indications (gathered from personal observation and informal conversations), these individuals “have more money than they will ever know what to do with” (Personal Conversation, David 2008). Therefore, they are willing to invest millions to create a wine that will gain notoriety through high ratings from industry critics. Their measure of success becomes the ownership of a wine that exists above crude economics and into the symbolic realm of prestige. Indeed, as Conaway’s (2002) quote mentioned above suggests, at this level of affluence these Napa wines become “glamorous” and beyond any costs that may be incurred in their creation.

Certainly, this is not to imply that these wines do not appreciate in value as they achieve consecrated status. Indeed, they do become highly collectable and quite expensive (e.g., \$300-1000 per bottle). Yet, these wineries themselves do not orient themselves toward marketing these coveted wines in order to generate a profit. Instead, these wines are withheld from the general public (through maximum purchases or exclusive access to wine club members) very much like the wines in the Old Napa Elite wineries. What differentiates them from the Old Napa wineries of this quality, however, is the vast amount of money that they invest in new vineyard locations and hired consultants. As only one example, as mentioned in Chapter 2, one of the premium AVAs in the area is Howell Mountain, where the rocky soil causes the vines to struggle for water to create very bold and intense fruit. Until the early 2000s there were only a few

vineyards (or wineries) in operation on Howell Mountain. Despite the excellent conditions for growing red varietals such as Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, the land is covered with huge boulders (e.g., weighing up to a ton!) and large rocks that would have to be cleared in order to plant grape vines. Moreover, the roads were unpaved and there were only minimal water pipes to the mountain. This made transporting supplies difficult and irrigation practically impossible. However, in the past 10 years Howell Mountain has become one of the premium areas for vineyard development, with individual property owners incurring the costs for moving the boulders and building roads and water pipes. This has added millions of dollars to the cost of installing vineyards on the mountain, yet, according to a winery consultant very familiar with the region “people from L.A., New York and Chicago are scurrying to buy property up there” (Informal Conversation, Robert 2010).

As more people from outside Napa “scurry” to buy prime vineyard property, the likelihood of them understanding the process of wine making (or viticulture) is quite low. Thus, it is not surprising that this category of wineries (elite/exclusive that are owned by Napa newcomers) employ a team of consultants that specialize in viticulture and winemaking. The explicit goal of these consultants is to make quality wines that will be highly rated by industry critics (namely Parker or *The Wine Spectator*). Therefore, most of these wineries specialize in single varietal wines (e.g., bold red varietals) that will compete for ratings in the high 90s (some even as high as 100 points). In order to garner these perfect or near-perfect scores, these are the wineries that have been most well known to “Parkerize” their wines in order to appeal to the palate of Robert Parker.

To my knowledge, very few of these wineries offer tasting experience to the general public, and they often choose to only share their wines with people who occupy their same social position (e.g., other wealthy executives or celebrities). From my few observations, these gatherings are rarely for the purpose of tasting the wine for purchase and instead offer a winery owner the chance to “show off” their prized wine (Personal Observation 2008). As will be discussed below, some of these highly coveted wines are included on the tasting lists of “collective” tasting rooms, which are becoming increasingly trendy in the Valley. While Old Napa and New Napa Elite wineries diverge sharply in how they understand wine and enact industry classifications, when they are open to guests, they do tend to share some similarities in how they structure their tasting rooms. Therefore, the following discussion will highlight some of these commonalities.

Elite Tasting Rooms

When tasting rooms for elite wineries (both Old and New) exist in the Napa region, most all of them require an appointment to visit or taste wines. In part, the need for an appointment is due to permit restrictions for small wineries operating in California, as well as, the fact that these wineries may not have full-time staff people available to welcome guests. Notably, however, appointments vary in their difficulty to obtain. For instance, some wineries eagerly grant appointment requests on the same day, while others have limited availability that might take weeks or months to secure. Still others only grant appointments to buyers within the industry or through the social networks of friends

or business associates.³¹ Of the tasting rooms that are more difficult to access, many do not appear on tourists' maps of the Napa area and are protected from the general public by automated gates that either have an intercom system or touch pad code for access.

In addition, these wines can be sampled at tasting rooms where several wineries are represented in a common space. While a visitor could purchase any wine in the shared tasting room, these establishments rotate wines every week, giving each winery equal representation (see Barclay 2004). Often these wineries do not have facilities to accommodate guests and can gain some retail exposure to the general population through these common tasting rooms. Notably, these wines are almost always considered "cult" because of their limited production (and distribution), their "celebrity winemakers" and/or scores well above 95 points from experts such as Parker or *The Wine Spectator*.

In both the private tasting rooms and the shared spaces, hosts rarely introduce information about wine club memberships, even though they offer similar benefits to the limited-commercial organizations discussed above. Notably, however, some of the limited-production wines are only available to wine club members, limiting the possibility that these wines will reach mass markets. In some situation, wine clubs may be closed to new members so consumers can join waiting lists in case a position comes available in the future.³²

³¹ In fact, many of the wineries in the latter category are unwilling to grant appointments without connections with high status persons within the industry (e.g., relationships with people at *The Wine Spectator*, the Napa Valley Vintner's Association, well-known wine makers, or owners of similarly situated wineries).

³² In some cases, an opening is rare given that wine club memberships may be willed to future generations through estate planning.

Interestingly, the cost for tasting these wines varies significantly from one winery to the next, ranging from Free to \$100 per flight. While all of these wines enjoy similar status and quality, the wineries that have international recognition or prestige among a wider wine audience tend to charge higher prices for wine flights. These wines might be compared to the “collectable” wines of the mass-commercial organizations, which also garner higher prices for tasting experiences. Wineries in this category that regard wine as a form of “art” and appeal to consumers more interested in wine appreciation, than wine as a status symbol, tend to forfeit tasting fees in favor of a less “commercial” tasting experience. Of course, other wineries fall in the middle of this continuum, with them charging a fee to offset the cost of the wines consumed.

The tasting rooms of these wineries also exhibit the most variation among these organizational categories. Some boast elegant tasting rooms similar to the Reserve areas of the mass-commercial category, some are at private residences that allow visitors to sip wine on their beautiful patio, and still others are conducted in wine storage facilities that resemble old barns. While each winery may be known for a particular type or style of wine, they almost always offer consumers a range of white, red, and Rosé wines. Tasting rooms in this category are the only ones to offer consumers “barrel tastings,” which offers consumers a chance to taste wines during the winemaking process. Not only does this offer consumers a gauge of quality for upcoming releases, but it also engages consumers in the creative process of winemaking by allowing comparisons across vintages, varietals, vineyards, and aging techniques.

These organizations share similarity with each other in the high caliber of their tasting room hosts (who might be a winemaker or the wineries owner). Approximately

half of these workers hold some type of formal credentials in the industry, ranging from sommelier certifications to a degree in winemaking from an accredited university. Moreover, people working in these tasting rooms communicate that they know each other and socialize personally and professionally. This insider knowledge fosters a feeling of camaraderie and connection when a visitor knows someone else within this inner circle of wine lovers. Very rarely do these establishments offer any retail items beyond their wine selection, and when they do, logo polo shirts or wine openers gather dust off to the side of the tasting area where they will not distract the consumers' focus on the wine tasting experience.

The Enactment of Classifications in Napa Wineries

As discussed in detail above, previous research suggests that as societies become increasingly commercialized, Artistic Classification Systems (ACS) will falter in their ability to structure hierarchical symbolic differences across products or social relationships across consumers. However, in an industry situated squarely within a commercial realm, a closer examination of tasting rooms in Napa offers a more nuanced description of how classifications function to maintain vertical ordering among wines, wine organizations, and consumers groups. These tasting rooms are the public representations of wineries, where consumers are invited to gain exposure to particular wines, as well as, the overarching structure of the wine world. In other words, they provide consumers an opportunity to taste wines (some of which are new to them) and to enact performances around wine appreciation. Interestingly, wine organizations differ significantly in how they display and communicate information about wine critics and the

role of expert-generated classification systems as an indication for quality and prestige. Moreover, they vary in how they enact performances and communicate information that uphold legitimated ways to appreciate wine. While boundary maintenance may be less pronounced in some consumption spaces, the acts that lessen them (such as in mass tasting rooms) serve to reinforce the universality of the overarching classification system as a whole. Table 11 provides a summary of findings related to the enactment of classifications in Napa tasting rooms, while the more complete discussion follows.

Mass-Commercial: Intoxicators and the Sale of Status

Not surprisingly, wines found in the Main Tasting Rooms of mass-commercial wineries do not display ratings for their wines because these are not the wines awarded accolades from industry experts. Instead, tasting room offer consumers a chance to enjoy wines that are of poor to medium quality and widely available in mass markets. Tasting hosts are available to make the tasting experience light and enjoyable, often telling standardized jokes and teasing patrons about how many wineries they have already visited. In these conversations, wine is frequently discussed as something that “tastes good” and that will “enliven any social gathering” (Field Notes 2006, 2007). Thus, the wine’s function is highlighted as a way to enhance the recreational activities that consumers already share with friends or family (e.g., at the lake, in the hot tub, by the pool) by adding intoxication. For instance, one tasting room host routinely described a particularly fruity and crisp white wine as “something you can drink all day to get a buzz, but it won’t make you feel bloated” (Field Notes 2006). Another common explanatory

phrase used across tasting rooms in this category refers to sweet, fruity wines as “Panty Droppers,” or “LPR: Liquid Panty Removers” (Field Notes 2006, 2007, 2008). Invariably, these remarks elicit humor from the consumers (especially men) and add to the sociability and playfulness of the tasting experience.

The consistent theme echoed within these tasting rooms is that people should drink what they like “no matter what the experts think” (Field Notes 2006, 2007, 2008). In fact, experts and industry classification systems are presented in an unfavorable fashion by hosts, whereby consumers are told that they know more about the wines that they like than “some critic somewhere” (Field Notes 2006). In fact, one host routinely tells his guests, “Hell, we can be our own critics in here.” (Field Notes: Bobby 2006). These statements reinforce the subjective aspect of wine appreciation, whereby industry classifications need not structure consumer experiences or buying preferences. Arguably, this strategy may relax hesitations from consumers who might otherwise not purchase these wines given that have not gained critical acclaim. Indeed, these consumers tend to purchase wines based on how much they enjoy the taste, rather than external forms of validation (Consumer Interviews 2006, 2007).

Tasting hosts in these environments also distance themselves (and the consumers) from legitimated forms of wine appreciation and the rituals associated with “correct” wine tasting form. For instance, one host mimicked “high brow wine tasters” by swirling the wine in his wine glass, swishing it in his mouth, and then pretending to spit out the wine. Afterwards, he stated, “you don’t need to do all of that to enjoy wine” (Field Notes 2006). Presentations such as this seem to lower the barriers to wine as a cultural product by suggesting that consumers can make up their own rules about how to consume wines

and when to integrate it into their lives. However, these communications build the awareness that “high brow wine tasters” visit the Napa region and that there exists a “correct” (i.e., legitimate) way to enjoy wines.³³

In contrast to these main tasting rooms, the Reserve areas provide a distinctly different experience for consumers. As described above, not only are the physical surroundings of higher quality, but also, the wines featured in these rooms enjoy considerable prestige generated by wine critics. In fact, these wines may be ranked in *The Wine Spectator* as some of “The Most Collectable Wines,” or part of an elite list of the “10 Best Wines of the Year.” Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that visual displays of such accolades are very common in these tasting rooms. Not only do the tasting lists provide scores and descriptive accolades from the industry’s top critics (Parker and *The Wine Spectator’s* California critic, James Laube), but these markers of quality are also framed and hung in highly visible locations for guests to read. As discussed above, tasting hosts in these settings tend to be very knowledgeable about wine, yet they share very little information with consumers about the actual process of wine making (e.g., effects of *terrior* or climate on the characteristics of particular vintages) or the aesthetic qualities of wines (e.g., variations in the tannic structure across wines). Instead, the focus tends toward the historical authenticity of the winery (Beverland 2005) and an expert evaluation of the wine’s quality. For instance, one tasting room host stated, “This historic property has been making wine long before you were born... That’s why we are one of the best wineries in the Valley...well, actually in the world... especially if you listen to

³³ Interestingly, consumer interviews with people who frequent these consumption sites confessed to wanting to learn about wine and the correct rules associated with it, even though they did not have the time or money to learn these skills.

these guys [pointing to a critic's review]—and they are the experts” (Field Notes 2006). By appealing to the “experts” and a long history of wine making in the Napa Valley (even though Napa vintner's only began shifting toward quality wine during the mid-20th Century), these hosts effectively elevate the wines as a symbol of status for the winery and consumers fortunate enough to own these coveted wines. In fact, the utilization of expert ratings for these wines stimulates consumer purchases (Personal Interviews: John 2006, Gary 2007) and meets the overall commercial objectives for the winery.

Even though other tasting rooms on the same properties mimic legitimated rituals for wine appreciation, these Reserve tasting room hosts enact them in an exaggerated manner. For instance, before pouring a taste of wine from a newly opened bottle a host might carefully inspect a piece of appropriate stemware, pour the wine into his glass, swirl vigorously, tilt the wine to view the colors, place his nose into the glass, taste the wine (including aerating the wine in his mouth) and then spit the wine into a spittoon in front of the guest at the tasting bar. While there are functional reasons for tasting the wine prior to serving it to guests (e.g., to detect problems such as mold or other spoilage), these actions are performed much more discreetly in mid-sized or elite tasting rooms.

Tasting hosts in these Reserve rooms tend to show preference toward men (who are the primary purchaser of these wines) and guests wearing observable high-class markers, such as designer clothing or expensive jewelry. Women and patrons who exhibit lower class fashion or mannerisms may get less attention from tasting hosts, who fail to look these visitors in the eye or adequately answer questions that would advance their knowledge of the wines (Field Notes 2006, 2007, 2008). The effect of this

differential treatment seems to accomplish two related outcomes. First, as hosts cater to consumers with larger wine budgets they advance the overall commercial goals of the winery. And, second, the consumers with fewer monetary resources are funneled back toward the main tasting rooms (Participant Observation 2006, 2007; Consumer Interview: John 2006). In effect, this means that the physical segregation of consumption spaces creates boundaries that minimize contact across high and low status consumer groups. Therefore, while a range of consumers may frequent the same winery, these firms have successfully segregated tasting experiences in such a way as to simultaneously cater to the greatest number of high and low status consumers on the same premises.

In part this is due to the fact that wines offered in the different tasting spaces enjoy two different cultural contexts, where the first is oriented toward quantity “without getting bloated,” and the second is oriented toward demonstrating the success of wines within existing classification schemes (created and maintained by critics and cultural producers in the field). In more theoretical terms, the enactment of this classification system juxtaposes the distinction between that which is deemed “popular” wine for the masses and that which is considered “high status” wine for the economically affluent. Given that this occurs within mass-commercial organizations, perhaps we should not be surprised to learn that “cultural capital” or the appreciation of wine as “art” fails to factor into these performances.

Limited Commercial: Educators

As mentioned above, wines found in mid-sized tasting rooms compete with similar positioned wineries for awards in regional as well as national competitions, and

often gain positive ratings from industry experts. For instance, approximately forty percent of the wines found in these settings earn higher than 90-point ratings from lead critics and have positive articles or reviews listed in food and wine lifestyle magazines (e.g., *Food and Wine*). Visible signs of these accolades can be found throughout these tasting rooms, ranging from blue ribbons gained from regional wine shows to text following the tasting notes for a particular wine. In contrast to the above category, however, rarely are ratings from *The Wine Spectator* or Robert Parker framed and hanging on the wall for consumers to see. Significantly, hosts tend not reference these external markers of success as a reason to buy the wine and, instead, “let the wines speak for themselves” (Personal Interview: Frank 2007). However, these workers are incredibly knowledgeable about the existing classification schemes and rankings of wines in the Napa and surrounding wine growing regions. Moreover, they readily reference these rating systems when discussing wines on their particular tasting menus when comparing them to like-varietals at other wineries that harvest their grapes from a different climate or geographic region. In other words, these references seem to emerge from an educational rather than a sales-driven orientation, since hosts use ratings as proxy for what a Cabernet Sauvignon “should” taste like in its truest form.

Hosts in these organizations explain that they keep up with the ratings and share them with customers “only because they should understand the way wines are evaluated and where our wines fall in that system” (Personal Interview: Paul 2006). In this hosts’ opinion, existing classification schemes are in place to “help new wine drinkers in America learn about the variations of wines and to learn that all wines are not the same” (Ibid). Hosts in these tasting rooms help consumers learn how to assess a wine’s

character, value and quality through institutionally generated categories. As one host explains, “In some ways I guess I play an educational role by exposing consumers to ratings...and uh...well, categories that they may not understand before coming to Napa” (Personal Interview: Frank 2006). Likewise, other tasting room hosts echoed this sentiment, in that they also reference the classification schemes to help consumers navigate and differentiate among the range of wine products available in the marketplace.

From this perspective, consumers should be aware of what characteristics a Cabernet Sauvignon can exhibit under particular growing conditions and wine making techniques. Therefore, hosts can readily point to color-coded maps that distinguish soil types in particular vineyards as an indication of what characteristics the wines will exhibit. In personal interviews, hosts quickly acknowledge the way in which expert ratings influence buying patterns among consumers, however, hosts themselves rarely use these scores to facilitate consumer purchases. Instead, consumers are encouraged to choose wines that compliment other aspects of their lives (such as wines that will pair well with foods that they typically cook) (Field Notes 2006, 2007).

Not surprisingly, hosts in this category understand their role in the tasting room as an educator for consumers who lack the skills necessary to accurately classify wines and detect distinctions within existing categories. The creation of a learning environment can be witnessed by how tasting hosts welcome visitors to the bar. For instance, hosts often greet consumers by asking the visitor what types of wines she/he prefers in order to “get them started” with the tasting. Hence, even though a schedule of wines may be listed on a printed sheet the tasting host may suggest that the patron begin with “something that is not on the menu” or start in the middle of the list so as to focus attention on wines that

they might enjoy. In several interviews, hosts reported that this technique allows them to “get a feel of the customer” and to assess their level of knowledge (Personal Interviews: Frank 2006, Paul 2006). This allows the host to customize the tasting experience and provide the level of information that will assist consumers build their wine knowledge. For instance, after tasting hosts have explained to visitors what they might expect from a particular varietal, she or he may facilitate a “game” with guests, in which they could correctly guess the flavors present in each wine. Hosts are available to offer clues or reminders that will assist patrons in making correct assessments, and to coach tasters on what colors, aromas or flavors they should expect from particular varietals or growing regions.

Routinely, hosts explain wine-related performances to guests and receive exclamations such as “wow” or “cool” when the meanings behind such rituals are deciphered (Field Notes 2006, 2007, 2008). For instance, hosts may explain the significance of swirling wine in the glass by demonstrating the difference in aromas and flavors before and after swirling the wine. Guests often show surprise that this process unleashes much more complex aromas and flavors from the wine and enhances the overall tasting experience. Moreover, hosts may have educational “props” behind the bar to aid in this learning. For instance, hosts may use a relatively recent invention that allows for wines to be poured through a plastic aerator that mimics the decanting process. Or, they may provide foods (e.g., cheeses, mustards, chocolates or beef jerky) that will enhance the flavor of the wine as a demonstration in successful wine pairing. Typically these techniques are not standardized in training programs, but are initiated by tasting

hosts themselves who want to share their “passion” for wine to willing learners (Field Notes 2006, 2007; Personal Interview: Jack 2007).

Successful interactions of this sort, however, require a willingness from consumers to learn and expand their understanding and appreciation for wine. In fact, consumers who are not open to a broader wine appreciation are met with resistance by these tasting room hosts, who may exhibit both covert and overt signs of dissatisfaction toward guests who are uninterested in an educational experience. For instance, a host may plainly tell patrons that the winery does not carry the kinds of wine (e.g, fruity, sweet) that they want, and then recommend other wineries in the region that offer wines more consistent with their palate. When asked about an interaction of this type, one host stated, “I was not going to waste any more wine on this person...she just doesn’t have a palate to appreciate it...I just cannot...you know in good conscience pour her wines that she will not appreciate” (Personal Interview: Frank 2006). In other words, if consumer needs do not fit wine offerings where the tasting host works, then they either attempt to educate the consumer in order to advance their knowledge and expand their palate, or they send the consumer to other wineries that will offer wines closer to the consumer’s palate. In contrast, when consumers readily engage hosts as their teachers or mentors about wine categories, scoring criteria, rituals, or other means of appreciation they are rewarded with helpful “tips” on the region (e.g., good local restaurants or fresh seafood markets, menu suggestions, less publicized concerts or wine events in the area, etc.), discounts on wines or waived tasting fees. In essence, then, consumers who adhere to the universal standards of wine consumption and value are nurtured and furthered on their educational journey, while visitors who are unwilling to adopt or participate in these

classification systems encounter normative reactions that place them outside the boundary of that particular winery. Therefore, tasting rooms in this category could be characterized as an educational context, in which consumers are socialized into a universally accepted culture of wine consumption and appreciation.

In many ways, these wine tasting rooms are most overt in their adherence to classification systems generated by experts and legitimating institutions. Rather than creating social boundaries, however, they offer consumers an opportunity to unmask the unspoken rules and rituals of high cultured wine aficionados. However, as Bourdieu argues there is a difference between the “theory of art and the experience of the connoisseur, who is generally incapable of stating the principles of his judgment” (Bourdieu 1984:66). In other words, hosts in these settings are quite capable of providing a thorough rationalization for categories that have been institutionalized by elite wine connoisseurs and industry experts. Not unlike educators in other high arts fields, these explanations take the form of “standardized taxonomies, fixed once and for all in the form of synoptic schemas or dualistic typologies” [e.g., Cabernet Sauvignon v. Pinot Noir] (Bourdieu 1984: 67).

Additionally, classifications serve to “rationalize a sense of beauty,” (Ibid) by training the palate to know what to expect and how to classify wines in ways consistent with written tasting notes or critical evaluations. Arguably, this rationalization process minimizes the role of creative expression (associated with high culture), but serves to solidify divisions among elites who have tastes, the middle class who have rules that govern tastes, and lower class that have bad tastes. Bourdieu (1984) quotes Pierre Francastel to make this point more explicit:

Taste must not be confused with gastronomy. Whereas taste is the natural gift of recognizing and loving perfection, gastronomy is the set of rules that govern the cultivation and education of tastes... And this brings us to the heart of the problem: if the gourmet is a delicate connoisseur, is the gastronome is a pedant?... The gourmet is his own gastronome, just as the man of taste is his own grammarian... Not everyone is a gourmet that is why we need gastronomes... There is such a thing as bad taste... and persons of refinement know this instinctively. For those who do not, rules are needed (68).

In much the same way as Francastel describes gastronomes, tasting room hosts in this category function to reinforce rules of classification and legitimated norms and rituals of wine appreciation. Moreover, they identify those patrons with “bad tastes” and offer them directions to the main tasting rooms at mass-commercial wineries. Not only does this preserve the learning environment for serious wine students, but it also, serves to reinforce boundaries of inclusion and exclusion for differently oriented consumers. Notably, this strategy may sacrifice commercial objectives (e.g., sending potential buyers to other wineries) in favor of preserving legitimated knowledge and rituals around wine appreciation. With that said, commercial interests are operational in these settings and can be witnessed in the boutique gift shops and the high quality of wine they sell to educated, upwardly mobile, and middle to upper class consumers.

Elite/Exclusive: Gatekeepers

Wines crafted by wineries in this category could be labeled extraordinary using any range of evaluative standards, only one of which includes the critic-generated classifications discussed in this chapter. This is because wines in this category are made from the best grapes available in Napa Valley and have the most talented and respected winemakers in the U.S. wine business. Not surprisingly, when wineries submit their

wines to critics, such as Parker or *The Wine Spectator*, they commonly receive scores ranging from 92 to 100 points. In stark contrast to the mass commercial wineries that have a few well-rated wines, these specialist firms produce all of their wines at this level of high quality. When wines gain critic generated notoriety (such as earning a 100 points) they are instant collectables for high status consumers, as they become part of the highest status and price category of wine in Napa Valley.³⁴ Moreover, 85 percent of the red varieties can easily age for between 10-20+ years (and many should age several years), making most of them just as “collectable” as the wines made by generalist firms.

Despite their high quality and the accolades they receive, visual cues that recognize these successes are rarely found in tasting rooms of this caliber. Instead, a wine list will include the name of the winery, the varietal, vintage, AVA (often down to the specific block within an AVA designation), a brief description of possible flavors one might detect in the wine, and (in many cases) the name of the winemaker who made the wine. Moreover, these wines are not vertically listed in terms quality (“Napa Valley” v. “Reserve Napa Valley”) that might be observed in the previously discussed tasting rooms. As one host explained to me, “Yeah, all of our wines are of the highest quality so we don’t use those generic labels like “Reserve”...I mean they don’t mean anything...and our consumers know that” (Personal Interview: Chad 2008).

As mentioned above, tasting room hosts in this category are the most credentialed and knowledgeable about wine, winemaking, viticulture, food pairings, etc. than hosts in any other category. Of the ones who are not winery owners or the winemakers

³⁴ Once a wine gains above 97 points from Parker or *The Wine Spectator*, it becomes practically impossible to locate in the retail market and serves as a high status object for affluent consumers. One host explained it this way, “yeah, those wines have become like Mercedes emblems for the rich. They may not be the best wines out there, but people will pay a lot to get them” (Personal Interview: Carson 2007).

themselves, they became tasting room hosts for these elite wineries to learn about quality winemaking and the wine business more generally. Yet, they very rarely offer this information to consumers in tasting rooms without a direct question from a guest. Several hosts have explained this lack of information sharing as “meeting customers where they are” (Personal Interviews: Chad, Chase, Taylor). So, in a similar way as the hosts from the above category, these workers “size up” their consumers and make determinations about how to interact with them during the wine tasting experience. However, unlike the previous category of workers who accomplish this through a friendly welcome and question such as: which wines would you like to begin with today? (i.e., assessing their wine knowledge and palate), these hosts “size up” guests by their motivation for being at the winery (i.e., are they there to buy a status symbol or to appreciate a finely crafted wine).

Also, unlike the hosts in mid-sized wineries, they have the power to decide which consumers will leave with the most coveted wines in the U.S. market. As one host explained, “Look, we don’t need to “sell” our wines. Everybody knows they are the best...we spend more time dealing with punks from the city who think they can walk in here and buy a case of “Anna Barstow’s” wines (Personal Interview: Brian 2007). Therefore, these hosts act as gatekeepers to the products themselves, assessing which consumers can purchase wines, how many bottles they can buy, and whether or not they will be included on mailing lists that offer valuable information about first releases or other insider knowledge. This role of gatekeeper remains constant regardless of the type of guest present; however, how the host enacts this role changes depending upon whether they are situated in an older or newer winery and the type of consumer they face.

In general, there are two types of consumers who seek out these elite tasting rooms. First, there are the high status consumers who are in search of the “latest Mercedes emblem to go in their wine cellar” (Personal Interview: Chad 2008; Personal Conversation: Carson 2007). Not unlike the consumers who go to Reserve tasting rooms in mass-commercial wineries, these guests are interested in the final product, including the rating that the wine has received from renowned critics in the field. Like tasting room hosts in the mass-commercial sites who seem to cater to this population of consumers, newer elite wineries in Napa tend to appreciate the awareness these patrons demonstrate about critic ratings and where their wines fall within this classification system. In fact, it is quite common to hear the tasting room host and consumers discuss at length the specific critic ratings for each vintage and how many bottles they have in their cellar. The most coveted of these wines tend to be the ones that are no longer available through the wineries and can only be bought from private sellers through informal networks or the Internet (Personal Conversation, David 2008). In these conversations, it seems that money is less of a concern than the actual acquisition of a difficult to obtain wine, suggesting that particular wines of this type are indicators of status rather than a reflection of amount of money spent for them.

Tasting room hosts in elite/exclusive wineries that have been in the Valley for a long time are much less interested in performing for or conversing with status-oriented patrons. Instead, these hosts exhibit a formal demeanor and are often curt when answering questions about the point ratings for the wines on the tasting list. It is not uncommon for tasting room hosts in older elite tasting rooms to identify these consumers as they emerge from their limousines or sports cars in the parking lot. And, they report

having an informal rotation as to who “takes those customers...you know...based on who is in the mood to crack some heads” (Personal Interview: Scott 2007). In other words, these hosts meet consumers in search of a highly valued “commodity” with resistance and the knowledge that they have the power to control whether the guest is able to gain access to these desirable wines. While hosts do not turn these guests away or steer them toward other wineries (like in the mid-sized wineries), they do impose limits on consumers—such as how many wines they can purchase.

Take for example an event that occurred in an older elite tasting room that sells wines from several different wineries. As mentioned above, these collective tasting rooms rotate wines on their wine lists in order to offer equity to all the participant wineries. On this particular day, the tasting room was not pouring “Graham Sidel” wines, despite the fact that a potential buyer requested pours from Sidel’s highly rated Chardonnay (98 points by Robert Parker). This customer and a tasting host exchanged heated words about this rotating wine tasting list, whereby the tasting host told the customer to “call Sidel and ask him if he’s okay pouring out his wine to anyone who walk in and ask for it.” The visitor then responded by saying, “I am not just anybody...I was going to buy a case...” Before the customer could finish, however, the tasting host replied, “we have a two bottle limit...would you like me to wrap that up for you?” (Field Notes 2007). This exchange highlights the relationship between tasting hosts in this type of setting and consumers who have exceptionally high budgets for wine (e.g., \$10,000 worth of wine per visit to Napa, Personal Conversation: David 2007). While the tasting hosts are polite they have significant amount of power and discretion as to which wines consumers can taste and how many bottles visitors can purchase. In these specialist

organizations, money cannot not buy everything. Rather, tasting room hosts act as gatekeepers who ration products at will, in part, based on the consumer and her/his motivation for being there.

The second type of consumer who seeks out elite tasting rooms begins with a different orientation toward wine altogether. Rather than envisioning wine as a status “commodity” that appreciates in monetary value depending upon the ratings secured by top industry critics, these consumers approach wine as an art form. Consumers with this orientation match well with tasting room hosts in older elite wineries because they share common sensibilities and language about wine appreciation, as well as, overlapping social networks (e.g., friends who are wine makers), hobbies (e.g., foods), and experiences (e.g., travel to European wine destinations). They also share a similar bafflement about the power of industry critics to guide consumer choices, artificially elevate prices, and “control and the entire wine market in the U.S.” (Personal Conversations: Scott 2007, Carson 2008). These tasting room hosts, as well as this type of consumer, repeatedly refer to *The Wine Spectator* as the “Wine Speculator,” highlighting the connections of the magazine with futures markets where speculators are looking to make money on short-term commodity investments (Field Notes 2007, 2008). Both hosts and consumers alike communicate frustration about “how a beautiful artistic expression, like wine, can be cheapened by people wanting to make a buck” (Personal Conversation: David 2007). Moreover, they readily discuss their disappointment with the increased homogenization of wine by winemakers who appeal to the palates of particular critics such as Robert Parker (i.e., newer elite wineries that Parkerize their wines). Instead, wines in from elite wineries with a long history in the Valley are appreciated for

their diversity of character and flavors that reflect the unique qualities of *terrior* (e.g., soil and climate) and the talents of the artisan winemakers.

Not surprisingly, then, these wines share similarities with other high art cultural products in that they are often referred to by the artists involved in making the wine. Therefore, wines of this type are often known by the grape grower or wine maker, rather than the winery whose label appears on the bottle. For instance, it is not uncommon for someone to discuss a “Jackie Smith” or an “Anna Barstow” wine rather than the particular winery that owns the label. Similarly, hosts and consumers alike may discuss a wine based on whose grapes (and which blocks of land) were used in a particular vintage. By uniting an experienced viticulturalist with a talented winemaker, the wine boasts a unique quality that represents the style and complexity of these two artists. Tasting room hosts may even refer to these wines as “unclassifiable” because they do not conform to the institutionalized categories of varietals such as Chardonnay or Cabernet Sauvignon (Field Notes 2007, 2008). Instead, there is a “beauty” in the wine that defies the rationalization of legitimated classification systems (i.e., expert generated ACS) used by limited-commercial tasting room hosts. Also, as mentioned in Chapter 2, many of these wines are blended from several grape varietals, making them far more complex than a single varietal wine. Therefore, these wines require an internalization of wine “taste,” which is not easily set to rules or categories that can be standardized (Bourdieu 1984). Moreover, while these tasting room hosts highlight the subjective experiences of each taster (where some may enjoy a particular wine over another), they are qualitatively different from mass-commercial tasting rooms that distance themselves from classification system that provide normative ordering for quality products (e.g., “you

should just drink what you like”). In Bourdieu’s (1984) terms, the mass commercial sites provide validation for “bad tastes,” while the exclusive/elite wineries with a long history in the Valley provide opportunities to express an internalized system of “taste” and appreciation for beauty that is intuitively understood, but often still “unclassifiable.”

While wines from these elite wineries may or may not (e.g., some “unclassifiable” wines from older elite wineries) conform to the ACS established by industry experts, ritual performances around wine are consistent with legitimated forms of appreciation for both the older and newer elite wineries. For instance, rituals around wine are enacted without discussion or exaggerated performances—because they are a means to wine appreciation (Field Notes 2007, 2008). So, both types of elite wineries enact functional rituals such as swirling wine in the appropriate stemware, which are performed to enhance the flavors embedded in the wine. Unlike the Reserve rooms in generalist organizations or tasting rooms in mid-sized specialist organizations, these acts are not exaggerated performances or educational opportunities for consumers. Instead, they are part of the milieu of the tasting experience, whereby participants might only notice them in their absence (Bourdieu 1984).

In older elite wineries, other ritual performances commonly link wine tasting experiences with high culture or “manners.” In part, this may be due to the fact that these tastings often occur in the home or personal space of the winery owner and/or winemaker. Therefore, these spaces provide a more personal experience for consumers who truly become “guests” of these wineries. For instance, wine tastings may take place on a side porch adjacent to the main home, inside the wine cellar, or by the owner’s personal swimming pool. Additionally, rather than commercial grade stemware, napkins,

or other items (e.g., water vases) these wineries provide the highest quality goods from inside their own kitchens. This personalizes the wine tasting experience and elicits responses of gratitude from visitors who express much appreciation for being invited into the “home” of the winery. Moreover, hosts and consumers alike often use first names to refer to winery owners, winemakers, and local chefs as if everyone is part of the same family of wine lovers who share a common lifestyle and culture (Weber 1922/1968). Being part of this high culture experience often encourages actions from participants not seen in other wine tasting sites, such as men opening doors for women, conversations peppered with ‘yes ma’am’ or ‘thank you sir,’ and other polite gestures or acknowledgements (Field Notes 2007, 2008). Several tasting room hosts reported that it is not uncommon for guests to send thank-you notes in the mail that express their gratitude for the winery’s hospitality (Field Notes 2007, 2008; Personal Interviews: Carson 2007, John 2008). On other occasions, tasting room hosts in these older elite wineries reported that they “loved their customers” because they “just get it,” which meant that they acted respectfully and shared an appreciation for the artistic qualities of fine wine and high culture (Personal Interviews: Cindy 2007, Donna 2007, Brian 2008). Notably, consumers who fall into this category diverge sharply from the first group mentioned above, who “don’t get it” and only come to the winery for high status commodities.

Despite the hospitality and generosity offered to consumers by these exclusive/elite tasting rooms that have been in the Valley for a long time, these spaces are still encircled with significant boundaries that effectively limit inclusion from potential tourists. First, like the newer elite tasting rooms, these wineries are notoriously difficult

to find and require insider knowledge to locate and access. Their limited production and distribution make them virtually unknown by consumers who enter the Napa Valley region as an unseasoned tourist. While there are many color brochures that offer information about wineries in the area, very few of the elite/exclusive specialist organizations advertise in such publications. Therefore, information about these wineries tends to travel through insiders in the industry (e.g., wine shop owners, chefs at high-end restaurants, sommeliers, etc.), or through people who spend a lot of time and money on wine as a hobby that will enhance their lifestyle (e.g., either as a collector of status goods who gains information through industry publications or as person who shares networks with people who have similar high culture lifestyles). Without industry publications such as *The Wine Spectator* or social networks, it is difficult for consumers to gain information about which wineries operate tasting rooms, where they are located, and how to get an appointment. Moreover, elite wineries may or may not choose to be included on tourist maps of the area, making them difficult to find if one is not familiar with the Valley and surrounding mountains ranges. Then, once one arrives at the listed address for the winery, it may or may not have a visible sign alerting the guest that she/he has arrived at the proper destination.

Second, in part due to Napa County permit restrictions, most of these elite wineries require an appointment for access and may have a limited number of guests that they can accommodate per week. This means that even though they may be technically open to the public, spaces are limited and may take weeks, months or even years for consumers to gain entry to such organizations. Other organizations do not offer public access to their wineries unless the person has insider connections (professionally or

personally) or presents a business opportunity for distribution into an affluent restaurant or onto a well-regarded sommelier's wine list (Field Notes 2007, 2008; Personal Conversation: Jacob 2008). Given these two factors, consumers report that they have made reservations at least a year in advance to some wineries (Field Notes 2007), "called friends to get them in the door" (Personal Interview: Donald 2007), or even posed as a wine buyer to get a spot in the tasting room (Informal Conversation: David 2007). These examples highlight the fact that even gaining access to these wineries poses significant hurdles for consumers to navigate.

Given how many tasting rooms are in operation in Napa Valley, only the most informed and well-connected consumers will exert the time and energy necessary to gain access to many of these exclusive/elite tasting rooms. The people who do, however, tend to plan their travels to Napa around these organizational types, overlap with each other during their visit to the Valley (e.g., see each other at multiple tasting sites).³⁵ Moreover, they often visit the same wineries year after year (to restock their cellars) so many of them are familiar with the history of the winery, the characters of the wines, and the people who work there (or have worked there) (Field Notes 2007, 2008).

Therefore, in conjunction with the "insider feeling" generated by tasting experienced described above, this familiarity of the consumer creates a situation where people converse about topics that a new entrant might have a difficult time engaging. For instance, being able to converse about the differences in character between a 2003 and 2004 Cabernet Sauvignon from a particular block of vineyards would require that a

³⁵ They also overlap with each other in other places in the Valley, such as a particular restaurant or spa. When listening in on these conversations, one gets the impression that these visitors know the chef who prepared their meal the night before and can make helpful recommendations for who to contact to get coveted reservation at restaurants that have several month-long waiting lists.

consumer had tasted (and could remember) the qualities of each of these wines. Or, being able to discuss comparisons between wines made by different winemakers poses difficulties for consumers who have not developed the tastes to discern a “Holly Tunstall” from a “Michael Potter.” Still even more complex are the older elite wineries where tasting room hosts and consumers alike move beyond industry classifications into the realm of subjective “tastes.” Therefore, unlike discussion in the mid-sized wineries that rely upon standardized classifications across grape varieties (i.e., this is what a Pinot Noir “should” taste like) or conversations in newer elite wineries that rely on knowledge of the most highly rated wines, conversations among consumers and the artisan winemakers and most aesthetically oriented tasting hosts in the Valley shun these institutionalized categories for a seemingly subjective (yet coherently organized) expression of quality.

Conclusion

Finding presented here suggest that while the relationship between differently oriented wineries and expert-generated ACS exhibits significant variation, all three organizational types (and their status oriented sub-types in mass commercial and elite wineries) reinforce the saliency of institutionalized categories in Napa Valley. Moreover, these symbolic boundaries are enacted in ways that effectively reinforce social boundaries based on the economic and cultural capital held by consumers. In all three organizational types, intermediaries contribute to boundary work that separates “us” from “them” and aids in the construction of collective identities and shared belonging among similarly situated actors (Lamont and Small 2008).

One of the significant findings for this chapter rests in the fact that while there are only three organizational types (i.e., mass commercial, limited commercial and elite/exclusive) under investigations, there are actually five different wine cultures that exist in Napa Valley. The segregated space of the mass commercial offers two distinct wine cultures, even though in both the Mass and Reserve tasting rooms the hosts reference classifications as an opportunity to meet commercial objectives. The former distances themselves from these classifications in favor of a “good time” for consumers unfamiliar with wine ACS; and the latter utilizes them to generate sales for status-conscious consumer groups. This process serves to maintain hierarchical distinctions between the “popular” wines for the masses and the legitimated “high” wines deemed valuable by experts within the organizational field. Moreover, the way in which tasting room hosts communicate information about legitimated wine (and wine-specific behaviors) effectively funnels higher and lower class tourists into segregated tasting rooms that reinforce social boundaries among these consumer groups. Therefore, whether distancing themselves from classifications or imposing them on consumers, these generalist organizations are appealing to the widest possible segment of the market and still reinforcing the universality of expert opinions such as Robert Parker or the *Wine Spectator*.

In the third wine culture, limited commercial wineries likewise concern themselves with commercial interests by using creative strategies to draw consumers to their tasting rooms. If consumers do not adhere to the rules and norms of these tasting rooms; however, hosts (who earn a commission for sales) may sacrifice commercial interests in favor of the preservation ACS. Additionally, hosts readily acknowledge

classifications and can easily identify where their wines fall within that hierarchically organized system. In contrast to the mass commercial sites, tasting rooms are structured in such a way to introduce consumers to the legitimate ways to assess a wine's quality and to perform rituals that will enhance its appreciation (i.e., increase universality of ACS). Hosts communicate this information to consumers by offering them an educational experience that will de-mystify the distinctions across varietals or *terriors*. In many ways these hosts offer upwardly mobile consumers the clues necessary to begin their own journey of wine appreciation and knowledge, and they do so by offering legitimacy to the universality of expert-generated classifications. When consumers are uninterested in these knowledge transfers, hosts politely suggest tasting rooms that offer wines more consistent with their underdeveloped palates, thereby reinforcing divisions between low class patrons with "bad tastes" and middle class visitors who need rules to make accurate distinctions about the character or value of a wine.

Because of their limited production and exclusivity, micro-wineries that have been in the Valley for a long time as well as those that are new to the area begin with higher-class clientele than the other two organizational types. In essence, then, the social boundaries are already solidified before consumers ever reach these tasting room. Among these elite wineries, there exist two discernable wine cultures, namely those that have historical ties to the Valley and those who are newcomers to the region. In the first case, winery owners (who are often the tasting room hosts, as well) are personally invested in the winemaking process and strive to blend the artistic talents of grape growers and wine makers into the most creative expressions of wine imagined. This may mean moving beyond legal classifications (percentages of a particular varietal) and critic-

generated classifications (e.g., ratings by Parker or *The Wine Spectator*). Rather than seeking external forms of validation or status, the joy of wine rests in its intrinsic qualities that can be easily detected by someone with an internalized sense of “taste.”

For those patrons who frequent these sites, however, there exists a noticeable division between consumers who are in search of a status symbol (high economic capital) and those who appreciate wine as an artistic expression (high economic and high cultural capital). For the former, expert generated classifications guide buying decisions—not interactions with tasting room hosts. In these cases, tasting room hosts are hesitant to engage these consumers about a wine’s projected value or discuss wine as a “commodity.” Instead, they turn their attention to consumers who “just get it,” and with whom they can converse about food, travel, and wine as part of a particular lifestyle that they all share. In these interactions, “tastes” and wine appreciation are internalized apart from hierarchically ordered classifications generated by industry “experts” and through the on-going and repeated interaction of people who share a common lifestyle.

In contrast, newer elite wineries in the Valley are explicitly oriented toward the accumulation of highly rated wines in the wineries overall portfolio. Owners of these wineries (also often the person conducting the private tastings) rarely engage in the winemaking process itself, instead trusting the viticulture and oenology to the expert consultants who earn premium fees for their “success” in earning a high score from industry critics. While the Reserve wines in mass commercial tasting rooms meet the overall commercial objectives of the winery, these elite firms operate without regard for the money spent on production or the revenue generated from the sale of their wines. In this way, they operate beyond the realm of market incentives (e.g., profits), choosing

instead to compete for symbolic (and very difficult to obtain) currency. Yet, in contrast to elite wineries that have historical ties to the Valley, these firms rely upon external forms of validation to establish their status and prestige, thus compromising the creative and artistic aspects of wine in favor of a more homogeneous style that will more likely gain praise from industry critics.

CHAPTER 5

NAPA VALLEY CONSUMERS AND THE MERGING OF SYMBOLIC AND SOCIAL BOUNDARIES

Introduction

Sociological research on consumption has long built on the classical origins of Simmel (and Marx), whereby value within a capitalist market system is generated through the process of exchange rather than the actual use value of an object. Value is not inherent in an object but rather a set of provisional judgments made by actors engaged in the exchange process (Simmel 1978). Therefore, the value of a commodity is determined by the on-going social interactions of producers (including intermediaries) and consumers. Bourdieu (1984) furthers Simmel's theory of value by arguing that the exchange of commodities creates value through human interactions, attributions, and motivations that give meaning to otherwise "useless" products. Hence, consumption practices are grounded in multifaceted interactions, which include the transmission of values through institutions, culture and social relations (Appadurai 1988; Fine 1992; Friedland 1984). Therefore, humans are consumers of representations as much as they are consumers of actual commodities.

For instance, Stefano Ponte (2005) offers a description of the restructuring of the global coffee market, in which the "Starbucks factor" reshapes the organization of labor and the way in which the symbolic meaning of coffee is reshaped through the interactions of producers and consumers. Not unlike the evolution of other specialty product markets

(such as wine, organic breads, micro-brewed beer), firms within the production chain for coffee began to recognize the need for a better “consumer experience” and the importance of educating the public about the qualities of fine coffee. One significant alteration in the structure of the commodity chain included the expansion of the distribution centers for coffee products, namely the “Third Space” where consumers can socialize in a comfortable and trendy environment outside their home or office. Hence, Starbucks (and its expanding coffee competitors) sell a cultural signifier along with their quality beans and specialty lattes. In contrast to recent historical eras in U.S. coffee distribution, the value added to the product depends less on production and more on the construction and maintenance of a “lifestyle signifier” (Dicum and Luttinger 1999). Hence, the site of consumption (e.g., coffee shop) and the interactions between the baristas and consumers become important for consumers to gain knowledge and feel her/his inclusion or exclusion within particular consumption cultures.

Wine shares some similarities with coffee, as the industry has experienced rapid growth by affirming wine as a “lifestyle signifier” and creating distinctive spaces where consumers can share in a common culture of consumption. In consumption spaces such as Napa Valley tasting rooms, consumers enter with some prior knowledge about wine that they have learned from sources ranging from friends, colleagues, family members, wine store managers, and lifestyle television. This prior knowledge is validated, supplemented or challenged by the interactions with industry representatives (e.g., tasting room hosts) that occur in the consumption spaces themselves.

One of the key features of the U.S. wine industry is how the industry has hierarchically structured these “lifestyle indicators” through connecting wines with status

and symbolic indicators of value (e.g., point ratings) (Jamerson 2009). Then, by utilizing this point based classification system provided by wine critics and industry experts, even novice consumers are able to navigate a wide range of consumer products across price points. Not only does this classification system assist buyers in choosing a “good” wine at the “right” price, these ratings also confer symbolic value to wines. Therefore, wines with higher ratings (especially those rated 93+ by top industry critics such as Robert Parker) have higher value both in terms of cost and status within the overarching classification system. These wine classifications are widely referenced throughout the United States, including television (e.g., Food Network), lifestyle magazines (e.g., *Sunset*), industry publications (e.g., *The Wine Spectator*), retail spaces (e.g., placards that include ratings), and the consumptions spaces themselves (e.g., both visual displays and audible mentions from service workers). Therefore, consumers are surrounded by various references to the hierarchical structure of wine in the United States.

As discussed in Chapter 4, these markers of value are readily apparent throughout Napa Valley tasting rooms. In fact, symbolic boundaries are clearly established through the various ways in which ACS are upheld as universal across organizational types. Moreover, we see hints in Chapter 4 about the distinctive ways in which information is exchanged to produce unique wine cultures that reinforce particular notions about wine and its functional and symbolic meanings. Tasting room hosts in these organizations literally funnel consumers into tasting rooms that are most suited to the pre-existing knowledge or expectations that they bring with them into Napa Valley. This process suggests that as symbolic boundaries are enacted by tasting room hosts (as well as

through the visual displays that are evidenced in different wineries), social boundaries may also emerge to segregate space based on the class differences of consumers who visit the tourist region. More specifically, social boundaries refer to the lived distinctions that divide people of different social groups (such as social class) into segregated spaces that hold varying amounts valuable resources (including information that could provide access to limited spaces, save money, lead to social mobility, etc.) (see Bryson 1996; Lamont and Molnar 2002). Or, put another way, social boundaries are the mechanism of social reproduction, whereby distinguishable groups (e.g., based on race, class, gender) are formally or informally directed into patterned positions within the larger stratification system. Following the scholarship on consumption and its potential for contributing to social inequality and the establishment of social boundaries, this chapter examines how consumers from varying class backgrounds understand wine as a lifestyle indicator and how their interpretation of industry classifications reinforces or challenges social boundaries that exist between class groups.

The chapter will begin with an overview of how consumption practices have been understood to reinforce social distinctions across class groups and some of the empirical findings related to these theories. Following this discussion, the chapter will provide consumer related findings from three years of field research in tasting rooms in Napa Valley. First, I will highlight the organization of the space of Napa Valley, namely its wineries and related tourist attractions. Second, I will discuss the different types of consumer groups who come to the valley for vacations, focusing on their different levels of economic, social and cultural capital, as well as, how they understand and utilize industry classifications.

Consumption and Social Boundaries

The extent to which social interactions and the socially constructed value of commodities create symbolic boundaries and reinforces social hierarchies has sparked significant debates within sociology of culture research (see DiMaggio 1987, 1991; Erickson 1996; Halle 1993; Holt 1987, 1998; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Peterson 2005). This debate emerges from early sociological theories that posited a relationship between consumption and social boundaries. For example, despite their divergent theoretical origins, the classical theories of Adam Smith (1759/1976), Karl Marx (1844/1978), Thorstein Veblen (1899/1965), Max Weber (1922/1968) and Georg Simmel (1904/1976) all argued that social actors use objects as a way to distinguish themselves from others and obtain or maintain social status. For instance, Veblen (1899/1965) argued that the wealthy use conspicuous displays of consumption as a means to differentiate themselves from lower social groups. Lower classes emulate the consumer practices of the leisure class in order to elevate their own social position by associating with the higher social class. Similar arguments by Simmel (1904/1976) suggest that commodities create social boundaries through the on-going stylistic innovations of fashion which cannot be emulated by mass society without losing their preferential significance for the elite.

Indeed, many of the studies of consumption and class in the United States during the mid-twentieth century agreed that status-based consumption organizes social life. For example, borrowing from Weber's (1922/1968) theory of social status and Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption (1899/1965), Warner (1949) argued that objects act as positional markers that reinforced social boundaries. Here, elites are engaged in a

perpetual game with lower status groups, in which they struggle to maintain control over universally valorized objects. Lower status groups attempt to emulate these consumption patterns despite their ultimate inability to accomplish this type of consumer replication.

Bourdieu's seminal book, *Distinction* (1984) builds on this line of theory and research by extending his analysis to how consumer tastes reproduce class boundaries. According to Bourdieu (1984), commodities acquire symbolic "identity values" that correspond to particular social groups and reinforce class based social boundaries. While classic sociological theories had focused on consumer objects themselves as the source of social boundaries, Bourdieu's work moves beyond an exclusive focus on objects to explore the divergent ways in which differently located social groups consume cultural objects. In other words, how one consumes cultural goods is as important as what objects are being consumed. This theoretical and empirical insight highlights the transition of focus from external forms (products themselves) to internalized dispositions (ways of consuming) that reproduce class boundaries.

Bourdieu's theory of tastes rests upon his belief that the social structure produces and regulates the *habitus*, which is "a series of durable, transposable dispositions," tendencies, predispositions, inclinations, or propensities that organize action within social class groups (Bourdieu 1977; 72 also see translator's footnote 1:214). Through class based socialization (e.g., family interactions and education) individuals internalize a tacit familiarity of tastes, styles, and practices (i.e., cultural capital) that are consistent with other people who occupy their same class position. Because of the profound influence of early childhood socialization, the specific content (i.e., cultural capital) of the *habitus*

becomes invisible and largely intuitive to individuals who occupy similar social class positions. Thus, the *habitus* is maintained through unconscious interactions and practices that reinforce the material conditions of the social structure. In this way, it operates as a bridge between the objective class structure and the subjective forms of cultural capital embodied by individuals, thus acting as a localized configuration of shared tastes and dispositions that reproduce social boundaries across class groups.

From Bourdieu's perspective, having "good tastes" is inextricably linked to social status because elites are able to dominate other classes through defining and legitimating their particular set of tastes as superior. Therefore, the entire field of consumption is stratified based on a consumer's successful utilization of cultural capital, which involves a set of distinctive tastes, skills, knowledge, and practices that are rare or difficult to obtain (Bourdieu 1977, 1984). Individuals who share social class positions also share similar levels of cultural capital as manifested by their tastes, and orientations toward consumer goods. Hence, particular class based consumer cultures encode objects with hierarchically ordered symbolic meanings, thereby creating and reinforcing boundaries between these social groups. For instance, in the field of consumption, cultural capital is enacted through arts, food, interior design, clothing, popular culture, hobbies and sports (Bourdieu 1984). Through an embodied style of consumption and the expression of (what appear to be individual) tastes, consumption practices reinforce social status boundaries, regardless of the object being consumed (see Holt 1997, 1998).

For instance, Bourdieu argues that elites consume based upon tacit aesthetic knowledge that they have gained through socialization (rather than studied "book knowledge"), thus making their manner of consumption inaccessible to mass consumers

who have not gained high-class socialization. This offers elites a rare ability to decode more complex cultural goods (e.g., music, art, food or wine) through their shared appreciation of refined distinctions and complex styles. Moreover, this higher level of cultural capital ensures a unique style of appreciation that stresses form (i.e., the process of production) rather than the function (i.e., the utility) of an object of consumption. According to Bourdieu, members of this high status group help reinforce social boundaries by controlling the classification systems that organize cultural goods and the modes of appreciation that are understood as universally worthy or valuable.

Whether among elites or among lower class groups, Bourdieu argues that the *habitus* universally structures consumption practices and serves to reproduce class divisions within all societies. However, the extent to which consumption (and tastes in particular) reproduces symbolic boundaries that reinforce social hierarchies has sparked considerable debate within social scientific research (DiMaggio 1987, 1991; Halle 1993; Holt 1997, 1998; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Peterson 2005). One of the primary ways scholars have approached this debate has been to assume a clear distinction between “high culture” (e.g., ballet, symphony) and “popular culture” (e.g., country music), whereby elites maintain hegemonic control over lower class groups by defining the classification systems related to “worthy” cultural goods and by barring access from non-elites.

As discussed in Chapter 4, research by DiMaggio (1987, 1991) has been highly influential in suggesting that the effectiveness of tastes as a resource for social reproduction relies on the structure of particular societies and argues that institutional and social factors within modern society prohibit higher status groups from legitimating a

universally accepted hierarchy of value related to cultural products and activities.

Universally accepted hierarchies of value weaken in response to market pressures, a diffuse consensus among consumers regarding value, and the lack of legitimating rituals needed to reproduce symbolic boundaries. In other words, the predominance of pluralism in a market-driven society decreases the ability of elites to monopolize the institutional and organizational resources needed to create and maintain symbolic boundaries that can create social boundaries across class groups.

Without question, consumption today occurs in a world where elites are diffuse, reference groups are more pluralistic, the middle class has expanded, credit is readily available for most income groups, cultural educational opportunities are available to wider audiences (e.g., HGTV) and mass-produced products (that range in quality and style) are easily accessible. These factors seem to have eroded the distinction between what is universally deemed “high culture” as well as the symbolic boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that would structure social relationships (Collins 1992; DiMaggio 1987; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985).

However, as Chapter 4 highlights, symbolic boundaries do exist in the thriving commercial field of wine, where the Artistic Classification System (ACS) is effectively upheld in very different tasting rooms in Napa Valley. Questions remain, however, regarding how this information is interpreted by consumers who may come from different social class positions. Moreover, further research is required to understand how the *habitus* may structure taste patterns and/or meaning systems around a cultural product that is encircled by symbolic boundaries.

In other cultural fields, empirical research that examines preferences for particular cultural objects have bolstered claims about the collapse of a universally accepted hierarchy of cultural goods and have challenged Bourdieu-inspired assertions about the ability of elites to exert “symbolic violence” through taste preferences. In fact, tastes operationalized by consumer preferences for particular products (or cultural goods) reveal inconsistent patterns for class groups, thereby complicating the hypothesis that cultural capital, revealed through consumer tastes for consumer objects, contributes to social reproduction. For example, Halle’s (1993) study of home decorating in New York suggests that art consumption does not necessarily generate social boundaries since multiple social groups consume similar objects (e.g., art landscapes). Additionally, Bryson (1996), Erickson (1996) and Peterson and Kern (1996) argue that both symbolic and social boundaries are more permeable than Bourdieu’s theory would predict, especially as dominant classes become less exclusionary in their consumption patterns. Indeed, high status groups today in the United States are more diffuse in their consumption patterns than in 1960s France, as they exhibit tastes well-beyond predicted high culture objects.

Specifically, Peterson and Simkus (1992) find high status respondents are less likely to restrict their consumption to “high culture,” thereby revealing a tendency toward omnivorous consumption rather than exclusionary boundary maintenance. According to a growing body of literature, cultural omnivores shun highbrow snobbery in favor of democratic ideals that preference more open rules of inclusion. In other words, while they may feel comfortable in their capacity to appreciate cultural goods, they oppose the existence of an objective criterion of evaluation that would structure appreciation for all

members of society (Peterson and Kern 1999). Moreover, even though omnivores are comfortable with their own subjective tastes, they avoid judging others for having “poor tastes,” thereby reinforcing their commitment to equality across class groups.

Despite this commitment to democratizing tastes, other studies suggest that elites with higher levels of cultural capital share common *interpretations* of cultural objects and that these distinctions reinforce social boundaries. For instance, Holt (1997, 1998) finds that people with higher levels of cultural capital (HCC) (as measured by father’s occupation and education, and the respondent’s occupation and education) express distinct styles of consumption when compared with people with lower levels of cultural capital (LCC). First, HCCs reject mass consumerism and actively distance themselves from mass produced products (or the appearance of mass produced products) and consumer goods that are used by LCCs as status markers (e.g., BMWs, vacation cruises, or larger homes). Instead, HCCs seek out “authentic” objects (such as an antique rug) as an expression of individuality or invert materialism. Second, HCCs highlight the process of production and the intricate complexities of a consumer goods rather than focusing on the utility or function of a product. Thus they develop complex vocabularies and fine grained evaluative criteria that are largely invisible to LCCs. Third, Holt finds the even when consuming similar objects to lower class groups (i.e., being omnivorous), the HCCs distance themselves from LCCs by applying complex and idiosyncratic distinctions to mass-produced goods. Hence, even though both groups may consume the same product (e.g., country music), the preferred sub-genres of consumptions and the styles, classification systems, and modes of appreciation between the groups diverge considerably. Moreover, HCCs seek out opportunities to acquire knowledge and

experiences that will enhance their appreciation of both scarce and mass-produced cultural goods. Therefore, the dissimilar structures of the *habitus* and varying levels of cultural capital foster the facilitation of cultural knowledge and skills particular class groups, which contributes to social reproduction and boundary maintenance.

More recent scholarship on omnivores, cultural capital and tastes offers support to the collapsing of the high and low culture dichotomy, as well as, for the way in which consumption practices reinforce social boundaries. For instance, Johnston and Baumann (2009) show that “foodies” (i.e., people with high levels of income and education who appreciate foods and food culture) are omnivorous in their food choices, appreciating both “high-brow” foods such as haute cuisines as well as “low brow” foods such as hamburgers. However, within this low-brow food category, foodies seek out the most “authentic” hamburger from the most “authentic” restaurant they can find. This allows high status food connoisseurs to maintain their commitment to democratic and populist ideals, while using their tastes (which are shaped by their economic and cultural capital) to create distinctions and social distance from people of lower socio-economic classes. Additionally, like respondents with high cultural capital in Holt’s study, foodies express a desire for individualized aesthetic expressions, which conform to complex vocabularies, elevated quality standards, and specialized knowledge that have been legitimated by cultural experts, such as food magazines or critics.

These studies suggest that even in a democratic consumer society where objects are readily available, elites continue to utilize specialize knowledge and a high level of distinction to consume even the most “common” products. Moreover, elites affirm their cultural superiority through their taste selections and the manner in which they engage

consumer products, thereby reinforcing exclusionary social boundaries that limit access by lower class groups.

While these qualitative findings highlight the ways in which cultural capital acts to reproduce of class boundaries through consumption practices, they also raise questions about how economic capital and social capital contribute to the acquisition of cultural capital for particular consumer groups. Certainly, Johnston and Baumann (2009) highlight the absolute necessity of economic capital in enacting foodie sensibilities by focusing on elite consumers who have a significant level of disposable income to explore the highest quality ingredients, trendy new restaurants, or the latest food travel destinations. In other words, economic capital is a prerequisite for the deployment of high culture tastes and omnivorous consumption practices. These findings also support Bourdieu's assertion that embodied capital takes time to accumulate, as he argues here: "Embodied capital, external wealth converted into an integral part of the person, into a *habitus*, cannot be transmitted instantaneously (unlike money, property rights or even titles of nobility) by gift or bequest, purchase or exchange" (Bourdieu 1986:48). Instead, "the transformation of economic capital into cultural capital presupposes an expenditure of time that is made possible by possession of economic capital" (Bourdieu 1986:50). Hence, money is the primary requirement that then requires an investment of time into the embodiment of cultural knowledge or legitimate "tastes." This insight suggests that there must be a transition from the external knowledge of valorized objects (products themselves) to an internalized awareness of the nuances and distinctions that are part of the cultural capital used by truly elite consumer groups.

Like some other cultural products, wine is a product that can be appropriated materially (which presupposes economic capital) and symbolically (which presupposes cultural capital). However, one of the more interesting features of wine is the fact that people in the United States are not legally able to consume the product before the age of twenty-one. This means that wine knowledge and/or appreciation do(es) not begin with early childhood socialization (through the family) or through traditional educational venues (public or private school). Instead, adults must have economic capital to fund their own wine consumption (rather than using their parent's resources) and must learn the complex wine system of products and rituals of appreciation later in life.

Interestingly, this raises two related questions. Firstly, where wine consumers in the U.S gain their information and knowledge about wine and, secondly, how and when this information becomes "internalized" or "embodied" as a form of cultural capital.

While the first question includes mainstream media outlets (e.g., Food Network) and specialized sources of information related to wine (e.g., *The Wine Spectator* or wine classes), it also raises the issue of social capital or the networks of people (and the resources embedded in those network) that would offer legitimate information or access to valuable resource related to wine. One of the distinctive features of social networks is whether they reach horizontally across a homogenous group or vertically into differently positioned groups (with resources that would not be held within one's own group). Information held in homogenous networks reinforces the same knowledge and validates similar interpretations or experiences, while information exchanged in heterogeneous networks would challenge existing information or offer access to resources otherwise unavailable. In the context of social reproduction, homogenous networks might solidify

existing social boundaries, while heterogeneous networks could offer an opportunity for social mobility or boundary transgressions (see Granovetter 1973; 1983).

The Organization of Space

One of the more striking aspects of the initial data collection period was just how segregated 32-miles of valley could be. Most obvious was the complete invisibility of the predominately Latino vineyard and “backstage” service workers from the main tourist areas, giving the appearance that Napa Valley is a mythical Eden where all the necessary dirty work is accomplished under the cover of night.³⁶ In many ways this is literally the case, given that vineyard work is completed by the time tasting rooms open at 10 or 11 and the cleaning of hotel rooms is done while visitors are out visiting the wineries or restaurants. Therefore, when one drives through Napa Valley for the first time, it appears quite homogenous, where the locals and the tourists alike are white and within the middle or affluent classes.

Upon more careful observation, however, the class segregation of space begins to become more obvious through the wineries themselves, the restaurants, the hotels, and the agro-tourist activities offered to consumers. For instance, consumers can choose from standard chain hotels in the city of Napa or in the less desirable suburbs of Napa that cost around \$100 to \$150 per night or a Tuscan-inspired villa surrounded by vineyards in St. Helena that runs around \$1000 to \$1200 per night. The chain hotel might provide a standard continental breakfast (e.g., bagel and orange juice) and a stand full of colorful tourist brochures, while, in contrast, the villa would provide a personal chef for meals and

³⁶ 26.8% of Napa Valley residents are non-white Hispanics.

a sommelier to make recommendations and reservations for wineries in the area. Just from this illustration one can see that class distinctions are readily apparent in the range of options offered to consumers even within an affluent wine region like Napa. On one end of the spectrum, effective mass marketing, accomplished through brochures and incentives such as “free tasting” coupons found at local hotels and the Visitor’s Center, funnels lower class consumers toward large commercial wineries. While simultaneously, higher class consumers are offered access to the “behind the scenes” Napa that escapes the pedestrian aspects of the valley (often referred to as “avoiding Disney Land” by consumers in this latter group). Notably, many mid-range hotels, Bed and Breakfasts or cabins provide lodging options to middle class consumers who visit the area.

Interestingly, consumers in this category reported a striking similarity and overlap as to where concierge or other service workers directed their wine tasting experiences, leading them away from mass commercial sites to “smaller” wineries that offer a more “unique tasting experience” (Consumer Interviews 2007). These recommendations rarely included wineries that required a reservation or would be classified as elite tasting rooms.

Additionally, consumers report that the activities that they choose beyond the actual tasting rooms are also segmented based on class differences. For instance, middle class consumers are more likely to pursue activities such as the Napa Valley Wine Train, which provides an educational ride through the valley where consumers learn about the history of the valley, its unique growing regions, as well as information about food and wine pairings (Consumer Interviews 2007). Higher class consumers explained that the Wine Train is part of the Disney Land experience that they seek to avoid and would much rather indulge in a day at one of the exquisite spas in the area (Consumer Interviews

2008). In general, lower class consumers did not report branching out beyond wineries and said that they made winery selections based on complementary wine tastings or other “free” tourist experiences such as NASCAR models on display (Consumer Interviews 2006). Restaurant choices are also class stratified, with high-class consumers going to restaurants with celebrity chefs such as Thomas Keller (e.g., French Laundry), middle class consumers frequenting the excellent but less exclusive restaurants (e.g., Rutherford Grill), and lower class consumers choosing chain restaurants (e.g., Marie Calendars).

While these differences are fascinating in their own right, the significance for this project rest in the distinctive class groups that are maintained and reproduced in this geographically small, and relatively homogenous tourist region. Moreover, it was quite common for me to spend an entire week going to one type of winery (e.g., mass commercial wineries) and encounter the same tourists over and over during their vacation. Hence, consumers were experiencing the same wine culture (complete with the aesthetic, educational and interactional aspects of the wine tasting experience), which was geographically separate from consumers of different classes. In other words, class distinctions manifest themselves through literal social boundaries that are maintained through interactions with service workers and other similarly situated consumers who exchange information about where to stay, which restaurants to try, what activities to experience and the tasting rooms that cannot be missed. Interviews with people from these distinctive cultures offer insight into some of the unanswered questions related to class reproduction, namely the relationship between various forms of capital and how different class groups legitimate their consumer choices.

Various Forms of Capital and Forms of Legitimacy

Everyone who visits Napa Valley has money. That is, everyone has money in comparison to the rest of people living in the United States. According to a study done by the Napa Valley Visitor's Bureau, the average tourist is over 35 years of age, educated (i.e., most with graduate degrees) and about half earn more than \$100,000 per year (Stonebridge Research Report 2008). In many ways, however, even though everyone shares a relatively high-class position in comparison to national averages³⁷, qualitative data reveal the nuances of how social class is enacted in this tourist region. More specifically, findings from this project show that economic capital, social capital and cultural capital are all uniquely exhibited depending upon the consumer group under investigation.

*Mass Commercial Consumers*³⁸

Consumers who visit mass commercial tasting rooms report a wide range of annual earnings, ranging between \$40,000 and \$100,000 per person. The men in this category are employed in blue-collar jobs (e.g., electricians) and the women tend to work in the professional service sector (e.g., teachers or social workers). Therefore, it is not surprising that the women hold higher educational degrees than the men, whereby the

³⁷ The national average for personal income is just under \$40,000 (Bureau of Business & Economic Research: <http://bber.unm.edu/econ/us-pci.htm>) and the national average for bachelors degrees is around 27% (Educational Attainment in the US: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-550.pdf>).

³⁸ According to wine industry insiders, even though visitors to Napa have higher earnings than the larger U.S. population, this consumer group best represents the majority of wine drinkers in the United States and have been targeted by marketing efforts of large international corporations (Informal Conversation, Brad 2008). Moreover, this consumer segment has been most recession-proof during the recent economic crisis in the United States. For instance, E & J Gallo's low cost Barefoot label (under \$5.00) saw the highest increase in revenue and volume than any other brand during 2008 (Firstenfeld, Gordon and Lavin 2008).

former mostly hold master's degrees and the latter have high school diplomas or four year college degrees. All of these respondents were married (which in most cases pushed their household annual earnings over \$100,000). None of the people interviewed in this consumer group live in urban areas, rather they report preferring to have more acreage (in rural areas) or larger homes (in suburban areas) than they could afford in the city. All of the respondents who lived in the suburbs argued that their savings allowed them buy boats to take to regional lakes on the weekends. From these reports, these consumers are economically "comfortable" and chose to come to Napa for the wine experience (rather than for the food or overall culture).

Men and women in this category both reported that they enjoyed wine because it added to the romance and significance of a special moment together with their husband or wives (e.g., anniversary). In fact, all of these consumers had chosen to come to Napa because they thought it would be a romantic excursion where they could "fall in love again" (Personal Interview: Tammy 2007). When at home, they report that they have friends who drink wine, but who are not people they would consider to be "wine experts." The social events that they discussed repeatedly highlighted common sex-segregation where the women enjoyed wine and the men chose to drink beer or hard liquor (e.g., whiskey). For instance, in a joint interview with a husband and wife, the man jokingly stated, "Well, ya know...well...I mean she is not going to like this (pointing at his wife). But, wine is sorta a girl drink... I mean, I don't think that (laughing)... I'm here aren't I? But, when I'm with the guys we don't drink wine. We drink Jack Daniels. I guess it's just more accepted for us (men)" (Personal Interview: Tommy 2006). Women, in contrast, routinely incorporate wine into social events and prefer to serve wine over

other alcoholic beverages at parties. When asked how they decide which wines to buy for these events, they report choosing based on “what looks fun” (Personal Interview: Deborah 2006). Neither the men nor the women reported having anyone that they routinely asked for wine advice, suggestions or recommendations, not only limiting their overall wine knowledge but also about where to go when they got to Napa Valley. Therefore, they relied heavily on the color brochures, Visitor Centers, and their familiarity with wines that they knew from local grocery stores in their areas (mass commercial wineries with large distribution networks).

With this limited amount of social networking with people with culturally legitimated knowledge about wine (i.e., low social capital related to wine), these consumers are also insulated from legitimated forms of wine appreciation or cultural capital related to wine. For instance, if we compare Holt’s (1997, 1998) findings about LCC’s taste preferences to interviews with respondents in this category we see a striking overlap [See Table 12]. Respondents in mass commercial tasting rooms report choosing the same wines over and over, based on brands and the visual cues on the label. For instance, they may repeatedly buy a Goodbrothers Merlot that they recognize in the local grocery store as a wine that is affordable (most often \$5-\$10 per bottle) and that they have enjoyed in the past. When asked why they made the original purchase of this wine they repeatedly said, “I liked the label” or “it was on sale.” Many of the wines mentioned are wines that boast large marketing displays in chain grocery stores and have bright, colorful labels with cartoon-like animal sketches on the bottle (e.g., kangaroos, fish). One respondent in particular states, “It’s all about the label...if it’s colorful, jumps out at me, doesn’t say white Zinfandel or anything, but if it says merlot and it is pink and purple, or

has leaves, or it has a little black dog...I am going to buy it...even if it has a screw top (Personal Interview: Winnie 2006). Inevitably, then, these consumers purchase mass marketed wines with large advertising campaigns that will capture their attention and “not break the bank” (Personal Interview: Tommy 2006).

As mentioned above, these consumers routinely integrate wine into social events that involve their friends, although this is more common for women than for men in my sample. In fact, two female respondents reported holding “wine parties” at least once per month. For consumers in this category, a wine party means that about 5 to 10 women get together to consume wine and food and to share conversation. As one respondent explained, “I am in a group called the “whiners.” There are about 10 of us in our group...we meet at each other’s houses...well we rotate, and every time we get together we pick a theme. And bring wine, drink wine...then call for taxicabs! We just drink and whine... I really don’t really have a lot to whine about, but these women with husbands, kids, and adolescents they have *a lot* to whine about” (Personal Interview: Winnie 2006). As Winnie highlights, these gatherings are intended to build friendships and solidify bonds of commonality by using the intoxicating effects of wine as an opportunity to “loosen up” or “let go” (Personal Interviews: Tammy 2006, Winnie 2006). Hence, the participants are concerned about price and value as opposed to the aesthetic value of wine or wine as a cultural product. For instance, Winnie continues to explain:

When they come to my house I get the prettiest labels and the best names... Crazy names, with screw tops... who cares? I don’t care. Hell, I will leave the price sticker on the bottom of the bottle. I say, if you are worried about the flavor then here drink this tequila first, then try the wine. Then they would go home and say ‘man, that was really tasty.’ I guess the only problem with buying cheap wine is that there can be a

direct correlation between the cost of the wine and the size of the headache (laughing).

As suggested in this quote, this respondent (and others in this category) are aware of the social rankings that are associated with wine consumption, whereby wine confers status to consumers who know about wine and purchase more expensive wines. However, they repeatedly state that using wine as a status indicator matters less than getting a good bargain for an intoxicating product that will enhance social relationships (whether with friends or their romantic partner).

Outside of their homes and in restaurants, these consumers continue their preference for cost and functionality over the aesthetic value of wine. For instance, several respondents mentioned chain restaurants as their favorite places to eat because they offer “bottomless glasses” of wine. For example, Morgan (Personal Interview 2007) explains why he enjoys one of the popular Italian chain restaurants.

...and they have...they give you a full glass, a huge glass. I mean it's bigger than a regular glass and it's a house wine. They put this big jug on the table and you get white, (white) Zin or red. It's house wine. And now that...we can go through a couple or three of those. And we eat there for everybody's birthday....And it's painless because it's so inexpensive.

Similar sentiments are shared by Tommy (Personal Interview 2006) in the following quote about another popular chain restaurant that offers jug wine or large glasses of wine at minimal prices.

It's like \$3-\$4... it's a big thing. It's huge. It's like a soda glass. So we like getting a lot of bang for our buck. Why would I spend \$7 or \$8 for a glass of wine when they put this big jug down in front of you or give you this huge soda glass full of wine for \$3. It just doesn't make sense to pay more....I just laugh at the bastards that spend \$100s for a bottle of wine when you can get the same thing for nothing.

As these examples show, consumers in this group repeatedly emphasize the quantity of wine they can get for the least amount of money.

From the above quotes and discussion, we can also see common themes emerging about how this group understands the classification system related to wine, namely how wines are differentiated from each other and how they are ranked by industry experts. These consumers themselves share similarities in how they classify wines into broad overarching classifications such as red, white, or what Morgan called Zin (which he meant as a White Zinfandel, which is a red grape processed without the skin to enhance the sweetness and minimize the tannins found in red wine). These three categories of wine were used over and over in response to the interview question, “what types of wines do you typically drink?” In all but one case, consumers in this category quickly stated either “red,” “white,” or “Zin.” When pressed on what varietals they preferred within these distinctions, the respondents commonly named Merlot and Chardonnay, which have a history of mass production in the United States, and Shiraz, which has been popularized by the Australian wine industry through marketing campaigns that offer colorful labels and extremely low costs. Consumers were unable to name distinctions for wines that were more complex or nuanced than the broad categories of a few of the most popular varietals (e.g., growing region, year, wine maker, or lesser known varietals such as Barbera).

Moreover, these consumers verbalized an awareness of wine critics and the culturally legitimated classification system for wine and modes of appreciation; yet, they either actively distance themselves from them or stated that they will learn about them someday when they have more time or money to make wine a hobby. In the first case,

consumers made jokes about people that they saw in Napa who were “really into wine” by exaggerating wine related actions such as swirling wine to the point of swirling it out of their glasses and onto the table. Or by stating things like, “Well they (other people in Napa) can be a little snooty. And I don’t like snooty. And then like I said before... you could have, I don't know, a really cheap wine, I guess like Boone's Farm and put it in an empty bottle and someone's gonna go "Ooo la la” and charge \$100 for it” (Personal Interview: Tommy 2006). In two separate interviews, respondents echoed very similar opinions about wine experts that I had observed tasting room hosts in mass commercial wineries use in their wine tasting presentations. In both cases, the expertise of wine critics was diminished and the importance of consumers “drinking what they like” was emphasized. In the second case, consumers reported that they could not afford the wines featured in wine publications (e.g., *The Wine Spectator*) or by other industry experts. For instance, Morgan (Personal Interview 2006) explains that “wine magazines... well, they are pretty much talking about wines that are too expensive. I am not going to pay more than \$10 for a bottle of wine. I am not trying to impress anyone. And, I don’t know enough to pay more... I mean I’d like to know more. But, I just don’t have time to learn right now.” Another respondent echoed this thought, saying:

Well, I know that some people spend their whole lives learning about wine. But, it’s just too much for me right now...I’m too busy with life, ya know, I work a lot of hours and the last think I wanna do is read when I get home... just give me the cheap stuff now, and maybe someday I will have more time...well, and more money (laughing) (Personal Interview: Chris 2006).

In conclusion, even though consumers in mass-commercial tasting rooms have relatively high levels of economic capital, they lack heterogeneous social networks with

people who would emphasize a complex appreciation of wine. Instead, they get their information about wine from places like marketing displays in large chain supermarkets or from travel brochures in Napa. Therefore, they tend to choose cheap, mass-produced wines that have visually striking labels. This serves three related objectives. First, the wines fit within their budgetary understanding of what a wine “should cost.” Second, this expectation of low cost is related to how the respondents understand wine as an intoxicant that facilitates social relationship (whether with friends or with a partner). This was the only consumer group that readily acknowledged the intoxicating effects of wine as a reason for drinking it. As demonstrated above, respondents in this group made many humorous references to situations where they had “had too much to drink” or “headaches,” as if this type of playful intoxication is a primary reason for drinking alcohol in general and wine in particular. Hence, they emphasize high quantity at a low price. Considerations of quantity and price also inform their decisions about which tasting rooms to visit in Napa, whereby they choose tasting sites that are most aggressively marketed through color brochures, visible signs, and incentives for “free tastings” or free merchandise (e.g., commemorative wine glass). Third, these consumers want predictability in their wines, meaning that they expect wines to taste the same from one year to the next. This expectation is somewhat difficult to meet with wine since grapes change from year to year with different climate and weather effects. This requires highly standardized wine making techniques that minimize artistic creativity in favor of mass production. Moreover, consumers choose tasting rooms that are also standardized in their wines (e.g., offering the same ones that can be purchased in the mass market) and consumable goods (e.g., mass-produced shirts, hats, golf accessories).

In many ways, these consumers offer an excellent example of the powerful effectiveness of large-scale marketing efforts to expand wine consumption in the United States. They purchase wine because they perceive it to be trendy and more upscale than wine coolers or other similar beverages. Moreover, they are aware that wine carries status and is often associated with more affluent culture in the United States. However, they understand themselves in a somewhat of a contradictory relationship with this higher status culture, whereby they drink wine because of its association with “class” but they readily distance themselves from “snooty wine snobs.” While they are aware that classification systems exist to rate wine and to provide information about wine appreciation, they understand them as evidence of the “snootiness” of wine snobs and actively distance themselves from participating in active learning about wine or wine culture.

Limited Commercial Consumers

Consumers who visited Limited Commercial tasting rooms can be easily classified as economically affluent based on their personal annual earnings, ranging from \$50,000 to \$100,000. Both the men and the women are employed in high status occupations such as lawyers or college professors, which require advanced professional or academic degrees. Moreover, respondents report that wines (and food) are a valued part of their occupational culture where people routinely discuss wine, local wine tastings, new restaurants, etc. Additionally, they report that events sponsored by their business organizations or college/university departments include wine as part of the social and professional culture. In fact, two respondents stated that they chose to increase

their wine knowledge as a direct result of their current job. One of these men explained his transition into wine in this way.

Scott: Well, I remember like 5 years ago I was invited out to dinner by a competing (law) firm in town. I thought they might be greasing the wheels...ya know, seeing if I would be interested in joining their firm. So, we go to this nice restaurant and they want me to pick a bottle of wine. I remember the terror! I was so nervous.... (laughing) I mean, I guess it didn't really bother me that I wasn't an expert in that. But, in that moment, I knew that all eyes were on me and I was nervous because I thought this is going to be really bad if I chose wrong...

Interviewer: So, what did you do?

Scott: I did what I had always done before (laughing)... I asked the waiter. Then, I decided I don't want to feel that way again. See, if it's just for me then that is fine. Ummm...but now I had to learn about this stuff as part of being taken seriously with those guys. Ya know, I just want to feel comfortable picking out a bottle if I need to (Personal Interview 2007).

Scott credits this moment as highly influential for him in seeking out wine related information. And, explains that he started this journey by reading *Wine For Dummies*, doing Internet searches about wine, going to local wine tastings and subscribing to the *Wine Spectator*. Now, he says that feels comfortable with his co-workers who actively cultivate a professional culture that includes conversations and experiences related to wine.

All of the respondents in this category live in urban areas that are near trendy new restaurants, wine bars, and specialty wine stores, which they frequent often. They also report that their hobbies include food, wine and travel (both domestic and international) that often involves wine regions. Additionally, they referenced specific cooking show or new food trends that they had seen on The Food Network or reported learning about

where to take their next vacation on The Travel Channel. In many ways, these consumers are avid followers of media outlets that can aid them on their journey of wine exploration.

Moreover, they incorporate wine into many social events ranging from dinners to wine parties. Unlike the mass commercial consumers, however, wine parties spotlight wine and are structured in such a way so as to learn about wine varietals, growing regions, wine pairings, and other aspects of wine culture or appreciation. For instance, these events may be monthly “theme parties” in which each participant brings a bottle of wine that is consistent with the theme of the party (e.g., Tuscan style wines, Cabernet Sauvignons from Napa, Malbecs from Mendoza) and a food dish that would pair well with these particular wine selections. One respondent explained that he “research(es) all month to find the perfect wine to take,” meaning that the wine is indicative of that particular style, region or varietal (Personal Interview: Chad 2007). Moreover, these wines must be “reasonably priced” so that they can be incorporated into everyday experiences of wine consumption. For this consumer group, “reasonably priced” includes wines that range from \$12 to \$25 per bottle for everyday consumption to \$20 to \$50 for a special occasion (or if it is on their company’s expense account). Therefore, the ideal wine for one of these “theme parties” would range between \$15 to \$18 per bottle. According to one respondent, this price range allows group members to “drink the wine at home on a weeknight” and forcing them to “be creative in finding a good bottle at a good price” (Personal Interview: Graham 2007).

In order to accomplish this goal, respondents rely heavily on their “wine expert friends” or “experts” who work at local wine shops. Repeatedly, people in this group

referenced these personal “experts,” who they hold in high regard due to their vast wine knowledge, and who they report as an important source of information about wines and wine knowledge or culture. For instance, Robert enthusiastically details his friend’s knowledge of wine by saying, “well, I have this friend who knows everything about wine. I mean, he has traveled everywhere, read every (wine) book and tried all sorts of unusual wines that I have never even heard of... I mean, this guy knows it all...from flavors to smells...he can detect it all...even just from the aroma he can tell you more about it than most people can from tasting it” (Personal Interview: Robert 2007).

In many ways, this consumer group demonstrates the importance of heterogeneous social networks in gaining exposure to legitimated wine information and in acquiring wine-related knowledge. Therefore, even though they may not travel in circles with sommeliers, critics or wine makers, they do have access to wine drinkers who bridge the gap between the respondents and industry personnel. For instance, both Chad and Robert discussed “expert” friends who lived in wine regions or who knew winemakers or chefs. These social networks in conjunction with new media outlets that feature wine (as well as food and travel) significantly enhance the knowledge base for this consumer group.

This translates into a learning culture of its own, whereby wine consumers are building a community around the acquisition of knowledge and skills that revolves around what “experts” consider legitimate. Therefore, the industry generated classification systems are most embraced by this clientele. In fact, the classification system (e.g., ratings, reviews, expert reports) is revered by these consumers as the “truth” about wine and the most desirable ways to enjoy its consumption. For instance, during

observations in limited commercial tasting rooms, I saw many consumers engage in “games” with tasting room hosts, whereby the consumer would guess what flavors were present in the wine (e.g., licorice, grapefruit, cherry). Routinely, guests would swirl the wine to open its bouquet, smell the aroma carefully, aerate it before swallowing and then make a guess at the flavors found in the wine only to be gently corrected by the tasting room host “expert.” When asked about these experiences during interviews, respondents stated that they were glad to have the opportunity to learn how to develop their palates and improve their ability to detect flavors and distinctions in the wine. Interestingly, none of them questioned the tasting room hosts or the written cellar notes, but instead, chose to believe the “experts” over their own subjective experience of the wine. Two respondents reported similar themes in how they discussed their wine parties with friends, whereby they would each bring a bottle of wine, a paper bag and the wine’s tasting notes (found at the wine shop or on the Internet). Guests at the wine party would go through each wine and write their own tasting notes to describe the wine and the one closest would get a prize. One of these respondents admitted, “I’m actually not very good at this game...huh...my friends are better at it than I was [sic]...but I always learn something and that is why I go” (Personal Interview: Debbie 2007). In all of these consumer interviews, respondents actively deferred to cultural experts, whether they were “expert friends,” television shows, industry personnel (e.g., service staff in restaurants, tasting room hosts or critics) or wine related publications.

Because of this active learning process, these consumers had acquired a very detailed vocabulary about wine, understood why certain rituals were necessary (such as swirling wines prior to tasting them), and could articulate some basic rules for pairing

foods and wines. Moreover, they communicate a complex understanding of wine varietals (and which growing regions are best for each) and what one could expect to pay for a “good bottle” of a particular type of wine. However, they routinely downplayed their knowledge of wine as compared to the industry insiders and believed that they had a lot more learning to do in order to really understand wine. One of the more striking things about these conversations was how intellectual (rather than personal or sensual) and conformist the discussion were. At times, even the language used to discuss the wine was sterile or rote so as to conform to what others had said about the wine, rather than to describe their own subjective or sensual experience of it. For instance, Robert described one of the wines we were enjoying during our interview in precisely the same language that I had observed the tasting host use at the tasting bar several hours earlier in the day. “Well, see for example, this wine here is dry...almost like cotton in your mouth, which you would expect from a Cab of this style... well and from this soil and climate too” (Personal Interview: Robert 2007). Another example was during interviews with Chad, where he explained that the wine was “crisp...which you would expect from stainless...leaving a slight grapefruit finish on the palate” (Informal Conversation 2007). This was strikingly similar to the description offered by one of the tasting room hosts whom I had just interviewed several days prior.

Another important pattern observed early in the study period (2006-2007) was the way in which consumers in this group actively distanced themselves from certain types of wine, namely “pink wines,” which they regarded as beneath the sophistication of their tastes. Several respondents reported that the first wine they ever tasted and enjoyed was “White Zinfandel... in a box,” which they confessed laughing with embarrassment.

Active distancing from “pink wines” was very evident in the tasting rooms, where tasting room hosts in these wineries routinely greet customers with a question about which wines they prefer or typically drink. On multiple occasions, guests immediately replied, “we drink anything but pink wines” or, “we drink whites and reds...well, anything really except for those pink wines” (Personal Observations 2006, 2007). When asked why they did not want to try a Rosé, they responded that “they are too sweet” or “I used to drink them...before I learned to drink red wine” (Informal Conversation 2007). In individual interviews, respondents echoed these sentiments and explained that their first wine experiences were with boxed White Zinfandel and that they now associate these wines with people who are not sophisticated in their wine selections. In fact, they repeatedly expressed disdain for “pink” wines by using words like “pedestrian” or calling it the “poor man’s wine” (Personal Interviews: Chad 2007, Debbie 2007).

Interestingly, Rosé wines got very little attention by industry publications during this initial study period (despite the fact that they were widely embraced by consumers in elite/exclusive tasting rooms for the European style of wine making that was being used for Rosés within the Napa Valley and surrounding viticulture regions). For instance, *The Wine Spectator* had only highlighted Rosé wines in three articles from 2004-2006 (2/2004; 11/2004; 7/2006). However, beginning in February of 2007 the *Spectator* began running elaborate articles that featured the complexity and pairability of Rosés, which included a cover story entitled “Rosé: Explore the Many Flavors of This Attractive Wine” (May 2007). In the following years, Rosé would be featured in 6 articles during 2007, 7 articles during 2008 and 11 articles during 2009, which suggests a shift toward the legitimization of “pink” wines by industry experts. Not surprisingly, recent studies

suggest that Rosés has gained ground within middle to affluent consumer groups in the United States. For instance, Nielson Company found a 28 percent increase in imported Rosé sales over the past several years, which reveals a trend away from sweet White Zinfandel wines (that are mass-produced in the US) toward dryer Rosé styles that are common in Europe (Camuto 2010). Not surprisingly, these are the types of Rosés appreciated by exclusive/elite consumers during the early study period (discussed below) and that have been legitimated by industry critics and magazines such as *The Wine Spectator*.

While patterned avoidance of “pink” wines was exhibited by the consumers in limited commercial tasting rooms during 2006 and 2007, in the 2008 data collection period none of the consumers at these same tasting rooms outright rejected “pink wines.” In fact, several tasting rooms in this category that had not previously included Rosés on the tasting menu now offered guests an opportunity to try a “dry Rosé.” During my observations, consumers regularly commented that they did not used to like pink wines, but that they were “learning to appreciate them” (Personal Observation 2008). This transition highlights the interests in social mobility shared by this consumer group, whereby they actively reject “pink wines” associated with the lower classes until they gain cultural legitimacy by experts in the field. Moreover these experts can provide standardized distinctions between the sweeter varieties and drier varieties, so as to maintain social boundaries between them and less sophisticated (lower class) consumers. Moreover, in one conversation I asked how often a consumer drank Rosé at home or ordered Rosé in a restaurant. Without hesitation, he stated “Oh I would never order it out...its still pink in the glass. I would rather have a red” (Personal Interview: Stan 2008)

suggesting that the color of the wine could be a visual cue that might cause others in the restaurant to confuse him with one of the less sophisticated patrons.

In conclusion, consumers who frequent limited commercial tasting rooms are active in their pursuit of wine knowledge as a vehicle for social mobility within their careers and social circles. In many ways, their learning (through educational media as well as through personal contacts) allows them to transgress social boundaries and gain some measure of comfort and mastery over wine as a consumer product associated with the executive class. They utilize contacts with people peripheral to the industry (e.g., friends who know wine makers) to point them toward wines that they may enjoy, but also rely heavily on critic ratings and wine reviews as a proxy for quality. In fact, all of these consumers reported using printed placards with wine ratings found in wine sections of grocery stores (or wine specialty shops) to steer their buying decisions. Notably, they also mention their concern with price, even though they balance these economic concerns with what they understand to be reasonably priced quality wines. They choose tasting rooms in much the same way as they choose wine, relying on friends, local insiders (e.g., hotel concierge), cooking or wine-related television shows (e.g., Food Network) or articles found in wine or lifestyle magazines (e.g., *The Wine Spectator* or *Sunset*).

In many ways these consumers are people who complicate rigid theories of social reproduction that assert that class distinctions are reproduced through a static deployment of tastes across the life course. Certainly they share high levels of economic capital and education and are employed in professional occupations with people who have knowledge about wine (and expect that they share that knowledge). Yet, they reveal the difficulty and possibility of internalizing “tastes” related to wine. At the time of my

interviews, these consumers were active in their pursuits of wine knowledge, admitting that money and time restricted their ability to engage wine culture as they would really desire. Given their relatively young ages and their professional careers, however, there is a strong possibility that they may begin to internalize some of the aesthetic sensibilities of wine aficionados. Even before this internalization of tastes occurs, they are able to use tools offered by the industry (e.g., reviews, ratings, educational classes) to understand wine and demonstrate the type of knowledge that benefits them in their occupational and social lives.

Status-Oriented Elite Consumers

This group of Napa visitors can be identified throughout the Valley by their flashy cars, designer clothes and elaborate jewelry and/or sunglasses. In many ways, they stand out most visibly because of their extravagance and air of comfort in this affluent tourist region. In fact, it is common to see this group of consumers buying cases of Cabernet Sauvignon that cost over \$100 per bottle, and thereby spending tens of thousands of dollars on wine in a weekend. Even with this level of visibility, consumers in this category were the most difficult to convince to grant me a formal semi-structured interview. Therefore, much of the data related to these consumers was collected from participant observation and informal conversations in tasting rooms or during dinner conversations with mutual friends. In total, I had lengthy conversations (ranging from an hour to three hours) with approximately 10 consumers in this category, many of whom viewed me as an insider only to the extent that I had gained access to tasting rooms that were difficult to enter and/or had contacts in the Valley who were their trusted friends.

They also were aware that I was conducting a study on wine and were willing to sign consent forms; even though, they refused to be formally “interviewed” or allow our conversations to be tape-recorded.

From these conversations, exact salaries were difficult to obtain; however, several mentioned being “millionaires” and two discussed owning personal airplanes that they use to transport themselves to vacation destinations such as “private islands” (Personal Interviews: Jackson 2008, William 2008). Common occupations for respondents in this category were in finance, real estate, commercial development, or they were self-employed owners of a marketing or software companies. They reported living in private homes either inside the city or in neighborhoods that they considered urban, which had enough space for large homes with customized construction that included amenities such as wine cellars. In fact, an emphasis on homes (e.g., size, décor, “host-ability,” rather than space (e.g., urban v suburban) was highlighted several times in these conversations. For instance, all of the respondents were proud of the construction of their wine cellars, which included specialized lighting, climate control, and storage racks. In many of the group conversations (at dinners with multiple people within this category), consumers compared architectural firms and nuances of their particular wine cellar construction, discussing the vapor barrier resistance (i.e., type and quality of insulation, flooring and ceiling), the wood used for storage (i.e., Redwood v. Mahogany) and the cooling system (Viking was unanimously preferred). These conversations revealed the entire industry dedicated to quality wine cellars, which include lighting specialists, architectural firms, consultants and other professionals dedicated to ensuring the preservation of the highest quality wines.

These consumers, indeed, do hold the “highest quality of wines,” as determined by industry critics and wine related publications (such as *The Wine Spectator*). Our conversations emphasized the quality and quantity of the wine owned by these people, namely how many highly ranked wines were housed in each respondent’s wine cellar. In several conversations, respondents voluntarily named wines that they owned that had been awarded 95+ points by leading critics (e.g., Robert Parker) or that had been listed among the most collectable wines by *The Wine Spectator*. These tend to be expensive wines (over \$100 per bottle in most cases) when sold directly from the winery, but they can increase substantially in price if sold by other consumers. For instance, on one of the wine auction sites named by a respondent, highly coveted wines like the ones mentioned by respondents cost as much as \$2000 per bottle (winecommune.com). Respondents in this category gave no indication that money was a factor in making their wine buying decisions, rather they chose wines that would be “good investments” or that would enhance the symbolic value of their wine collection regardless of the cost.

Notably, informal interview respondents in this category were all men; even though, their wives or girlfriends may have been present during the conversations.³⁹ And, unlike the respondents in mass commercial wineries, men seemed to connect their wine collection to their masculinity because it is an outward indicator of financial success

³⁹ Women, in contrast, indicate that they love visiting Napa (even though wine is “his hobby”) because they enjoy the elaborate spas, shopping, restaurants, and scenery. In one case, at a tasting bar I asked a woman which wines she liked on the tasting list and she replied, “not any of these...look at this place, it’s dark and dreary in here and it is beautiful...sunny outside. I want to be at Clover right now...have you been to their patio?” (Informal Conversation 2008). “Clover” is a winery in the Valley known for its sparkling wines and magnificent patio. Wine flights are served outside at umbrella-covered tables and are paired with cheeses, fruits, or chocolates. It is very common to see tables of all women enjoying these less informational and more social “tastings” during the afternoons.

or status. Owning highly coveted (and expensive) wines becomes a measure of their wine knowledge (especially expert ratings and the potential for price appreciation), their financial success, and in many cases the social capital they possess in order to gain access to exclusive wines or wineries.

When these men were asked what kinds of wine they enjoy, they all said, “big reds.” When pressed on what that meant, they described big, bold Cabernet Sauvignons that are preferred by the industry’s leading wine critic, Robert Parker. In fact, some of the specific wines they mentioned have been named by industry experts as having been “Parkerized,” meaning that Robert Parker either acted as a direct consultant to the winery or that the winemaker made the wine to conform to Parker’s palate in order to gain a high score from him (Caputo 2008). Therefore, these men choose wines based on three interrelated criteria, namely their taste for wines (i.e., bold, oaky and have high alcohol content), wines that been legitimated by top industry critics, and wines that carry high status among wine collectors. Indeed these wines become what several tasting room hosts referred to as “Mercedes emblems” (Personal Interviews: Scott 2007, David 2007).

Interestingly, these “Mercedes wines” can be found at two very different kinds of wineries in Napa Valley, namely Reserve tasting rooms in mass-commercial wineries and very elite/exclusive boutique wineries. In the former case, consumers can visit any day of the week without an appointment. Typically, they will pay approximately \$25-\$50 for a flight of three or four wines that are the most coveted (and almost always the most highly rated) wines from that winery. These wines cost well over \$100 per bottle and there are usually not limits on how many bottles that customers can purchase. Hence, on several visits to these wineries I observed the purchase of a case or more of these

expensive wines (costing over \$1200 per sale). Given the high industry ratings of these wines, all of them are expected to appreciate in value over time, thus making this \$1200 purchase a sound economic investment as well as an impressive addition to their home wine cellar.

These consumers also frequent exclusive/elite wineries to purchase highly coveted wines. In contrast to the mass-commercial wineries, these tasting rooms are often closed to the public and/or require appointments (sometimes weeks or months in advance). Also, these wineries are known for their very limited production of high quality wines, which means that they limit the number people who can taste the wines before purchase and limit the number of bottles that guests can buy. Combined with very high critic ratings, these imposed limits raise the level of perceived and actual scarcity surrounding these products, thereby elevating the price and symbolic value of gaining access to the tasting room as well as owning these wines. This reality of scarcity highlights two related findings for how consumers in this category gain access to these wines.

First, industry personnel (tasting room hosts, in particular) readily expressed a dislike for consumers who came into their tasting rooms with an air of arrogance, “expecting that money could buy anything” (Personal Interview: David 2007). Yet, I observed many consumers in this category walk into tasting rooms wanting to purchase a case of the highest rated wines, which often have a two or three bottle limit. It was not uncommon for consumers who were told of these limits to demand the wine or to threaten to call a supervisor. Tasting room hosts (all men, as well) were quite skilled at defusing the situation, while still maintaining their position as gatekeeper of the wines.

In fact, none of the demands worked to convince tasting room hosts to sell the wine in any of the wineries I observed. Interestingly, however, when I asked a consumer respondent about this type encounter he laughing explained that he “expected limits” but that “you have to try to show them who is boss” (Personal Interview: Graham 2008). In other words, in his case, he attempted to use forceful persuasion to convince the tasting room host to sell him the wine despite the limits. Later Graham explained, “Look, these guys are just told what to do...ya know. And I figure that they work on commission...well, I know they work on commission so what’s it to them if they make an extra buck today by selling an asshole like me a case of wine to get me to shut up” (Personal Interview: Graham 2008). For him, these types of interactions in the tasting room are performances, intended to gain access to scarce wines through a combination of money and verbal posturing. According to him, he has only rarely (one or twice) had success using such a strategy.

The second way that this consumer group gains access to these scarce wines is through social networks. Unlike the next category of consumers, however, the social ties appear to be somewhat loose and uncertain across the industry but dense within one or two wineries. In part, this could be because the dense ties are to wineries that are relatively new to the Valley. For instance, one respondent reported being friends with an owner of a winery of which I was unfamiliar (even after spending two years in and out of the area visiting wineries). According to our conversation, one of the wines from this winery had been given a 95 points by Parker and was “fast up and coming” (Personal Interview: James 2008). After our conversation, I sought out this winery and it did not appear anywhere on my maps or insider lists. I asked some of my well-informed industry

contacts in St Helena about it and no one had heard of this winery. I was eventually able to track down information (location and a contact name/number) about the winery and drove to the locked gates. After leaving three phone messages, they agreed to grant me access to the winery, where I had a brief conversation with the personal assistant to the owners. According to this conversation, the owners were new to the Valley from New York City, where the husband had done quite well economically in the software industry. While the assistant confessed that the husband and wife team knew very little about viticulture, winemaking or the overall wine industry, they “just loved Napa.” Therefore, they moved to the area and invested over \$20 million on the winery, which would be closed to “general tourists” (Personal Interview: Kelly 2008). Kelly confirmed that their first wine release had earned 95 points, thanks to a hired team of “the best viticulturists and winemakers” led by the industry’s leading “flying wine maker,” Michael Rolland, who specializes in a style of wine that very closely resembles Robert Parker (see Veseth 2008 and the film *Mondovino* (Nossiter 2004)). With the land, grapes, labor power, consulting fees, bottling and label design costs, and the actual building construction, it is not surprising that Kelly reported that this 95 point wine cost the winery over \$60 million to produce (about 250 cases). Therefore, while it is uncertain how much integration this winery will have with the local Napa culture (including long-time viticulturists, wine makers, and industry insiders) it has already paid millions of dollars to win a coveted place in the larger world of wine ratings (i.e., a 95 Parker score).

Given this context, the conversation with James makes much more sense. Of course, he would be thrilled about his “insider” contact with this winery because the

owners seem to share a similar orientation toward wine styles and the meaning of wine as a status indicator that gains value through industry experts. Notably, however, this social tie does not seem to offer James access to the broader social network of Napa Valley (which will be discussed below) or to wineries in the region that have a history of excellence.

One notable exception to the need for an industry insider to gain access to scarce and very valuable wines would be the Annual Napa Valley Wine Auction, which is a valley-wide fundraiser sponsored by the Napa Valley Vintners that consumers in this category frequently mentioned as their favorite event of the year. Without question, this event is spectacular in its food and wine extravagance because it includes all of the most celebrated food and wines in the entire valley (Field Notes 2008). The four-day weekend includes dinners, wine tastings and a silent and live auction to benefit various Napa Valley social service and educational non-profit organizations in the area. Tickets for the full weekend cost \$2500 per person, which includes a credit check that sort bidders in different categories for “approved” on site bidding. Therefore, when guests arrive (commonly in limousines or helicopters) they are given a color-coded badge that indicates the level of bidding they are pre-approved to make while at the auction. Wines that make up the auction are all donated (most often by the case) by local vintners or wine makers, and many of them would be impossible to obtain elsewhere. For instance, during the 2008 Auction the most coveted Lot was a 6-bottle set of the first wine to ever be rated 100 points by a leading industry critic (Field Notes 2008). Not only would these bottles 1993 vintage wine be practically impossible to find in the general market place, one of the bottles was autographed by the winemaker, creating a once and a lifetime

opportunity for the highest bidder. These six bottles sold for just over \$3 million in very competitive bidding. While I did not interview this tenacious bidder, all of the people I interviewed from this category mentioned the Wine Auction as an event that they had attended at least twice and had future plans to attend in the future. What is most notable about this event for these particular consumers is how much energy and effort they put into researching the speculative appreciation of the Lots offered. All of this economic speculation was centered around critic ratings and industry-generated lists of the “most collectable wines” in the US market. Therefore, this event is important because offers consumers in this category an opportunity to use excessive amounts of economic capital to stock their cellars with wines that are otherwise very difficult or obtain (or literally unavailable) the rest of the year *and* that may become more valuable over time.

While one might be tempted to see this as solely an economic investment, the level of verbal signaling of particular wines held in their private cellars (to me and to others involved in the conversations) indicated that these wines offer consumers “bragging rights,” and function as high status markers that separates them from other classes *and* people within their own class. In fact, their competitive references of these high status wines were unilaterally leveled at people within their own class, rather than directed downward to create social distance from lower class groups. Interestingly, these respondents reported that they would probably never drink their most coveted wines, choosing to either keep them in their cellar or sell them before their value began to decline (Personal Interviews: James 2008, Graham 2008). This point highlights the reality that wines do not hold their economic value indefinitely. In fact, most of the

highly rated California Cabernet can be stored under proper conditions for about ten years (Case 2007). Therefore, the “investment” in the wine itself as something to be appreciated (as an art form) has a bounded life and may experience a decline in prices as the wine passes its peak. Therefore, wines may be bought and sold several times during this aging period or they may be kept indefinitely to function as a symbolic artifact as opposed to a beverage to be enjoyed (as compared to consumers in the following category). For example, in the \$3 million Lot mentioned above (1993 Anna Barstow), there is good chance that the wine itself no longer expresses its peak quality, yet, it serves as an example of a highly sought after status marker among consumers in this category.

This discussion does not imply that these consumers do not enjoy or appreciate wine in their wine cellars on a daily basis. In fact, all of these respondents reported drinking at least one glass of wine per day. However, they were far less enthusiastic about discussing this daily aspect of their wine consumption (Personal Interviews: Jackson 2008, Graham 2008). For instance, Jackson stated “I don’t know we just go get a case of whatever we know we like from Costco” (Personal Interview: Jackson 2008). When pressed on the particular kind of wine they purchased from there, he named about three red wines (Cabernet and Malbec) that typically cost between \$15 and \$20 per bottle (Field Notes 2008). When asked which wines he would serve when guests came to visit, Jackson laughed and said “well never one of those... I would pick something out of my cellar, depending on who the person was” (Personal Interview: Jackson 2008). This response was common in this group of consumers, suggesting that food did not drive their decision about which wine to serve, but rather their decision was based on the person who was coming to dinner. Again, this highlights the fact that wine serves as a

social marker, whereby these consumers choose the wines they serve based on how others will perceive their financial success or familiarity with expensive wines.

In terms of the performances of rituals associated with legitimate wine culture in Napa, these consumers were more sophisticated than those in the mass commercial tasting rooms and less technically oriented than those in the limited commercial. For instance, they knew the appropriate stemware for particular wines (and would request that tasting room hosts to change if they switched wines) and readily swirled and aerated wines in ways that would bring out the flavor of the wine. Moreover, several respondents described how to detect mold by smelling the cork or bouquet (e.g., detecting hints of must, smoke, or earth in most cases), which can occur in wines that have been stored for longer periods of time. While this ability is tied to wine appreciation it is also essential for protecting wine as a investment, especially since cork taint (i.e., moldy wine) is a substantial risk for collectable wines that are often stored for decades before opening. Even with these technical abilities and their vast knowledge of the wine market, however, the consumers in this category seemed uninterested in the subtle nuances or sensual aspects of wine appreciation.

In conclusion, consumers in this category have a lot of economic resources available to them to invest in expensive wines that will impress other people within their status group. The boundaries to inclusion of this group are fundamentally dependent on money and the ability to spend enough to impress their friends and compete within the realm of scarce objects. Wine is just one of many cultural objects used to signal financial success (e.g., cars, designer clothes). Therefore, this consumer group displays many of the features of Veblen's conspicuous consumption, whereby people purchase non-

necessary luxury goods for the purpose of displaying wealth to achieve or protect their status position. In this case, the object of consumption itself (i.e., a premium bottle of wine) acts as a positional marker that reinforces social boundaries (Veblen 1899/1965; Warner 1949). Perhaps in an unexpected way, these consumers share similarities with that mass consumers who drink wine for its functionality (e.g., to get intoxicated) rather than for its form (Bourdieu 1984). However, instead of using wine as an intoxicant (although many people may do this), status seeking consumers stress the function of wine as a marker of success, whereby they own and can display a scarce and highly valuable good that has gained legitimacy by industry experts. Indeed, they exhibit a highbrow snobbery that is consistent with cultural consumers in Britain (Warde, Wright and Gayo-Cal 2007). While these consumers do not control the classification system (as Bourdieu argued that elites with HCC do), they use industry-generated classifications to their social advantage by competing over goods that are deemed “worthy,” and then take on extraordinary price tags that exceed the cost of comparable quality wines.⁴⁰ In no way would these consumers be considered omnivorous wine consumers, especially given the way in which they either target their purchases to a homogenous wine selections (i.e., big and bold Cabernet Sauvignons with high ratings) and the same brands of Cabernets or Malbecs from Costco for everyday wine consumption.

⁴⁰ While no one would argue that these are high quality wines, many elite consumers and industry insiders (e.g., wine makers of these critically acclaimed wines) argue that they are not the best quality wines on the market. In fact, many wines of equal or better quality are never submitted to critics for review (Informal Conversations 2008)

Cultural Omnivorous Elite Consumers

In contrast to the above category of consumers who are easily spotted in Napa, these wine lovers appear much more casual and relaxed, and tend to blend in with the local population of the Valley. Rarely do they wear visible labels of financial success, but rather wear jeans or khaki pants and a white dress shirt (men) or simple linen blouses or Capri pants (women). Additionally, rather than visibly expensive cars (e.g., Mercedes), consumers in this category drive “more sensible” Acura or Lexus vehicles (Jonathon 2008). Yet, many of these consumers of elite/exclusive tasting rooms share similar incomes (e.g., \$1,000, 000 annually) as the people in the previous category. As a group, they were typically older than people in the other categories and several of the interview respondents had recently retired from executive positions. Of the younger respondents, all of them were insiders to the industry, either as restaurant owners, sommeliers, or working in wineries as part of their requirements toward master’s level degrees in viticulture or oenology.

Gaining access to this group of consumers was difficult as with the above category because the elite/exclusive tasting rooms they frequent are off the map, require appointments or have limited availability. However, once I was allowed access (either through persistence or the social capital I established over my years of field research), these consumers were the most interested in this project and the most gracious with their time. At times, during conversations with these consumers, I literally felt like “part of the family” because of their insistence on sharing food and wine, the number of contacts they offered, and the familiarity with which our conversations evolved. For instance, all of these respondents expressed interest in me as a fellow wine enthusiast and wanted to

know where I grew up, where I live now, what I will do with my PhD, if I enjoy traveling, the types of food I appreciate, etc. In fact, at times during these conversations, respondents distanced themselves from other consumer groups by including me in their group (e.g., using “we” to imply my inclusion in their group). Additionally, once I gained access to these consumers they offered countless resources that included wine, food, and phone calls to other friends who were also elite/exclusive consumers of this type. The key shift in gaining access to this consumer group was twofold. First, a contact person in Atlanta (who is part of this class of consumer) offered to connect me with a long-time friend in the Bay area who knew several winery owners in the St Helena area. And, second, some grant money allowed me to pay rent in St Helena for a month during the spring of 2008. Because of the social contact and the financial resources, I was able to rent a small guesthouse at a local winery in one of the most affluent and historical regions of Napa Valley. So, not only was the contact invaluable in gaining access to the wineries themselves, I gained instant creditability as an insider to the Valley (e.g., staying in St Helena at a private guesthouse) once the consumers started asking where I was staying. This example of my own experience highlights the inextricable connections between economic, social and cultural capital for these consumers and the significant resources it takes to gain access to this subculture.

Elite/exclusive tasting rooms cater to these consumers and they are often considered to be “friends of the winery,” meaning that they have long-standing ties to the winery through purchases and who they know within the organization (e.g., wine maker, owner) (Jamerson 2009). For instances, since these consumers often visit the same wineries year after year so many of them are familiar with the history of the winery, the

character of the wines, and the people who work there (or have worked there) (Field Notes 2007, 2008). Therefore, consumers often use first names to refer to winery owners, winemakers, and local chefs as if everyone is part of the same family of wine lovers who share a common lifestyle and culture (Weber 1922/1968). Not surprisingly, then, there is a high level of shared familiarity within these tasting rooms, whether related to overlapping social networks (e.g., wine makers), hobbies (e.g., food), or experiences (e.g., travel to Europe). Moreover, because of the organization of space discussed above, the consumers in this group also overlap with each other in other places in the Valley, such as a particular restaurant or spa. When listening in on these conversations, one gets the impression that these visitors know the chef who prepared their meal the night before and can make helpful recommendations for who to contact to get coveted reservation at restaurants that have several month-long waiting lists (Field Notes 2008). Importantly, all of these overlapping social networks and a strongly shared appreciation for wine culture translates into an insular and tightly bonded community for high culture consumers in Napa.

The balance between men and women who were equally interested in wine (and being active participants in wine culture) is much more similar to consumers in limited commercial tasting rooms than consumers in either the mass commercial sites or the status oriented consumers discussed above. This gender balance was striking in this group, however, because both husbands and wives seemed to share equally in the passion for food and wine appreciation and explained that wine is part of their everyday culture that enhances the quality of their life. In other words, it was very common for both the male and female respondent to become visibly elated as they described in vivid detail a

dinner party they had thrown for their friends or family members. There was a visible excitement in their joint sharing of how they chose the menu, going together to the local farmer's market for the ingredients, the trip to the other side of town to get the "exotic" spice needed for a recipe, the cooking process itself, and how they selected wines that were perfectly paired with each food course.

While their excitement about these meals was intoxicating, one of the striking aspects of their description was the amount of time and money that it would take to prepare a meal of this caliber. When I asked one couple what a meal of this type would typically cost, the respondents looked at each other somewhat puzzled and the gentleman responded, "honestly, I don't guess we've ever calculated it that way...I mean, well...Sue and I just love it so much. I guess it depends on what we prepare, but cost is just not a factor for us when we are playing in the kitchen..." (Personal Interview: Jonathon 2008). In fact, none of the respondents emphasized financial restrictions that would keep them from enjoying the lifestyle they chose, which includes quality wine consumption on a daily basis.

However, unlike the above category of respondents, these guests had strong opinions about how much was "too much" to spend on a bottle of wine (Personal Interviews: Misty 2007, Donald 2008, Jonathan 2008, Sue 2008). For instance, they expressed bafflement about the power of industry critics to elevate the prices of particular wines, especially ones that receive high scores from Robert Parker and James Laube (senior editor of *The Wine Spectator*). Not unlike tasting room hosts in these elite/exclusive tasting rooms, these consumers expressed a high level of frustration about how "a few critics were jacking up prices on wines that aren't even the best wines on the

market...its not that these are not excellent wines...that's not my problem with it..., they are (excellent). But no wine is worth paying hundreds...well, in some cases, even thousands of dollars. (laughing) That is just insane.” (Personal Interview: Donald 2008).

On several occasions these consumers (both in formal interviews and informal conversations in tasting rooms) legitimated their frustration by saying, “Even Anna Barstow (the first winemaker to receive 100 points by an industry critic) doesn't think her wines are worth the hundreds of dollars that people are paying” (Personal Interviews: Thomas 2008, Jonathon 2008). In other words, consumers in this category share a common annoyance about the power of industry critics to drive prices and to influence wineries to make wines that appeal to critics. Repeatedly they shared strong opinions about Robert Parker (and other well-known critics, flying wine makers, etc.), who they believe are decreasing diversity and limiting the creative potential of Napa Valley wines (Personal Interviews: Misty 2008, Donald 2008, Sue 2008). Therefore, while some respondents reported that they enjoy some highly rated wines they do not seek out or routinely purchase wines that have been “homogenized to appeal to Parker's palate” (Personal Interview: Sue 2008). Notably, when asked which wines they routinely enjoy that have earned 94+ points by industry critics, all of the respondents named wines that have historic ties to the valley, rather than wines that are made by newer wineries such as the one discussed above. Also, all of these respondents stated that they had tried wines made by celebrity wine maker Anna Barstow. Yet, the way they discussed the wine was coupled with their familiarity or personal relationship with the wine maker herself. For instance one respondent stated, “Anna's wines are incredible, by anyone's standards...but what I like about them most is that all this celebrity status doesn't change her “down to

earthness” (sic)... ya know what I mean? She is just really salt of the earth. And, she is a true artist in her field. I guess... um, ya know...I respect what she has been through with all of this fan fair” (Personal Interview: Thomas 2008). Despite this and other similar statements about the high quality of her wines or her as a good person, none of these consumers said that they would pay the current market rate for her wines. Instead, they know people who are members of her exclusive wine club or wine clubs that distribute her wines under different labels.⁴¹ As wine club members, these friends would be able to purchase the wines before they reach the public and begin accelerating in price (\$70-\$100 per bottle versus \$200-\$1000 per bottle).

Unlike status oriented consumers above who enjoyed discussing how much they paid for wines, these respondents loved to discuss how they found high quality wines at a “bargain,” almost as if they were playing a game to beat the system. What is striking about how these consumers discussed their success was how well connected they are to people within the industry who can offer them industry discounts (usually 20% in Napa) or insider tips on which wines are expected to be exceptional in a given year. In the latter case, knowing which wines are predicted to be good allows consumers to be successful in the wine futures market, in which consumers buys a certain number of bottles or cases at a discount price before the winemaking process is complete. Consumers, then, take a “gamble” that the wine will be high quality and that they will be paying less than consumers who buy it after it has been bottled. This can be a risky venture because grape quality can vary from year to year and many problems can emerge during the production

⁴¹ Wine clubs that include celebrity or “cult” wines are always full and have waiting list that would take years to become a member. In some cases, the memberships are transferable to family members through wills or trusts or may be sold at very high costs to friends, acquaintances or strangers in the informal economy.

process that could affect the quality of the wine. However, these investors tend to know the vintner, wine maker or someone else who is close to the process so they are able to minimize potential losses and buy exceptional wines below market costs (Informal Conversations 2007, 2008; Personal Interviews: Sue 2008, Jonathon 2008, Thomas 2008). This level of social capital is not found in other wine consumers in Napa and contributes to the insular and familial feel to this group, as well as to the ways in which they trade information to maximize their wine consumption experience (i.e., highest quality at the lowest cost).

One of the other notable differences between this group and the above mentioned category of elite/exclusive consumers is the way in which they discussed the visible markers of wine, such as labels. While status seeking consumers are quick to give people a tour of their wine cellar or to buy wines that are visible markers of financial success, these consumers said that they would find “showing off labels” distasteful or uncultured (not unlike omnivores who distance themselves from highbrow snobs in Britain. See Warde, Wright, and Gayo-Cal 2007). For instance, Misty explained differences in the two kind of social events that she attends. At the first type, waiters stream through the crowd with the bottles of wine where the labels can be readily seen by the guests. In her description she stated:

Well I guess some sociologists would call these (sic) new money...it's the kind of party where all the labels are out for everyone to see.... (waving arms in air)... where the catering company logo is on everything, where the flower arrangement come from the highest priced florist in town... You know, its like they are out to prove that they have money by showing off. Honestly. I just hate those parties. Everyone just tries to... well, I guess prove they are part of the rich and famous class by being a show off (Personal Interview: Misty 2008).

In contrast, she described what she calls “old money” parties as “being more laid back and easy going, where people can really get to know each other” (Ibid). Misty was quick to add that this difference does not imply that money is not spent on the event or that everything is not of the highest quality. In fact, she said that the wines served could be of higher quality but that they would be served in a decanter so that the label would not be visible. The high quality of wine is “just assumed...understood... by everyone there. So, no one has to point it out” (Personal Interview: Misty 2008).

Other respondents highlighted a shared resistance to conflating labels with quality wine. For instance, three separate consumers explained that their most coveted wines were ones straight from the winemaker, given to them prior to the labeling process. Therefore, they are hand-labeled with silver permanent marker that gives the year, the varietal, and the vineyard where the grapes were grown. Notably, these hand labels do not list the winery name or offer a signature of the winemaker or vineyard owner, both of which could be used as status indicators (e.g., owning these highly valued bottles of wine directly from the winemaker or winery is a very scarce commodity) that would increase its appeal and value in the larger wine market. Additionally, if one were to walk through the cellars that house these wines, they would not carry any visible symbols as to their quality or dollar value. According to these consumers, even though these are excellent wines, what makes them special and highly coveted are the relationships the wines represent (rather than their status or market value) (Personal Interviews: Donald 2008, Thomas 2008). The use of wine to solidify or signify relationships among friends could be seen in the fact that the winery owner of the guesthouse in which I stayed in St. Helena gifted me a bottle of her wine after my month of living at the vineyard.

Significantly, there was not a winery label on the bottle nor a hand written label designating its year or varietal, yet this winery had a reputation as making highly coveted wines (earning a 95+ rating by a top industry critic). Taken together, these data suggest that consumers (and wine industry insiders living in Napa) place less emphasis on the status of wine (as generated by industry critics or other experts), and place more emphasis on the way in which wine can solidify relationships or express kindness within this circle of tight-knit friends.

In many ways these consumers exhibit strong similarities to Holt's (1997) HCC respondents and Baumann's (2009) omnivorous foodies. For instance, they are committed to "authentic" experiences of wine, meaning a unique combination of viticultural excellence and wine making expertise that offers the most creative expression of particular varietals, *terroirs*, and human talent. Therefore, they choose a range of wines that span white and red varietals, as well as blended wines, always looking for wines that meet the high standards of their palate. They are passionate about finding wines that they deem "worthy" by applying a very complex set of internalized criteria of appreciation. This internal criterion may or may not conform to industry classifications, whereby they agree with some critic reviews on particular wines but also enjoy wines that they deem as "unclassifiable" for prominent critics.

For instance, they report enjoying wines that are often not submitted to reviewers because "the wine maker knows that the critic won't appreciate it" (Personal Interview: Thomas 2008). So, while they are keenly aware of critic ratings and wine reviews, they rarely look to these external classifications to shape their own wine choices or assessments of value or quality. Indeed, they distance themselves from some critics (e.g.,

Parker) for having too much influence over the wine industry (ranging from producers to consumers), thereby restricting freedom of expression and choice (Personal Interviews: Sue 2008, Thomas 2008, Misty 2008). Not only does this sentiment conform to democratic ideals in the sense that they believe producers and consumers should not be confined by critics, but it also highlights their belief that seemingly “objective standards” such as industry classifications are simply the externalizations of the subjective palates and tastes of a few powerful people. Therefore, they view industry classifications as no more valuable than their own internalized taste for quality.

In terms of their own expression of internalized tastes, conversations with these consumers are striking in the level of detail they use to describe wine. Rather than describing a wine as simply having hints of lemon or lime they may further digress into more detailed distinctions such as lemon meringue or Kaffir Lime (Personal Interviews: Sue 2008, Jonathon 2008). This suggests a much more sophisticated palate, as well as, a much more nuanced set of internalized descriptors than other consumers might even imagine possible. In fact, this requires that the person understand the difference between types of limes and then to be able to apply that understanding to a completely different agricultural product, namely wine (which has no lime or lemon added during production). Not only are these descriptions not used by other consumer groups, they are also not referenced by tasting room staff or other written reviews of the wine. Instead, these respondents trust their own palate to discern the complexity of wine, to describe it to others and to assess its quality. Again, this suggests that these consumers have an internalized sense of taste, whereby they are capable of understanding the nuances and

distinction about wine that are comparable to Holt's (1997, 1998) HCC respondents and Johnston and Baumann's (2010) foodies.

Also similar to Johnston and Baumann's (2010) foodies, these consumers have a wider range of possible descriptors that branch into the "exotic" (meaning those things that might be shunned or avoided by other consumers). For example, consumers in this group might describe wines as having flavors of mushrooms, leather or petroleum. Among other groups, none of these are flavors used to discuss wine (even though they are included in the range of 400+ possible options detected in wines in many wine tasting classes) and may even be less appealing to people who expect to taste flavors such as plum, vanilla or licorice. Comparing wine to motor oil in a wine industry publication might not be the most effective marketing strategy or influence a "typical" consumer to try the wine. Instead, it seems that these adjectives are unique to this group of consumers who are looking for the most descriptive words to discuss a wine, even if that description enters into a realm of non-edible items (e.g., leather or petroleum).

Another interesting feature of conversations with these consumers was how poetic their discussions of wine are. At times, the descriptions and enthusiasm for wine were almost poetic. For instance, Jane (Personal Interview 2008) described one wine by saying, "feel that coat your tongue with sensual bliss...the layers of chocolate just delicately fall onto each other as it lingers..." Rather than the rote or highly intellectualized categories offered by consumers in limited commercial tasting rooms, Jane uses language that brings the sensual nature of wine to the forefront of her description. Another example of this kind of poetic language and sensuality can be seen in Matthew's (Informal Conversations 2008) description of a Cabernet Sauvignon. "...its

like...(smiling, closing his eyes and tilting his head back)...a hint of dryness intertwines with the bright finish to leave the mouth satisfied and yet demanding more..."

Once Matthew finished this description he took another sip of wine, tilted his head back again and sat there (smiling) for another several minutes before moving on to another topic of conversation. Not only was this description not found elsewhere in the cellar notes or offered by tasting room hosts, Matthew experienced the wine throughout his body rather than limiting his interpretation or description to intellectual categories of classification and distinction. Importantly, this highlights the similarities between wine and other aesthetic forms (e.g., art or music), whereby consumers engage the embodied aspects of their awareness to fully participate in the consumption experience. Not surprisingly, then, these consumers adamantly reject any attempt to reduce wine to crude economics (i.e., a price tag) or to restrict its creative expression to rigid standards that have been imposed by external sources (i.e. critics that structure wine production of consumption). Instead, wine (like all art forms) should be a creative expression of artists (e.g., viniculturalists and wine makers) intended to inspire the sensual aspects of human experience.

While these consumers would argue in favor of democratic ideal that would allow all people access to these kinds of sensual experiences with wine, there are structural and cultural features of their class position (and the overall class structure) that make this ideal difficult to actualize. First, these consumers rarely socialize with people outside of their class group, unless they are in formal roles, such as employers. This insular nature of their social lives can be readily seen in Napa, whereby they stay in private cottages or villas (with friends or family), eat at restaurants that require money (e.g., typical

meal/wine costing over \$100 per person) and social networks (e.g., knows the chef or has a long-standing connection with the restaurant) and visit wineries that are off-the-beaten path or require insider connections to gain access. In other words, these consumers travel in tightly bounded circles that share similar levels of economic capital and embodied cultural knowledge about a range of cultural goods such as wine. And, while actively distance themselves from other groups would violate their philosophical commitment to equality, they use more subtle forms of social distancing that achieves similar outcomes of social demarcation.

First, they would rarely encounter consumers in mass-commercial wineries due to their overt disdain for mass-produced wines. Several people in this category negatively mentioned large corporations that have purchased wineries in the valley over the past 10 years or so. As discussed elsewhere, most of these wineries were once owned by local wine families in the valley and were oriented toward quality viticulture and wine making. With the corporate buy-outs, these consumers express a belief that “all they care about now are profits” (Personal Interview: Misty 2008). Several respondents cited recent movies (such as *Mondivino* (Nossiter 2004)), which provides a detailed account of the commercialization of wine and the way in which this process has led to the homogenization of wine and the related financial speculation for wine products. This shift toward economic incentives strikes these consumers as highly problematic for the creative expression of wine making and the potential for this artistic form (Personal Interviews: Marissa 2008, Mary 2008, Donald 2008, Thomas 2008, Jonathon 2008, Jane 2000, Sue 2008). Therefore, they report an active choice to avoid mass-commercial tasting rooms on moral grounds, which emphasize values consistent with liberal

democratic ideals such as freedom of expression, creativity and equality of opportunity. This enactment of their values to avoid mass-commercial wineries, limits their exposure to consumers who frequent these mass-commercial tasting rooms without imposing a “judgment” upon them for drinking these wines. Instead, they communicate that mass consumers are “drinking what the industry tells them to drink” (Personal Interview: Thomas 2008), which implies a superior sense of appreciation without blaming the consumers for their poor tastes.

Second, while they do not earn the highest salaries of the consumers in this overall project, they have invested a lot of money over a long period of time in developing both their social connections and their cultural appreciation of wine.⁴² Of the older respondents, all of them reported that wine has been a “hobby” for over 15 years and that they have structured many of their leisure activities (e.g., vacations) around wine and food culture. This extended period of investment has offered them an opportunity to build upon their wine knowledge and to internalize “tastes” associated with wine over time. This kind of time investment may help explain some of the fundamental differences between this category of consumer and the ones who frequent limited commercial tasting rooms. While longitudinal data would help clarify the acquisition of cultural capital over the life course, these retired consumers may offer an insight into where this other consumer group will be once they have invested similar amounts of time and resources into wine appreciation and high culture. Not only do they share similar

⁴² Of the respondents who were not retired in this group, they were either sommeliers or restaurant owners. Therefore, not only is wine their “hobby” it is also central to their occupational success. In fact, while they provided excellent information about the industry, they could not be classified as true “consumers” because they are also “producers” of wine knowledge and wine culture. Therefore, the discussion that follows will focus on the retired consumers who are technically separate from the industry.

occupations as the former group, but they also share a similar passion about wine, even if the former group shares an intellectual passion and the this group expresses a sensual passion. This importance of age in the internalization of cultural capital is consistent with Bourdieu's (1984) theory of tastes as well as recent studies in Britain that highlight the important relationship between age and expressions of cultural capital (Bennett 2006; Savage 2006; Warde 2005).

This older group of consumers expressed little interest in "educating" other consumer groups (such as a younger generation of wine drinkers). In part, this seemed to be due to a simultaneous belief that their understanding of wine should not be imposed on others (which is consistent with their democratic ideals) and a lack of interest in involving themselves in social circles that did not share their own cultural sensibilities. For instance, when I asked Doc and Jane if they ever go to more popular wineries, Doc responded by saying, "Well, no. You know we used to try all the latest places....you know there have been a lot of new wineries sprout up and down the Valley...well, and into the Alexander Valley, the Russian River...you know Sonoma county has great wineries too... but Jane and I just enjoy coming out and seeing our friends...you know, staying close to home (the vineyard cottage where they always stay)" (Personal Interview: Doc 2008). At this point, Jane then interjected into the conversation. "Well see, we have all our favorite places to buy local vegetables and meats...the people here are just so nice and friendly. And, well, we love to cook. Then, we need to see our friends (at favorite wineries or restaurants) that we haven't seen in a while. So, I guess we just don't make the time to branch out from our little world that we love so much..." (Personal Interview: Jane 2008). In all of these interviews, consumers speak of their

“world of Napa” as being familiar and consistent from one visit to the next and they rarely choose to go to the newer establishments. While these kinds of decisions may not be an intentional form of social distancing, the choice to stay insulated from more popular wineries would restrict interactions and limit information spillovers between these consumers and those who are just learning about wine appreciation.

Third, not only do they go to the same places from year to year in order to maintain connections with old friends, they also overtly reject some of the more flagrant displays of wealth that accompany some of the other high quality wineries in the Valley (such as the ones appreciated by the status seeking consumers discussed above). An example from Sydney and Donald illustrates this point. This couple has been coming to Napa Valley for about 8 years and they have established what they call a “community” in the area. During the visit of our interview, they were in town to go to a wedding for the daughter of some friends from San Francisco. This event took Donald and Sydney into a relatively new winery that they had never visited and that could be classified as “new money” based on Sue’s distinctions discussed above. While they expressed a gracious attitude about being invited to the wedding, they were “put off” by the way that the winery (and the family) had structured the event. Namely, they reported that it was “stuffy” and “too formal for an outdoor wedding” and that it “seemed like everyone was there to impress someone” (Personal Interviews: Donald 2008, Sydney 2008). While they said that they enjoyed the wines that were offered to the guests and that they may purchase them on-line, that they would not go back to the winery tasting room (even though they only tried two of the winery’s wines at the wedding reception). In contrast to the above type of social distancing whereby they choose to be with friends, this type of

social distancing is an overt attempt to avoid who they believe are high-brow snobs, namely people who use wine as a social marker of status or economic success.

For very different reasons, these consumers actively distance (i.e., rejecting mass commercial sites or high brow snobs) themselves or passively avoid through preferences to be with their own group all the other consumers groups in Napa. In the first case, they avoid what wine should never become, which is a commercialized commodity that is valued for its profitability and/or status-generating potential. In the second case, they would simply rather spend time with old friends in familiar places where they already have long-standing personal connections with people who share their same lifestyle commitments and sensibilities. Using either logic, the outcome of their choices reproduces social divisions, whereby they monopolize an internalized sense of taste for wine that is very difficult for other groups to understand or emulate.

Conclusion

This case study of wine consumers in Napa Valley is instructive because it offers insight into how differently positioned social actors enter the tourist region and become spatially segregated due to their divergent levels of economic, social and cultural capital. More specifically, it challenges the idea that consumption spaces are democratic and open for all consumer groups to enjoy equally (Featherstone 1991). Instead, these 32 miles of vineyards, wineries, accommodations, restaurants and agro-tourist activities illustrate the on-going significance of social boundaries, even among a relatively high-income group of consumers. Here we find a range of consumer categories that have been identified in previous literature about social class and tastes, namely mass consumers,

upwardly mobile consumers, highbrow snobs, and cultural omnivores. While their range in earnings are striking (\$40,000 to millions +), the differences in economic capital do not explain the more nuanced distinctions in how they understand and appreciate wine, the types of wine they enjoy or the wineries they enjoy while on vacation in Napa. Instead, there are significant variations in their social networks and the kinds of wine-related resources that are made available through these connections; as well as, their interpretation of wine and their level of cultural capital related to wine appreciation.

For instance, consumers in mass commercial wineries have many friends with whom they enjoy wine, even though these contacts do not seem to offer them much in the way of wine knowledge or appreciation. Instead, their friends reinforce beliefs about wine as an intoxicant and the playful use of wine as a way to solidify bonds of friendship. Moreover, they are reliant on industry marketing efforts to shape their buying choices (which preference brightly colored labels and low prices) and which wineries they will choose to visit. Inevitably, these are the largest corporate-owned wineries in the Valley because they offer brightly displayed advertisements and tasting discounts or other incentives (e.g., free commemorative wine glass). In many ways, these consumers share similar characteristics in their understanding of wine as respondents with low cultural capital found in Holt's (1997) research. Namely, their wine consumption patterns are routinized based on pragmatic evaluations (e.g., price and accessibility) and that conform to the structure offered by the marketing efforts of the industry (e.g., common varieties such as Merlot). Moreover, while they report not wanting to be thought of as "snobby" and not wanting to associate with consumers they perceived to be snobby about wine, they understand themselves to be more socially sophisticated than their friends or family

members who have not “learned to drink wine.” Even though they are aware of industry classifications and that there is a “correct” way to enjoy wine, they believe that they are exempt from these standards because they are applicable to consumers who have the time and money to invest in wine as a serious hobby.

Consumers in limited commercial tasting rooms can best be described as actively learning about wine and who use this educational process as both an exciting hobby and a means for social inclusion within the executive class. Through time spent in formal and informal educational venues, as well as, their financial investments in wine (and food/travel) they have gained a solid intellectual understanding of wine and the standardized methods of classification. For instance, they can readily discuss a more detailed list of varietals than the former group of consumers and they are aware of a range of aromas and flavors expressed in wines, even if they cannot always identify them though smell or taste. In other words, they have knowledge of industry classifications and legitimated modes of appreciation, despite the fact that this knowledge has not become embodied in the form of wine related high cultural capital (i.e., what Bourdieu would consider “tastes”). In many ways, then, they occupy a liminal space between the mass consumer and the cultural omnivore, whereby they reject genres such as Rosé that might suggest a lack of wine sophistication even though wine aficionados (who have embodied wine tastes) appreciate specific styles of Rosé wines. Hence, they understand themselves as more advanced than some consumers (and typically try to avoid mass commercialized tasting rooms⁴³) and yet still not “experts” at wine appreciation. Instead,

⁴³ Sometimes in Napa Valley it is difficult to know which tasting rooms are owned by local producers versus national or international corporations. In large part this is due to the fact that many mid sized wineries have been consolidated in recent years, even though they have maintained their historic properties

they defer to the expertise of friends who they believe possess knowledge about what to buy and where to visit in Napa (or other tourist regions). Also, as the example of Rosé illustrates, these consumers rely upon industry experts to guide their preferences about legitimate wines and to structure their understanding of wine appreciation, rather than trusting their own palates and subjective (i.e., intellectual and sensual) experiences of wine.

These next consumers are clear examples of what some researchers have identified as highbrow snobs. However, in other studies (for instance see the *Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion Project* in Britain) this group of people has been most obvious through third party references, such as omnivores who distance themselves from highbrow snobbery. In fact, this kind of identification by proxy has raised critiques from some commentators, who point out that we know very little about these anonymous status seeking cultural consumers (see Weininger 2007). In part, I would suggest that their relative invisibility in previous studies has been the difficulty of accessing them through short-term research designs. Within this project, it took three years to build internal connections within the wine industry to gain introduction to these economically affluent, fast-moving and relatively high profile wine consumers. In other words, these are not consumers who will not readily take the time to fill out surveys or agree to an hour-long interview with a social scientific researcher, unless that researcher has been invited into their social space by a trusted friend. While the women tend to be the more inviting and open respondents, they inevitably deferred to their husbands as the “wine expert” and the

and their long-standing management teams. Therefore, unless someone was an industry insider or researched such matters on their own, they would have very little indication that these are now part of larger corporate entities.

more qualified person to discuss wine consumption or appreciation. Moreover, the men who did agree to discuss wine with me (as an obvious outsider) only did so in the company of other similarly situated consumers, whereby they could compare information about wines, industry ratings, their wine cellars other status markers (ranging from cars to public figures that they know). In these conversations (and personal observations), these consumers clearly display signs of conspicuous consumption, whereby they purchase the most valuable (and scarce) products as positional markers and to elicit envy from other affluent (and potentially non-affluent⁴⁴) consumers (Veblen 1899/1965; Warner 1949).

In the case of wine, they utilize the power of industry critics to determine which products are deemed most “worthy” and will increase in economic and symbolic value. These wines tend to be big, bold Napa Cabernet Sauvignons, which also highlights the limited range of their genre preferences. While these consumers try to avoid consuming wines that are common among mass consumers, unlike cultural omnivores, they have no problem seeking out highly rated (or the “most collectable”) wines that are made by large corporate entities. Therefore, while in Napa they frequent small elite/exclusive tasting rooms as well as mass-commercial wineries that have separate Reserve tasting rooms that showcase wines that have gained top scores from Parker or *The Wine Spectator*.

The last group of consumers found in Napa Valley can easily be classified as cultural omnivores, both in their liberal democratic and egalitarian values and in their subjectively internalized tastes for wine culture. Wine culture in this sense certainly includes wine products themselves, but extends outward into a high culture lifestyle that

⁴⁴ Interestingly, people in this consumer group never discussed people of lower classes as reasons to purchase scarce and/or expensive wines. Instead, they reveled in the competition their purchases sparked in their own friendship networks.

involves wine-related hobbies such as food and travel, as well as, bourgeois attitudes of generosity and hospitality. In fact, despite their affluent class position they understand themselves to be outsider to the class system because they are good citizens, who donate time and money to worthy charities and distance themselves from high-brow snobs who “flaunt their economic success.”

In many respects, these consumers demonstrate an embodied form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) related to wine, whereby they have internalized wine appreciation as something subjectively and yet coherently organized. For instance, they share an understanding of “authenticity” that preferences the aesthetic and creative aspects of viticulture and wine making as a form of artistic expression. By combining natural aspects of local *terroirs* and the expertise of talented viticulturalists and winemakers, wine has the potential to take on an unclassifiable set of characteristics that goes well beyond the standardized classifications offered by industry critics. Moreover, even though these consumers intellectually understand wine and its standard classifications and modes of appreciation, they experience wine in a deeply sensual and embodied way. Therefore, their evaluative standards for a “worthy” wine include a technical understanding for a particular wine (given the grape varieties, *terrior*, vintage and wine maker), but extend into a more embodied awareness of how the wine stimulates their palate.

Despite the egalitarian values and overall hospitality expressed by these consumers, their tendency to remain in insular groups with people who share their lifestyle and the exclusive places they tend to frequent, limits their contact with consumers who do not share their internalized taste for wine. This minimizes the amount

of information spillovers that they offer other consumer groups, thereby inadvertently monopolizing symbolic knowledge around wine appreciation. Moreover, even though they reject the rigid classifications that are institutionalized by critics and industry publications, the feature articles in wine related publications lag behind the tastes of these consumers. One such example is with Rosé wines, whereby elite consumers were already appreciating the complexity and diversity of these wines when *The Wine Spectator* began its growing number of articles in May 2007.⁴⁵ While this research does not show that these consumers control the classification system itself (Bourdieu 1984), it does suggest that these consumers have already developed their wine preferences before they read the latest industry publications. In fact, they outright reject the classifications as the “authority” on wine for two primary reasons. First, they trust their own palate and internalized tastes and believe that they do not need to look to external sources to structure their preferences or interpretations of wine. And, second, they reject way in which the critics and classifications restrict the creative potential of Napa Valley wines and foster a type of commodity fetishism for highbrow snobs.

⁴⁵ Other examples would be related to recently popularized foods and herbs, such as Heirloom tomatoes or Lemon Verbena.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: THE LINGERING FINISH

Across all income groups in the United States, people are organizing their lives around the practices and rituals of consumption in order to upscale their lifestyles (Mort 2000; Schor 1998). While using consumer goods to construct a lifestyle may not be new to our postmodern era, the availability of credit as well as the rise in the quantity, variety, and quality of consumer goods has exacerbated competitive consumption, in which consumers spend more and more money to keep up with the social group with which they identify. In previous eras, reference groups were generally localized and confined within similar income groups. Today, in contrast, consumers view advertisements that enlarge the reference groups with which they can identify and they frequent consumption sites that are shared with consumers from many different income groups. Therefore, while consumers may not share the same income as the upper middle class reference group, they are afforded opportunities to gain information about products distinctions and access consumption sites where a variety of products may be purchased. Expanded opportunities to learn about product distinctions and the accessibility of commodities for all income groups have suggested to some social critics that old social hierarchies (as evidenced through consumer practices) have been replaced by democratic spaces of consumption, where everyone is equal in their ability to “fit in” regardless of their income levels (see Fiske 1989).

In part, this understanding of consumption, as an expression of democratic freedom and an opportunity for equality, resists earlier theories of consumption in the United States, which argued that the productive forces of capitalism created the consumer culture. Many of these theories emerged from the Marxist tradition of the Frankfurt School and maintained that consumer culture was ideologically dominated by the industries of mass production (see Horkheimer and Adorno 1944/2002). Others, such as John Kenneth Galbraith (1958/1998) argued that production and consumption are necessarily linked even though producers of consumer goods initiated the creation of markets for their products through the construction of wants and desires among consumers. Once these new markets were established, consumer expectations spark the advancement of productive forces, thus creating a “dependency effect” between consumption and production. Other theorists followed this perspective by emphasizing the powerful role of marketers and advertisers in shaping consumer preferences and needs (Marcuse 1964; also see Horowitz 2004). More recently, Stuart Ewen (1988) argues that by creating “style,” a seamless network of industries utilize the marketing power of Madison Avenue to seduce consumers into purchasing superfluous goods that helped them construct their lifestyle image.

The creation of these lifestyle images, however, depends on the ability of producers to construct symbolic meanings that shape the way in which consumers understand themselves and the world around them. For objects to acquire meaning they must extend beyond the functional aspect of the product into the realm of the symbolic values, which are maintained through social interactions. Within this social framework, producers of goods and mediators between producers and consumers authorize,

legitimate, and empower particular objects with a “sacralized” value (Bourdieu 1993; DiMaggio 1987). For example, sociological research on the production of culture focuses attention to the ways in which symbolic goods are shaped by the institutional environments in which they are “created, distributed, evaluated, taught and preserved” (Peterson and Anand 2005). This literature highlights the significance of cognitive, organizational, and institutional processes that attach value to commodities (tangible or intangible), and invoke shared systems of symbolic knowledge about them.

In addition to the production of symbolic meanings by producers or intermediaries who exist between the producer and the consumer (e.g., “experts” who influence buying patterns or service workers who have direct contact with consumers), recent scholarship on consumption emphasizes the role that consumers play in the establishment of lifestyle objects. Rather than being passive receptacles of sales or marketing efforts, consumers become active agents in the process of constructing meaning and value (see Nava et al 1997; Miller and Rose 1997). Therefore, while symbolic consumption choices can be observed among individual consumers, objects themselves exist within a complex societal framework that gives them meaning and social value beyond an individual act of consumption.

Many of these interactions occur at the site of consumption where sales persons, educators or retail clerks, as well as, consumers converge to construct meanings and value for particular products. This process of place-based interaction creates shared consumer cultures, where beliefs and behaviors are normalized around how products should be consumed in order to promote a particular lifestyle. These consumer culture includes the dense network of embedded practices and representations (e.g., texts,

images, speech, codes of behavior, etc.) that organize social life and give meaning to the way in which people interact with commodities and their fellow consumers.

This discussion raises questions about “lifestyle consumer cultures” and whether or not they are effectively open, equal and democratic or if they reproduce a hierarchical ordering of distinctive cultures based on pre-existing social differences (e.g., social class). Certainly this line of sociological inquiry dates back to our disciplinary origins, as classical theorists posited a clear relationship between the construction and maintenance of symbolic values and social reproduction through consumption. As some significant examples, Adam Smith (1759/1976), Karl Marx (1844/1978), Thorstein Veblen (1899/1970), Max Weber (1922/1968) and Georg Simmel (1904/1957) all argued that social actors use objects as a way to distinguish themselves from others and to obtain or maintain social status. Many of the studies of consumption and class in the United States during the mid-twentieth century agreed that status-based consumption organizes social life, whereby elites are engaged in a perpetual game with lower status groups in order to maintain control over highly valued objects (Warner 1949).

More recent questions about consumption and social reproduction were reinvigorated with the publication of Bourdieu’s now infamous book that provided empirical support for the role of consumer tastes in reproducing class-based social stratification in France. In this work, entitled *Distinctions* (1984), Bourdieu argued that consumer tastes and choices are structured by the subjectively internalized dispositions knowledge, and skill that correspond to class-based socialization. More specifically, the field of consumption is stratified based on the successful utilization of cultural capital,

which includes of a set of distinctive tastes, skills, knowledge, and practices that are rare or difficult to obtain (Bourdieu 1977, 1984).

At the level of the individual, cultural capital involves tacit and embodied knowledge and skills that can be easily transferred across social contexts. Individuals who share social class positions also share similar levels of cultural capital as manifested by their attitudes, tastes, and orientations toward consumer goods (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1997, 1998). Therefore, the production of symbolic value (through producers, marketers and intermediaries) interacts with the meanings and values that consumers assign to particular consumer goods based on their class specific knowledge and tacit understandings that have become common sense through socialization. According to this line of thought, particular consumer cultures encode objects with hierarchically ordered symbolic meanings (i.e., establishing symbolic boundaries), which thereby create and reinforce boundaries and divisions among social groups (e.g., maintaining social boundaries).

As mentioned above, however, consumption today occurs in a world where goods are more easily accessible, fashion consensus has become more diffuse, and social networks are more expansive than during the early decades of the twentieth century. Therefore, the construction of status must contend with the mobility of elites, the scattering of reference groups, the anonymity of urban spaces, and the increased availability of mass-produced goods that range in quality and style (Collins 1992; DiMaggio 1987; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985). These historical shifts have led to significant sociological debates about the extent to which consumption contributes to social reproduction. Part of this debate involves the ability of high status groups to

maintain a hierarchically organized system of *symbolic* boundaries around valued commodities.

In many ways, DiMaggio (1987, 1991) brought this issue to the forefront of the discussion as he argued that institutional and social factors within modern society prohibit higher status groups from legitimating a universally accepted hierarchy of value related to cultural products and activities. Thus, value hierarchies (i.e., Artistic Classification Systems/ACS) weaken in response to market pressures to increase consumer demand, weak consensus of consumers regarding value, and the lack of symbolic potency needed to reproduce symbolic boundaries. Research by Peterson and Simkus (1992) and others (for a summary see Peterson 2005) confirms that consumption by higher status groups is not limited to high status goods or activities (e.g., classical music or high art). Instead, affluent consumers tend to consume a range of goods and services that might be labeled “low class” (e.g., country music or landscape art). For some scholars, this pattern of omnivorous consumption among elites suggests that social boundaries (across class groups) cannot be linked to (or predicted by) consumption patterns (Halle 1993; Peterson 2005).

Others, however, reinterpret Bourdieu’s original theory of “tastes” to argue that the class-based deployment of cultural capital extends beyond the objects of consumption themselves and into the meanings, values and practices that surround consumer goods (Holt 1997, 1998). As an excellent recent example of this line of research, Johnston and Baumann (2009) show that “foodies” are omnivorous in their food choices, appreciating both “high-brow” foods such as haute cuisines as well as “low brow” foods such as hamburgers. Despite these “low class” food choices, patterns of meaning, value and

ideological beliefs are expressed among these elite consumers who share high levels of economic and cultural capital. This suggests that distinctive consumer cultures—where producers, intermediaries and consumers meet to communicate meaning systems, expectations or values and to enact rituals related to consumer products—may also reveal patterns of class-based social boundaries.

Therefore, the fundamental concern for this project is the extent to which the pursuit of consumer products (which are specifically tied to lifestyle and social mobility) and the creation of distinct consumer cultures reinforce social divisions across consumer groups or promote democratic consumption spaces where all people have equal access and acceptance. In many regards this is a two part question that involves: first, the issue of hierarchical ranking for products themselves (i.e., the creation and maintenance of *symbolic boundaries*) and second, the way in which consumers are organized (or organize themselves) around hierarchically ordered products to create social divisions (i.e., the establishment of *social boundaries*). Thus, the project begins by choosing a cultural product that has come to take on widespread significance as a lifestyle marker that confers status to consumers in the United States.

As detailed in Chapter 3, a convergence of historical, legal and institutional factors has led to the emergence of wine as one of these lifestyle products. Wine provides the opportunity to explore both a clear ranking system for products, wineries and growing regions (i.e., symbolic boundaries), as well as, a thriving consumer market where consumers utilizes wine as a way to establish or improve their status (i.e., social boundaries). Without question, the legal classifications for wine products, including strict definitions for the use of varietals, AVAs and vintages for labeling provide the

foundation for clear product differentiation. However, these objective categories (e.g., 75 percent of a wine must be made from a legally recognized growing region to bear that name) take on social significance as certain wine regions (e.g., Napa Valley) rise to the top of the status hierarchy for quality and prestige. Likewise, wines themselves take on a vertical significance as “expert” industry critics rate wines based on a set of standardized and highly rationalized criteria established to separate “worthy” wines from their “unworthy” competitors.⁴⁶

Even with this historical and contextual information provided in Chapter 3, which suggests evidence of a hierarchy of classifications around wines (and growing regions), there remain significant questions about whether or not these classifications translate into a universal acceptance of symbolic boundaries around wine products (and wineries) in real time and real space. In order to understand how these classifications are enacted by social actors, Chapter 4 and 5 proceed to a context specific study of how classifications manifest in an ideal case location, namely Napa Valley, California, where wine culture permeates the entire productive and consumer experience of the region. Thus, these two chapters use sociological studies related to the production of culture and cultural and social capital to examine the extent to which symbolic boundaries, established by institutional critics and experts, translate into social boundaries for organizational firms and consumer groups in Napa Valley.

More specifically data collected for this project demonstrates how symbolic boundaries (generated by experts, within a profit-oriented market) take on social

⁴⁶ Factors outside the industry itself also contribute to the vertical ordering of wine products based on these legal designations. The movie *Sideways* provides an excellent example of outside factors that shape the vertical ordering of varietals. Namely, Pinot Noir wine exploded in status as Merlot became equated with “vinegar” through the character Miles’ amateur (yet authoritative) assessment of California wines.

significance as they are solidified in the winery tasting room (e.g., ratings hanging on the wall) and enacted by tasting room hosts who become intermediaries between the ratings and consumers who enter the spaces. These intermediaries identify consumers who “fit” in their consumption space and treat them in ways that are consistent with the orientation and status of the organization (e.g., whether oriented toward profits or critic-generated accolades).

For instance, tasting room hosts in mass commercial wineries focus on the sales of products either in low quality wines to low status consumers in “Mass” tasting rooms or in high quality wines to status conscious consumers in their “Reserve” tasting rooms. In either case, the expert-generated classifications are used as a mechanism to increase profit by positioning their wines outside the classifications for consumers who are intimidated by the symbolic boundaries of high-culture wines (mass tasting rooms) or by positioning their higher quality wines squarely within the classifications for consumers who are in search of a high status wine. These wineries have captured a large segmented market and the classifications operate to reinforce social boundaries between the high and the low status consumer groups—both in terms of where they are sent to taste wines and what information they obtain during the tasting room experience.

Limited commercial wineries are less segregated and focus their attention on consumers who want to learn about wine classifications as a means to identify “good” versus “bad” wines. Wines in these tasting rooms tend to gain respectable ratings from critics and tasting room hosts are quick to explain how the ratings work, how their wines compete, and to encourage consumers to “practice” so that they can “enjoy wine” successfully within the established classification system. Consumers who are unwilling

to learn or participate in the ritual reinforcement of the classification system are readily re-directed to other wineries that would be less oriented toward the “serious wine drinker” (i.e., mass commercial wineries). Tasting room hosts in this category provide consumers with effective tools for upward mobility because they help consumers understand the classification system for wines so that they may use their wine knowledge to socialize with higher status friends and to enter business networks outside of Napa. Significantly, however, this process reinforces both the symbolic and social boundaries around wine as a status marker.

In elite/exclusive tasting rooms, the relationship between symbolic and social boundaries is most pronounced given that many of these tasting rooms require social networks and well-developed cultural capital to access. In wineries that have a long history in the Valley, the tasting room hosts are often winery owners and/or wine makers, thereby making the experience highly personalized, and tightly bounded. Even though these wineries enjoy some of the highest ratings, expert classifications around wine are often critiqued as artificial measures of quality and a cause for inflated wine prices. Both tasting room hosts and the consumers with internalized tastes believe themselves (and their friends) to be better judges of quality of a wine than critics since classifications can be “too standardized” or oriented toward a particular critic’s palate.

In contrast to these wineries with historical ties to the Valley, elite wineries that are new to the area actively seek out high scores from industry critics. This is accomplished through large financial investments in consultants who assist the winery in making high quality wines that will appeal to the palate of industry critics such as Robert Parker. It is unlikely that the sale of these wines would ever recoup the money spent on

their production, thus suggesting that economic capital is not the motivational force behind these wineries. Instead, these new firms compete for symbolic value and prestige. Thus, they rarely grant visitors to Napa the opportunity to taste their wines, therefore eliminating public tasting opportunities where consumers gather to interact with winery staff or owners. Instead, wine tasting experiences are reserved for other very affluent private guests (e.g., friends or business associates) who share an orientation toward wine as a status object. Although in very different ways, both types of elite/exclusive wineries, erect symbolic boundaries (such as ritual performances) and physical boundaries (such as gates) around their properties so as to limit access to mass consumers.

Chapter 5 turns to the consumers and the ways in which economic, cultural and social capital combine to create different itineraries and experiences for consumers who enter these Napa Valley tasting rooms. For instance, pre-existing social networks are the largest indicator of where consumers visit once they reach Napa. Not only do tourists visit wineries recommended by close friends, business associates, or wine store managers/owners but they also stay in hotels, eat at restaurants, and participate in activities recommended to them by people in these networks. This means that initial itineraries vary depending upon the status and the social network of the consumer. For instance, consumers who frequent mass commercial wineries also choose mass-commercial restaurants (e.g., Marie Calendars), whereby consumers in elite wineries prefer specialized restaurants with chef-driven menus (e.g., French Laundry). This creates a tourist landscape where people from different social classes rarely overlap or interact with each other. Hence, class divisions manifest through a spatial segregation that

funnels people into distinct consumer cultures that cohere with their own tourist expectations and beliefs about wine.

When the structure of the tasting rooms (e.g., the information exchanged by tasting room hosts in each type of tasting room) and the class background of consumers (e.g., the knowledge they bring to the Valley) are taken together, Napa Valley becomes a site where the process of social reproduction is readily visible. Indeed, social reproduction occurs through the creation of five distinct wine cultures, in which the information, norms and meanings about wine create a bounded community of similarly positioned actors [See Figure 4]. For instance, not only do consumers come into Napa with their own itineraries but tasting room hosts from each type of winery also recommend similarly oriented wineries (as well as, restaurants and other activities), again limiting consumers' exposure to and interaction with people in higher or lower status categories. This effectively reproduces geographical boundaries around each consumer groups, whereby they rarely (if ever) have an opportunity to share information about wine or other lifestyle choices.

Moreover, consumers in each type of tasting rooms receive wine-related information that is commensurate with their pre-existing orientation toward wine. For instance, low-status groups learn which wines will get them intoxicated “without feeling bloated,” mid-status groups learn existing classifications and how to use them to their advantage in social settings, and high-status groups either learn which wines will render the highest price on the wine market (status conscious consumers with high levels of economic capital) or they learn that they are part of a bounded community of true wine aficionados (artisans with high levels of economic and cultural capital).

Significantly, each of these consumer groups represents a distinct orientation toward consumer products as identified in previous sociological research. For instance, some consumers are motivated by price and quantity (similar to Holt's Low Cultural Capital respondents), some are motivated by mastering an external classification system in order to achieve mobility (similar to Bourdieu's discussion of the middle class who attempt to understand the "rationalization of beauty"), some are motivated by status and competitive consumption (similar to Veblen's exploration of conspicuous consumption), and some are motivated by an internalized sense of "taste" (similar to Bourdieu and Holt's High Cultural Capital respondents). Regardless of these divergent meanings that consumers attach to wine, there exists a consumer space in Napa readily available to reinforce their orientation toward this cultural product. In fact, there are tasting rooms specifically designed to make them "feel at home" and where the interactions and norms are consistent with their own class-based culture of comfort.

Future Research

Research from this project raises two issues for future consideration. First, while focusing on Napa Valley tasting rooms provided an ideal site for an initial investigation of symbolic and social boundaries, questions remain about the extent to which these boundaries exist in mass markets across the United States (or around the world⁴⁷). For instance, due to the high costs associated with a tourist destination such as Napa Valley

⁴⁷ From conversations with wine enthusiasts from European countries, it has become clear that the wine industry in the United States is very unique in its reliance on expert generated classifications. In fact, it seems that early childhood socialization about wine consumption in countries such as Italy and France facilitates an internalization of "tastes" about wine among consumers, thereby lessening the importance of external standards of quality. Therefore, a cross-national comparative study of the enactment of classifications would be an excellent next step to this project.

(e.g., accommodations, tasting room fees, restaurant costs), the sample of people in this project represents the more affluent wine consumers in the United States. Moreover, as argued above, the place itself is layered with significance and prestige, suggesting that the symbolic and social boundaries may be more pronounced here than in other areas around the country.

The initial research design for this project intended to compare consumption sites in Napa Valley with wine consumption sites in Atlanta, Georgia. Hence, I identified three types settings where wine was offered to consumers as part of a “tasting” experience. Like the sample in Napa, I chose three types of wine tasting events, ranging from large mass tastings to exclusive wine dinners. The first events were “wine crawls,” whereby consumers pay a nominal fee (e.g., \$20) to drink all the wine they can consume within a given period of time (e.g., 4 hours). Not surprisingly, the wines in these sites are of low quality and the general orientation of consumers is toward intoxication. The people who pour the wines tend to be distributors who are using these events to “market” cheap products to mass audiences through brand recognition or brightly colored promotional material. Preliminary conversations with consumers at these sites revealed very similar patterns as consumer in mass-commercial tasting rooms in Napa Valley (e.g., concerned about price, motivated by sociability and intoxication).

The second sites identified in Atlanta were “wine bars,” where wine is the featured product on the menu and other products (such as food) are organized around wine consumption (e.g., pairing lists). Interestingly, these wine bars were a growing trend during the early stages of this research project (2006-7) and were popping up all over Atlanta (e.g., *The Grape* or *Wine Styles* being the most popular). Currently, these

establishments are struggling financially and several have gone out of business in recent years. The general concept of these wine bars is to provide a “third space” where consumers could enjoy “wine culture” in mass markets. They are typically arranged with bright colored couches and other trendy modern furnishings. The wines offered on the tasting list tend to be mass produced and of average quality (certainly no better than could be found in many restaurants in Atlanta).

Perhaps most interestingly for this project is the fact that wines are not classified based on any recognizable wine classification system. For instance, wines are listed in color-coded categories that are labeled with designations such as sweet, dry or bold. Within each category, multiple grape varietals can be found so that the “bold” category might include Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Petit Syrah and Merlot. Moreover, wines are listed on the menu by the brand name (or winery name) but never by the AVA or vintage year. Significantly, this means that even the most expensive wines (e.g., Caymus which retails at *The Grape* for \$100 per bottle) do not offer consumers any information about the year or where the grapes were grown. From this it seems that the wine bar must rely upon either the price (e.g., an assumption by consumers that price equals quality) or brand recognition alone to sell these high priced wines. Certainly, none of the consumers in elite/exclusive tasting rooms would purchase a wine at this price without knowing the specific AVA or vintage of this wine.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Caymus is similar to Duckhorn as discussed in Chapter 3, whereby the winery produces a range of quality Cabernet Sauvignon wines from different AVAs. Not surprisingly, there is a significant difference in price and quality between a Caymus Napa Valley Cab (\$35 per bottle) and a Caymus Estate Grown Cab (\$170 per bottle). Experienced wine consumers would arguably want to see this information indicated on tasting menus.

From talking with the bartender and wait staff at these wine bars, it seems that they cater to mostly new wine drinkers, which could explain why they have chosen a “simplified” approach to wine classifications. From my observations (and preliminary conversations) there was some information about wine provided for consumers, but it did not offer much in terms of understanding the critic generated classifications that are readily referenced in Napa Valley. While I did not interview consumers in these tasting bars, my observations suggest that they were less knowledgeable about wine than consumers in limited commercial wineries (who would want to understand more “legitimate” forms of wine classification) or elite/exclusive wineries (who would be unimpressed with the organization of the wine lists or the selection of wines available). Yet, the consumer space itself (e.g., trendy modern) and the price of the wines (and food) would not necessarily appeal to consumers in mass commercial tasting rooms who would prefer to drink “bottomless glasses” of wines from the Olive Garden. Of course more investigation is necessary, but these initial findings may suggest that there exists another category of middle brow consumers in mass markets or that *The Grape* and other tasting bars of this type will continue to struggle to survive in a competitive market place where restaurants can provide consumers a better range of consumer experiences commensurate with their knowledge and expectations about wine.

The third (and most elite) wine tasting sites identified in Atlanta were events in small boutique restaurants in urban neighborhoods. These events are not scheduled on a regular basis but are special offerings that feature a prominent chef, holiday food pairings, or a new wine or winery being introduced to the Atlanta market. Typically, these events range in cost from \$20 to \$75 for 4-6 tastes of wine, which are paired with

either appetizers or a several course meal. For the Atlanta market, these are true educational experiences that offer consumers an opportunity to learn about wine making, growing regions, as well as, wine and food pairings. These tastings are hosted by the owner, sommelier or wait staff persons from the restaurant, all of whom tend to be knowledgeable about wine and wine culture (e.g., norms associated with wine appreciation). In conversations with participants of these tasting experiences, all of them had traveled to reputable wine destinations (e.g., such as Napa versus Arizona) and/or were members of wine clubs for California wineries. Noticeably absent from the conversations were the finely detailed designations that are commonly used in Napa Valley to differentiate wines. For instance, the people at these events did not indicate that they were aware of the ways that different soil conditions would produce distinct flavors in the same varietal (e.g., volcanic versus clay soil types). Nor, did they know the names of winemakers or winery owners associated with any of the wines.

From initial observations and conversations, it appears that there could be some similarities in the ways that consumption spaces are organized in mass markets to segregate consumer groups into distinct wine cultures. However, much more research is needed to understand these distinct consumer cultures, including the permeability of the boundaries that separate them and how each group utilizes classifications and constructs meaning around wine.

This project raises a second set of questions about the rigidity of the social boundaries around wine consumption in the United States. While the findings hint at the use of wine as a mechanism for social mobility (especially among consumers in the executive class), the research design does not allow for a thorough investigation into the

acquisition of cultural and social capital over the life course. In other words, because the interviews were confined to one point in time, we cannot determine the degree to which wine tastes become internalized over time or the process of that transition (from drinking pink wine for intoxication, to drinking “reds” and learning the external standards of wine appreciation, to drinking a full range of quality wines and the internalization of tastes). Given the older age of respondents who are cultural omnivores, we could assume that cultural capital around wine as part of a high culture lifestyle takes time to develop. Yet, a longitudinal study would be necessary to trace this process and to investigate when and under what conditions this transformation occurs.

Conclusion

As the second largest tourist destination in California, visitors from all over the world frequent Napa Valley to tour the vineyards and to sample wines at some of the most prestigious tasting rooms in the world. Wineries offer a range of experiences to guests that focus exclusively on wine or that merge wine with “cross-over genres” such as amusement park rides, popular culture museums (e.g., film or music), or connections with sports (e.g., NASCAR). Even with this diversity of experiences, Napa Valley offers an excellent opportunity to explore the patterned way in which industry generated classifications become solidified in visual displays, information exchanges and ritual performances. Specifically, this project maps five distinct wine cultures that exist in tasting rooms throughout Napa Valley. Each of these wine cultures includes embedded practices and representations (e.g., texts, images, speech, codes of behavior, etc.) that organize social life and give meaning to the way in which people interact with wine and

their fellow wine enthusiasts. Data collected from participant observation, informal conversations and structured interviews reveal the subtle boundaries that encircle differently positioned social actors, as well as, the ways in which people understand and use wine as a lifestyle marker that solidifies their group identification and allows them to distance themselves from consumers who do not share their particular wine “tastes.”

TABLE 1: TOP 10 WINE COMPANIES IN THE US (BASED ON CASE SALES)					
Rank	Owner	Headquarters	Annual Sales	Top California Brands	Napa Tasting Rooms
1	E & J Gallo Winery	California	67 million	Carlo Rossi Twin Valley Barefoot Cellars Turning Leaf	Yes
2	The Wine Group	California	56 million	Franzia Almanden Inglenook Glenn Ellen	No
3	Constellation	New York	46 million	Woodbridge Clos du Bois Robert Mondavi	Yes
4	Bronco Wine Co.	California	20 million	Charles Shaw Crane Lake	None
5	Foster's Group	Australia	18 million	Beringer Stone Cellars Meridian	Yes
6	Trinchero Family Estates	California	12 million	Sutter Home Menage a Trois Paul Newman	Yes
7	Altria Group	Virginia	6 million	Conn Creek Villa Mt. Eden Stag's Leap Wine Cellars	Yes
8	Diageo	England	5.6 million	Beaulieu Sterling Rosenblum Chalone	Yes
9	Jackson Family Wines	California	5 million	Kendall-Jackson La Crema	No, but TRs in Sonoma County
10	Brown-Forman	Kentucky	4.5 million	Bonterra Fetzer Little Black Dress	None

Figure 1: Theoretical Diagram

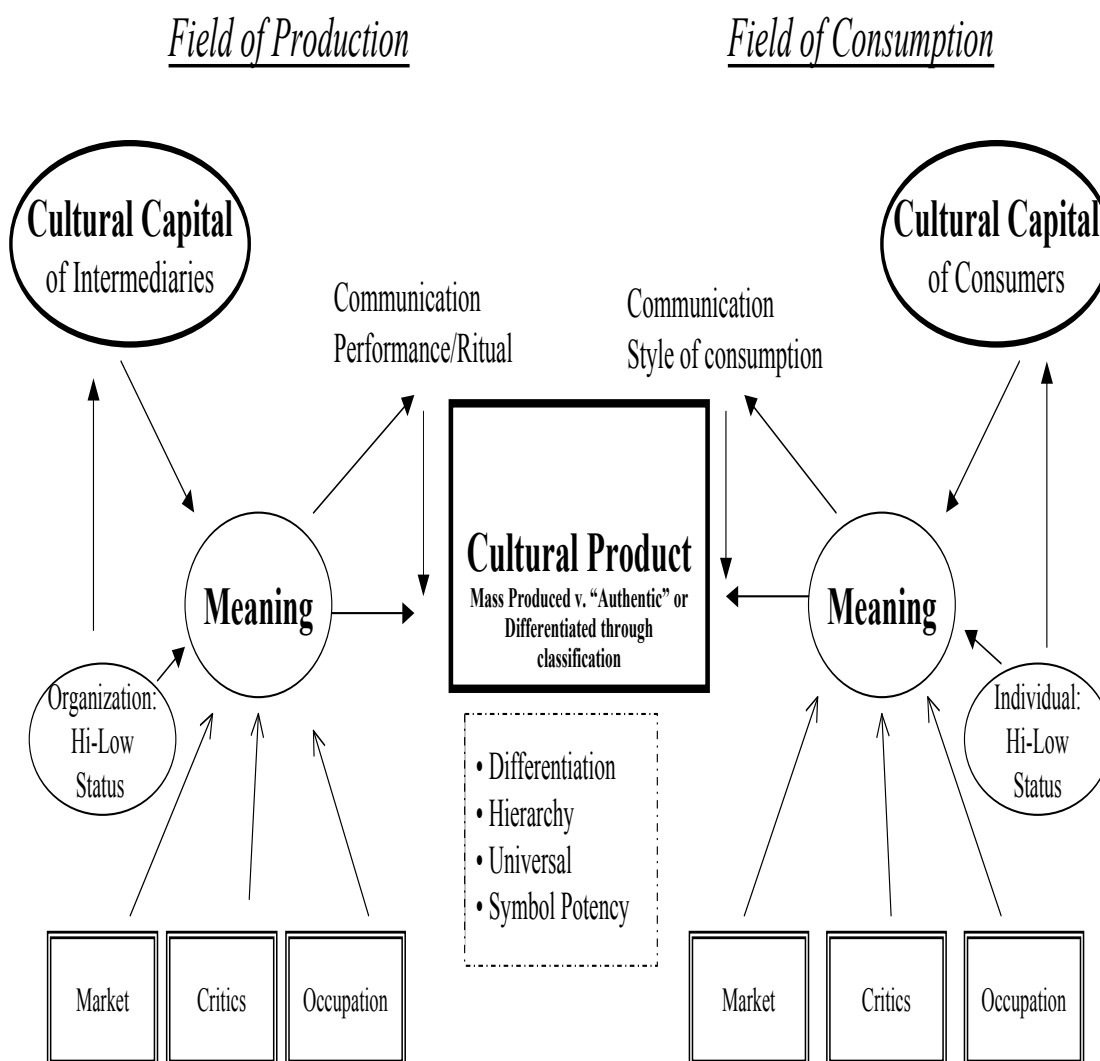


TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF RESEARCH DESIGN (INTERMEDIARIES)

Research Question	Data	Measures	Operationalization	
RQ1: How do intermediaries in the wine industry communicate /perform in ways that construct wine consistent with institutionalized classification systems?	<i>Service workers</i> Napa Valley: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mass Commercial: Tasting Room Hosts • Limited Commercial: Tasting Room Hosts • Elite/Exclusive: Tasting Room Hosts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of products offered • Genres offered 	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hierarchy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normative ranking of products • Reference to classification system • Justification for rankings • Origin of knowledge 	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of institutionalized classification system • Communication of classification system to consumers 	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symbolic Potency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rituals performed to maintain boundaries • Sanctions for norm violations 	
		RQ2: How do intervening variables affect the construction of wine as a cultural product?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market Factors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions driven by consumer demands • Decisions driven by market research • Decisions driven by price
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critics/Experts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions driven by critic rankings • Decisions driven by Wine magazines, trade journals, etc.
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occupation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles performed • Decisions driven by management/authority • Decisions driven by pragmatic v. aesthetic considerations • Perception of consumers and self within the industry

TABLE 3: SUMMARY OF RESEARCH DESIGN (CONSUMERS)			
Research Question	Data	Measures	Operationalization
RQ3: How do institutionalized classification systems inform consumer constructions of wine as a cultural product?	Consumers Napa Valley • Mass Commercial Consumers • Limited Commercial Consumers • Elite/Exclusive Consumers	• Differentiation	• Number of products purchased per month. • Range of products purchased
		• Hierarchy	• Normative ranking of products • Justification of ranking/preferences • Origin of knowledge
		• Universal	• Awareness of institutional classification for wines and consumption practices • Communication about classification system (how it is utilized or rejected)
		• Symbolic Potency	• Rituals performed to maintain symbolic boundaries • Awareness of consumers/inter-mediaries who violate norms • Sanctions for norm violations
		• Market Factors	• Material v. Formal Aesthetic • Materialism v. Idealism [See Table 2]
R4: How do intervening variables affect consumer construction of wine as a cultural product?		• Critics/Experts	• Decisions driven by critics or formal rankings • Decisions driven by Wine Spectator or other trade journal
		• Occupation	• Types of employment • Cosmopolitan v. Local • Individuality v. Local • Wine as expression of self-actuation v. self autotelic sociality

TABLE 4: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR WINE TASTING ROOM STAFF	
Differentiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many products do you offer here? • What kinds do you offer? • How would you describe the wines that you serve here in relation to other wine tasting rooms in the area?
Hierarchy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In your opinion, what are most important things to know about wine? • How do you decide which wines are the best? • Where did you learn the knowledge that you have about wine?
Universal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you decide which wines you drink? • How do you help consumers choose wines? • Are you aware of industry classification systems that exist to rank various wines or wineries? If so, what are they?
Symbol Potency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe an ideal environment for tasting wine? • How would you explain to someone how to taste wine? • Do you ever notice people who come into the tasting room who do not seem to fit in? Can you describe them? • How about people who seem to fit right in? Can you describe them?
Market Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you ever try to steer consumers in a particular direction in choosing wines? If so, how? • What factors influence which products that you suggest to consumers (e.g., price, consumer desires, aesthetic qualities of the wine itself)?
Critics/Exerts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How often do you use industry classification systems in deciding which wines to consume or recommend to consumers? • Which ones are your favorite and why?
Occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long have you worked in the industry? • What factors led you to this type of job? • What does your typical day look like? • What do you like/dislike about your job? • What have you learned from working in the industry? Who is your supervisor? • Do you supervise anyone? If so, who and how many people? • How do you feel like consumers view you? • Do you think that they respect your knowledge? Do you have examples? • Do you feel any pressure from your job? If so, where would you say it comes from?
Wine Understanding as consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How often do you go to wine tasting rooms or wine bars? • How do you decide which ones to go to? • Can you describe a good tasting room experience? • What about wine makes it so enjoyable to consume?

TABLE 5: INTERVIEW GUIDE: CONSUMERS	
Differentiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your favorite alcoholic beverages? Why? • How often do you consume wine? • How many bottles have you bought in the last month? • What types of wine do you generally consume?
Hierarchy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In your opinion, what are most important things to know about wine? • How do you decide which wines are the best? • How would you describe a “good” bottle of wine? • Where did you learn the knowledge that you have about wine?
Universal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you decide which wines you drink? • Are you aware of industry classification systems that exist to rank various wines or wineries? • If so, do they ever influence your choices of which wines to buy? How? • Do you ever seek out knowledge about these systems? If so, how? • Are there particular places that you go to gain this type of information? • Can you identify any “experts” in the industry that can help people learn about wine? • Do you ever take the advise of people in wine bars/tasting rooms in making your decisions about wine? Why/why not?
Symbol Potency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe an ideal environment for drinking wine? • Who do you usually go to these events with? • How long have you been visiting wine bars/tasting events? • How would you explain to someone how to drink wine? • Do you ever notice people who come into tasting rooms or wine bars who do not seem to fit in? • Can you describe them? • How about people who seem to fit in? Can you describe them? • Do you ever feel uncomfortable in wine bars? If so, why?
Market Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the most important factors that help you decide which wine to drink in a wine bar/restaurant? • How about in buying wine for home usage? • How do you recognize a good bottle of wine? What criteria do you use to make this determination? • Do you ever make decisions about wine based on a particular brand (e.g., Opus One)? Winery (Mondavi)? Explain. • Are there any wines that you would not ever want to buy/drink? Which ones? Why? • Are there other wine bars/tasting rooms that you want to visit? Why?
Critics/Exerts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you ever read wine magazines to inform your decisions about wines? If so, which ones? • Do you ever use number rankings to inform your decisions about wines?
Occupation/Lifestyle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe the job that you currently have? • What do you do there? • How often do you travel? Where do you go? • And, what types of entertainment/dining experiences do you seek out on these trips? • What would you say makes wine so enjoyable to consume? • Where do you live? Urban, Suburban, or Rural?

TABLE 6: DEMOGRAPHIC AND OCCUPATIONAL INFORMATION FORM

Case ID #: _____

Occupation: _____

Mother's Occupation: _____

Father's Occupation: _____

Education: _____

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Race: _____

Salary: _____

How many hours do you work per week? _____

Is this the number of hours you prefer? _____

If not, would you want more or less? _____

Do you have Healthcare through your employer? _____

Do you have a retirement or pension plan through your employer? _____

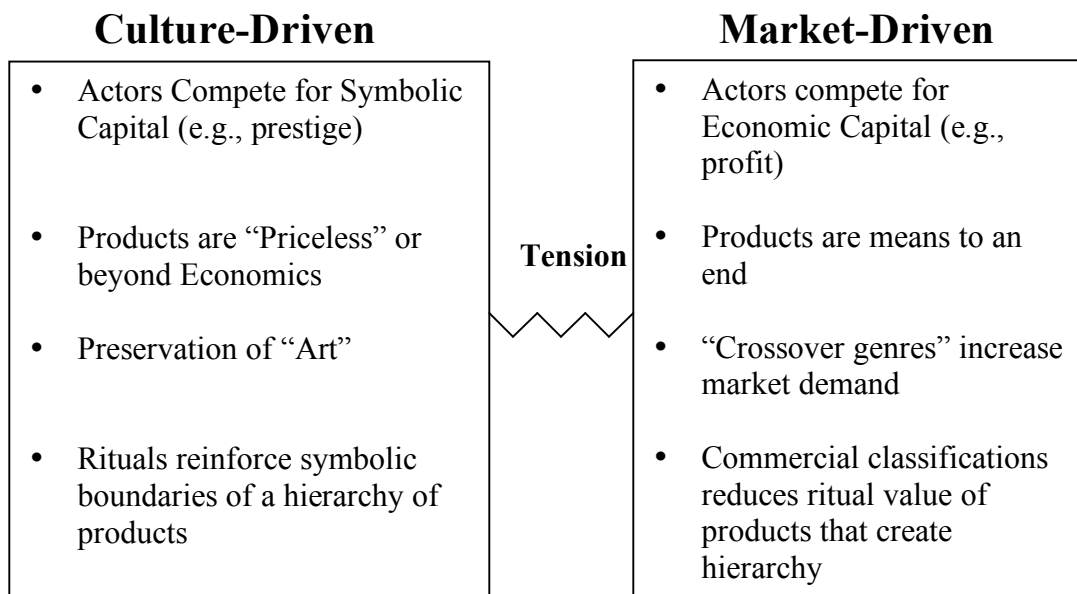
Do you get vacation days? _____ How many per year? _____

What other types of workplace benefits (like discounts) to you receive?

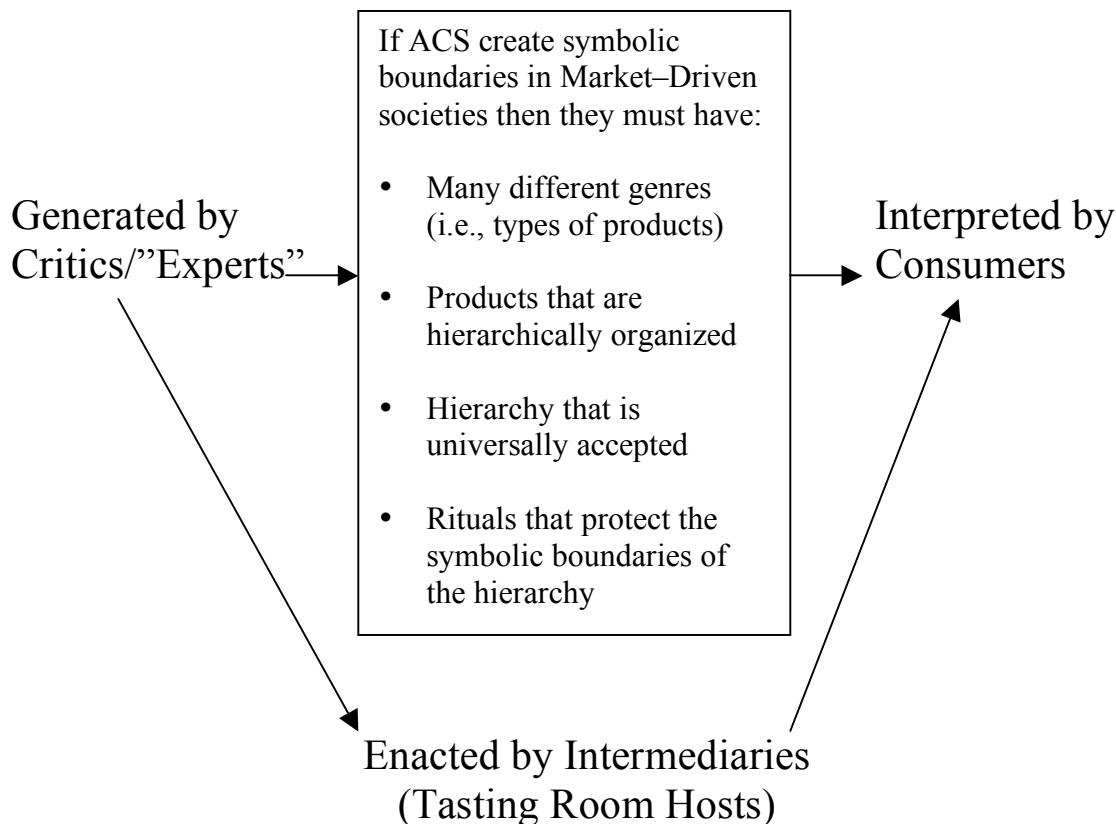
TABLE 7: CODE LIST	
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critic review/rating • Experts • Intoxication • Arts • Culture • Material Goods (brand-specific v. quality) • Food (High Brow/Low Brow/ Omnivorous: Authentic/Exotic) • Money/Price • Boutique • Travel (mass commercial cruises etc v. private villa & wine tours) • Wine club (elite, limited, mass) • Wine events (wine crawl v. private sommelier tasting) • Wine classes (on-line, private/limited, public) • Television •
Knowledge and Social Contacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critics • Wine (type, varietals, regions) • Wine appreciation (rituals around wine: why and how) • Winemakers • Vintners • Wineries (coded as elite, limited or mass) • Service staff in wineries • Restaurants • Chefs • Grocery Stores/Markets • Napa Tours (balloon rides, wine train, spas)
Feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Happy • Comfortable • Uncomfortable • Disappointed • Angry • Content • Satisfied • Excited
Us/Them: Social Distancing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alliance • Above • Below • Snob
Experiences of Wine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turning points • Discomfort • Social • Personal • Romantic • Sensual • Feeling important/unimportant
Action Codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fidgeting • Laughing • Talking to someone else in party • Lounging • Disagreeing • Gesturing • Showing off/referencing another object (e.g., watch, fountain pen)

TABLE 8: FIELD RESEARCH IN NAPA VALLEY			
Summer 2006	Visited 14 wineries <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No appointments • Mass-commercial • Limited-commercial 	Began to “map” the different types of tasting rooms in Napa Valley (ownership, ratings, public/private access) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Photos • Collect Brochures/Travel publications 	Interviews: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 consumers in mass-commercial tasting rooms • 3 TRH from limited commercial tasting rooms • 2 TRH from mass-commercial
Winter 2006	Visited 12 wineries and re-visited others.	Continued to “map” the different types of tasting rooms in Napa Valley. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Photos • Collect Brochures/Travel publications 	Interviews: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 consumers in limited commercial tasting rooms • 2 TRH from limited commercial • 2 TRH in Reserve rooms at mass-commercial
Spring/ Summer 2007	Visited 17 wineries and re-visited others.	Shadowed two friends who are wine collectors/”aficionados” for a 5 day “vacation” throughout the valley <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friends chose wineries, made appointments to wineries and restaurants 	Interviews: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 consumers in mass commercial tasting rooms • 4 consumers in limited commercial tasting rooms • 5 TRH from exclusive/elite
Spring/ Summer 2008	Lived in St. Helena. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visited 6 private wineries • Revisited several other mass produced wineries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteered at the Napa Wine Auction • Invited to Private Winemaker events • Attended Release parties (e.g., Spring Fling events) 	Interviews: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 omnivores Informal conversations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 status-oriented consumers • Industry insiders • winemakers • viculturalists • winery owners
Spring 2010	In Napa Valley to check data and do final write up.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Photos • New Brochures • Re-visit selected wineries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vineyard tour by viticulture firm owner who consults for wineries with 95+ ratings

Figure 2: Artistic Classifications in Market Driven Societies



ACS in Market Driven Societies



	Mass Commercial	Limited Commercial	Exclusive/ Elite
Production	> 250,000 Cases	10,000- 250,000 Cases	< 10,000 Cases or < 20,000 with select wines < 800 Cases
Distribution	National Chain Grocery Markets (e.g., Kroger), National Chain Restaurants (e.g., Olive Garden), Big Box Retail (e.g., Wal-Mart)	Retail Markets with Wine Managers (e.g., Whole Foods), High End Franchise Restaurants (e.g., Ruth's Chris), Wine Shops	Exclusive Wine Shops, Sommelier Lists, Wine Clubs, On-Site Tasting Rooms
Retail Price	Range: \$5.00 - \$150.00 Mean: \$25.00	Range: \$18.00-\$100.00 Mean: \$35.00	Range: \$30.00-\$200.00 Mean: \$75.00

	Mass Commercial		Limited Commercial	Elite/Exclusive
	Mass	Reserve		
Access	Open	Open	Open	80% By Appointment
Tasting Cost	Low	High	Medium: Not Enforced	Open: High Closed: High or None
Featured Wines	Whites, Rosé	Red	White, Red	White, Red, Rosé
Tasting Host Credentials	Minimal In-house Training	In-house Training, Self Training	Self-training, Wine Classes, In-house Training	50% + Sommelier Credentials
Retail Products	Many	Many	Some: Boutique Quality	Few-None

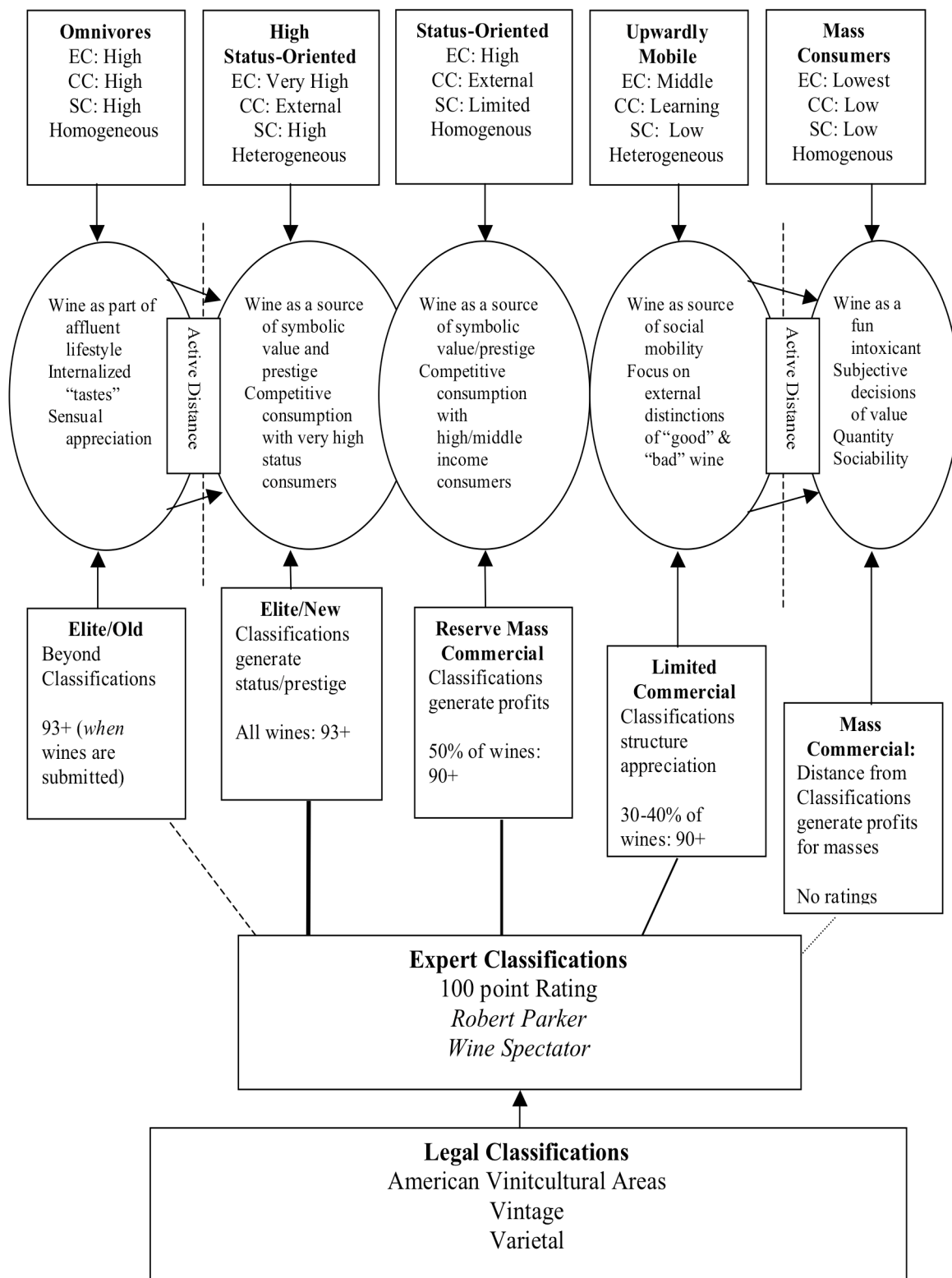
TABLE 11: CLASSIFICATIONS IN NAPA TASTING ROOMS					
	Mass Commercial		Limited Commercial	Elite/Exclusive	
	Mass	Reserve		New	Old
Ratings	None	90+ “Collectable”	40% > 90+	95+	90+/No Submission
Display of Rating	None	Highly Visible	Visible	Not Visible	Not Visible
Role of Host	Intoxicator	Sales	Educator	Gatekeeper	Gatekeeper
Communication: Products	Wine as Intoxicant	Wine as Status Symbol	Wine as Topic for Learning	Wine as Status Symbol	Wine as “Art”
Communication: Appreciation	Distance from “High Brow Snobs”	Preference to “High-Class” Guests	Explanatory	None	None
Performance	Mimic	Exaggerated Performance	Explained Performance	Intuitive Enactment	Intuitive Enactment
Universality of ACS	Uphold through distance	Uphold through repeated references	Uphold through education	Uphold through prestige and being “beyond economics”	Uphold through performance not wine choices
Boundaries	Low	Low (open access) High (cost, “snobby”)	Medium	High	High

TABLE 12: CONSUMER CATEGORIES							
	Economic Capital	Social Capital	Cultural Capital	Occupation	Location	Wines	Legitimacy Frame
Mass-Commercial Consumers	\$40,000 – \$100,000	Low: Homogenous	Low	Construction RN Teacher	Rural/ Suburban	White Zin, Red	Function: wine as intoxicating, fun, social. Price and Label matter most.
Limited Commercial Consumers	\$50,000 – \$200,000	Limited: Heterogeneous	Active Learning	Lawyer College Professors Self-Employed	Urban	“Not Pink”	Knowledge offers opportunity for mobility, hobby. Balances price with quality
Status-Oriented Consumers	\$150,000 – million+	Limited: Heterogeneous into the industry with similar-minded producers	Reliance on Experts	Executive Lawyer Finance Developer	Urban/ Suburban/ Gated Communities	Critic’s choice: Big reds	Signifying objects (vs. practices) in line with Simmel and Veblen. Mobility through object itself. Price = quality
Elite Consumers	\$60,000 - million+	High: Homogenous and tightly integrated into the industry	High	Retired Executives/ Social Service Workers/ Attorneys Sommelier Restaurant Owners	Urban/ Rural Farm	All genres (omnivores)	Aesthetic distinctions, embodied knowledge and interactions. Price becomes game—best wine for cheapest cost, usually found through connections with industry insiders.

TABLE 13: COMPARISON BETWEEN HOLT’S (1998) LCC RESPONDENTS AND NAPA VALLEY MASS COMMERCIAL CONSUMERS	
Holt’s LCC Respondents	Napa Valley Consumers in Mass Commercial Tasting Rooms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routinized consumption • Collective consumption • Break from things that are “old fashioned” or “backward” • Conventional • Choose popularly constructed genre distinctions • Rarely use vocabulary of expertise to talk about preferences • Make pragmatic evaluations (good prices) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeatedly choose same wines • Often drink wine as a “social lubricant” • Social distancing from people who have “not learned to drink wine” • Choose mass distributed wines • Use simplified genre distinctions that are common in mass markets (white v red) • Rarely know vocabulary of experts to talk about wine or their preferences • Evaluations are based on price, marketing and easy accessibility (in grocery stores)

TABLE 14: COMPARISON BETWEEN HOLT’S HCC RESPONDENTS AND STATUS-ORIENTED AND OMNIVOROUS CONSUMERS IN ELITE TASTING ROOMS		
Holt’s HCC Respondents	Status Oriented Elite/Exclusive Consumers	Cultural Omnivore Elite/Exclusive Consumers
“Authentic” consumption	“Authentic” as legitimated by experts	“Authentic” as creative expression of varietal, <i>terrior</i> , winemaker
Disavowal of mass consumption	Disavowal of mass consumption	Disavowal of mass consumption and wine as a commodity
Unique varieties of genres that stress “original”/“unique”	Similar genres (e.g., Cabernet) that are “original” or “unique” within range that has been legitimated by industry critics	Appreciation for creative varieties that are “original” or “unique”—often considered unclassifiable.
Nuanced techniques to evaluate, appreciate, and understand objects	High level of technical understanding of product and product market	Nuanced sensual evaluation and internalized “tastes” for wine
Fine grained vocabulary	Fine grained vocabulary related to wine storage, wine ratings, and wines within preferred genre	Fine grained vocabulary related to wine appreciation that includes technical and sensual aspects, as well as food pairings that enhance flavor or “uniqueness”
Specialized knowledge (often requiring research)	Specialized knowledge from books and friends who are also wine collectors	Specialized knowledge that is passed from personal friends who are industry insiders
Consumption as expression of individuality	Consumption as expression of class position and status	Consumption as expression of individuality and subjective (yet coherent) standards
Evaluation is dominant aspect of consumption	Evaluation based on critic-ratings and industry leaders is dominant (evaluation often framed as point values or cost)	Evaluation based on internalized tastes appreciate varietal differences, and artistic aspects of winemaking

Figure 3: Classifications, Tasting Rooms, Consumers and Consumer Cultures



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