

Qualitative determinants of wine demand: an exploratory analysis of two Sicilian wines “Catarratto” and “Nero d’Avola”

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Abstract

This article analyzed the socio-cultural representations associated with two Sicilian wines, Catarratto, and Nero d’Avola. The study was carried out in the area of western Sicily, where most of the wine growing is concentrated. In particular, for ‘Catarratto’, the research was conducted in the area of the Gulf of Castellammare in the province of Trapani, an area particularly suited to the cultivation of the ‘Catarratto’ vine from which the white wine is obtained; for ‘Nero d’Avola’, the research was conducted in the area of Menfi in the province of Agrigento, an area particularly suited to this black vine. Our objective was to determine how the players in the wine chain, and who indirectly deal with wine, construct their mental model relating to wine to suggest to companies the appropriate wine marketing actions to take to increase their competitive advantage. To achieve the objective of the research, ten focus groups consisting of wine consumers, teetotalers, wine opinion leaders, wine merchants, wine shop owners, medical doctors, and food experts were conducted. During the focus group, we gave these subjects a document in which they had to explain what wine evokes in them. The results of the research confirm that wine is a complex food product whose consumption evokes sensations, memories, and pleasures. The study provides an important source of knowledge on the current cultural significance of wine and its consumption in these two areas of Sicily. Therefore, the study highlighted the quality of these two Sicilian wines can guarantee competitiveness at the company and sector levels.

Keywords

Sicilian wines, Catarratto, Nero d’Avola, socio-cultural representation



1. Introduction

In recent years, Sicilian wine has become a product of the cultural heritage of Sicily (Sgroi, 2022) which in some ways also represents a symbol of it given the ancient tradition of Sicilian winemakers. In the consumer's vision, when he or she thinks of 'wine', landscapes are evoked both social feelings (meals eaten in good company, enjoyment, multi-sensory pleasures, special occasions, folk festivals, religious devotions/practices, colors, aromas) and geographical contexts (vineyard landscapes, images of sunset tastings, territories, the sea) that stimulate the consumer's senses. Agri-food products such as wine are strongly linked to their territory of origin (Sgroi 2021 a, b; Sgroi 2022a). But wine is also a complex matrix product; in fact, its consumption can accompany various moments in human life: from meals eaten at home (alone or in the company); by those who are addicted to wine; and finally, we have those who drink wine to share in convivial moments. These last two aspects are somewhat opposite. The first highlights the excessive use of wine which is not good for health. The second aspect highlights a very beautiful aspect, namely sharing among family and friends. (Poulain, 2019; López, 2021). Wine, known since ancient times, has now become part of the cultural identity of people. Wine accompanies man in particular moments of his life, in his fundamental recurrences to moments of celebration and being together at the table in moments of conviviality. Although it is not a basic food product, wine is now an integral part of consumers' meals and therefore represents a food product that is part of the consumer's diet. However, it should not be forgotten that today, in societies with a high per capita income, wine is also consumed outside meals, for example during aperitifs or for some particular occasion, as a symbol of a food product of friendship and well-being together. Therefore, the consumption of wine has been deconstructed from a meal drink to a drink that can accompany all moments of daily life. According to this concept, wine consumption is currently expanding to more and more people and within a wider range of social classes and gender (Alonso and Parga, 2019). In light of this, we are interested in determining the cultural consents associated with wine in two Sicilian locations the Gulf of Castellammare and Menfi where wine has always accompanied the history and culture of the territory and where the two wines examined, the "Catarratto" and the "Nero d'Avola" represent identity with the territory. The Gulf of Castellammare had been a port since the 1800s from where western Sicily left for the markets of central continental Europe (France, Spain, Germany, etc.). Furthermore, the territory is home to a multitude of companies that grow grapes of the "Catarratto" cultivar. In this strip of Sicily, the climate favors the cultivation of this cultivar, which produces bunches with a golden exocarp every year in August-September, representing an asset for the area. Menfi is also an important wine-growing center, where various companies and wineries are located, and where wine has a union with the territory and with the local population. The wines produced in the past were high-grade wines and were used in European destinations as blending wines. Today, however, thanks to the process of reconversion of Sicilian vineyards, and the work carried out by oenologists in Sicilian cellars over the last 30 years, these wines have become fine wines that compete with wines from northern Italy and France. Today we can affirm that Sicilian wines are excellent wines appreciated by Italian and non-Italian consumers. They are bought by consumers and bought on par with wines from northern Italy and France. The results presented in this article are derived from a research project conducted at the University of Palermo on the models of interpretation and how wine is viewed by those who are directly or indirectly involved with this food product. These findings form the basis of possible marketing strategies by companies marketing this food product. These aspects are important to understand how the potential of wine impacts local communities interested in grape production and its transformation into wine. The aim of this paper constitutes an important asset to orient wine production and marketing strategies.

2 . Materials and methods

In this research, we analyzed the socio-cultural representations linked to wine in two territories in western Sicily (Trapani and Agrigento). The first territory concerned the Gulf of Castellammare with “Catarratto” wine; while the second territory of interest in the study was Menfi with “Nero d’Avola” wine. Both wines are widespread in their respective territories and boast an ancient historical and cultural tradition; in fact, they come from native Sicilian vines and are an expression of the cultural heritage of the territory and are widely used in Sicilian gastronomy as well as being exported all over the world where they are well known and appreciated. As previously mentioned, these wines represent the “Princes” of wines respectively “Catarratto” for white ones and “Nero d’Avola” for black ones produced in Sicily. The research is aimed at discovering how all the direct players in the wine supply chain (producers, distributors, consumers, abstainers, oenologists, wine shop owners, oenologists, and food technologists) and indirect (actors who are not from the production chain but who are interested in consumption as they cure any disorders resulting from overconsumption) ones such as doctors and health workers perceive wine and what sensations they recall in their minds when they hear about wine or drink wine. (Spradley, 1979; Muñoz et al., 2019; Roascio-Albistur et al., 2019). Using the semiotic approach as a method of analyzing social meanings, we can identify the terms or elements that emerge in the answers to various questions. To analyze the social impact that wine has, we have adopted an ethnographic approach that includes various qualitative research techniques. In both areas of the Gulf of Castellammare and Menfi, we conducted 30 interviews with direct and indirect actors. However, in our survey, we found that the players in wine vary according to the territory under investigation. We have found that a producer can also be a good winemaker and vice versa, just as we have found that consumers are also experts in the history and traditions of the territory. This demonstrates that although the subjects to be interviewed are defined a priori, they are not identified within a certain perimeter but can at the same time assume the double figure of interested parties both directly and indirectly. The choice of the units to be interviewed took place with the snowball technique (Taylor and Bogdan 1984; Hammersley and Atkinson 1994) through contacts in the area with opinion leaders in the wine sector. To make the research more concrete, we also conducted an observation at a retail outlet to observe customers and identify the criteria for choosing a bottle of wine. Furthermore, we conducted observation in a tasting event linked to the popular festivals of the two areas under study. For the data collection, we have created a total of ten focus groups both in Castellammare del Golfo and in Menfi. The subjects interviewed as mentioned before were direct (producers, distributors, consumers, abstainers, oenologists, wine shop owners, oenologists, and food technologists) and indirect subjects that are related to wine (actors who are not from the production chain but who are interested in consumption as they cure any disorders resulting from overconsumption). Always among the direct subjects, there are grapes, a grape producer who subsequently transforms it into wine always in his own company and the presidents of local wineries. Always among the direct subjects, we find the distributors who are owners of wine shops and representatives of the large-scale organized distribution of the territory. In addition, ten wine consumers and three abstainers were interviewed among the direct subjects. Among the indirect subjects, we have grouped doctors, social and health workers, and psychologists. The subjects were first interviewed individually and then proceeded with the focus group. For each focus group, we used the free list technique, which consists in providing all participants with a free registration form and we asked them to answer the following question: “*What comes to mind when you hear about wine?*” We built lists of the answers in the form of participating words or short phrases associated with the word ‘wine’. We then elaborated and analyzed these words or phrases, cataloging them for the quantitative analysis of qualitative data specifically on cultural domains (Borgatti, 1996). To use the list of ethnographic techniques, we provided all participants with a questionnaire on a tasting of the two wines “Catarratto” and “Nero d’Avola”. This tasting was to collect their opinions on the organoleptic characteristics of this product, compared to other wines, and to

determine their ideas on wine. The results of the list that included the words that come to mind when you hear about “Catarratto” or “Nero d’Avola” have been tabulated where the frequency of each word is shown in each survey area (Gulf of Castellammare and Menfi). In the results that will be presented, only the words that have appeared most frequently will be considered. Furthermore, the data analysis will also examine “average ranking”, which is the average position of a term in the list of all informants who have cited it (Muñoz et al., 2019). This data was calculated by analyzing the position of the item in the lists and the number of times it appeared among the respondents. This combined measurement of frequency and order produces an “index of cultural or cognitive salience” that indicates the relevance of a term, ie. how it was referred to. The salience index (I) is determined as follows:

$$I = \frac{F}{N \bullet mP}$$

Equation 1

where F is the frequency, N is the number of subjects, and mP considers the weight of the average position in which the term is named (average ranking).

The saliency index serves to better understand consumer decision-making processes when purchasing wine; it is important to identify which attributes consumers rely on and how they perceive and weigh them in reaching a final decision (Ginon et al., 2014). The salience index varies from 1 to 0. The optimal value of the salience index is equal to one and indicates that a term has been used several times and in particular if the attribute is used by many respondents it approaches the unit and therefore means that that term has a very high frequency among respondents and could be a useful indicator for marketing strategies. If the index is equal to zero or close to zero, it means that the word has been named with low frequency, so that word is not used much to remember wine and therefore a term to be discarded for future marketing strategies.

3. Results and discussion

These research territories have always been dedicated to the production of wine grapes and are the headquarters of important companies and operators in the wine sector. First, the results will be presented for the two territories put together, then for Castellammare del Golfo and Menfi separately. We will also reinforce some of these findings with snippets extracted from focus groups in each area. Fig. 1 shows the frequency of free lists in these two areas (Castellammare del Golfo and Menfi). The attributes that appear most often in the list we have provided are our gastronomy, culture, pleasure, aroma, and family. These terms encompass all of the positive values of wine that reflect the importance of tradition, gastronomy, and the relationships between the senses and sensations. As for the salience index (Fig. 2), we can see that the item friends occupy the first place (0.198) after we have the family (0.179), followed by gastronomy (0.169), culture (0.169), pleasure (0.159) and aroma (0.141).

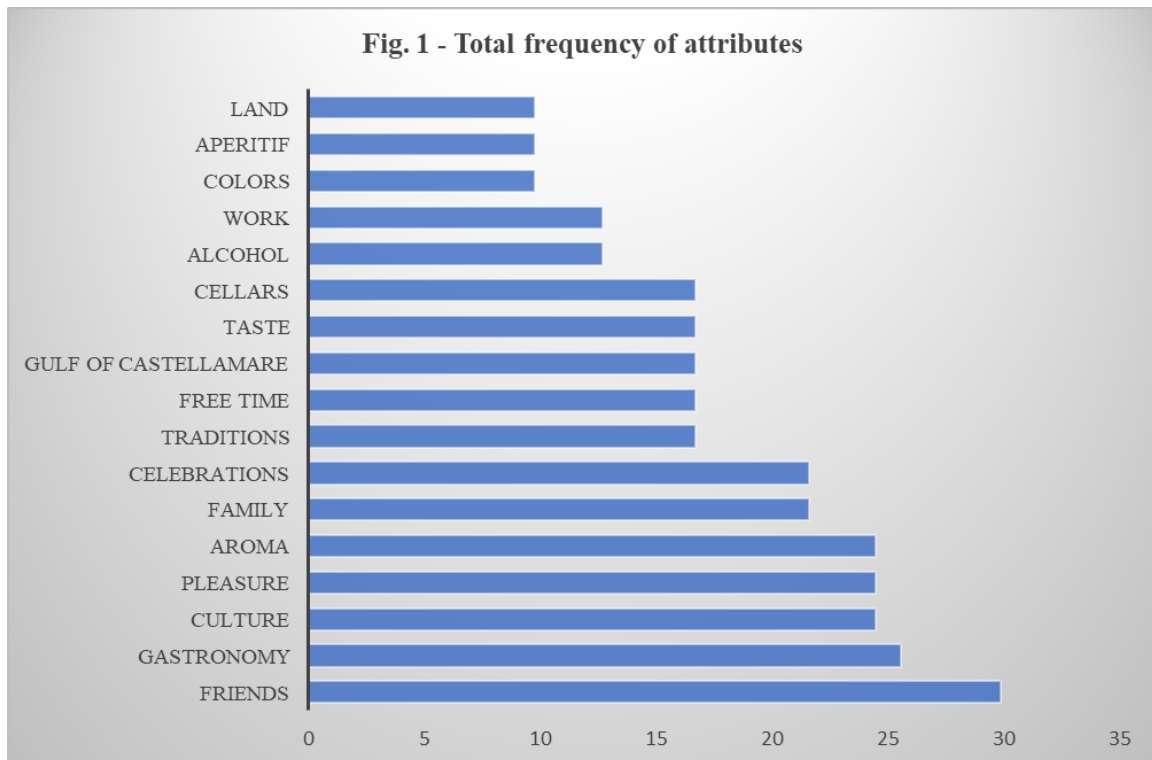


Fig 1. Total frequency of attributes

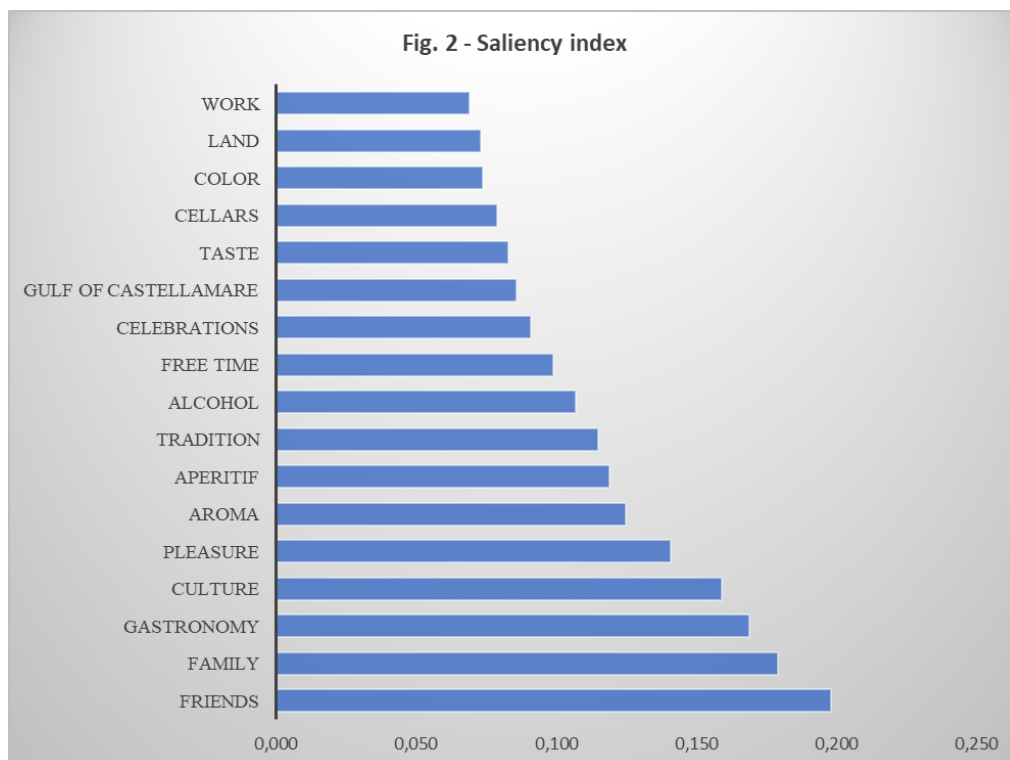


Fig 2. Saliency index

3.1 Gulf of Castellammare

The Gulf of Castellammare is strongly identified with the “Catarratto” wine. The area also produces wine from the Inzolia, Trebbiano, Chardonnay, Merlot, and Syrah cultivars; however, Catarratto is the one that takes up the lion’s share of the area. The culture of wine has some importance in the area. In particular, in the area of the Gulf of Castellammare, we find various cultural events on wine, and a historical monument located in the center of the area is the Cantina Borbonica which stands as evidence of the importance of wine in the area. In particular, the Real Cantina Borbonica, was built in 1800 by Ferdinando III, King of Sicily (who became Ferdinand I, King of the Two Sicilies after the Restoration) and represents one of the most beautiful and important works left to us by the passage of the Bourbons in Sicily. In this place, conferences and wine tastings are organized. Therefore this wine is identified with the territory and is also the basis of the production of the white DOC of Alcamo present in the territory in question. This is particularly illustrated by the frequency with which the term Gulf of Castellammare appears. In the first place, we also find friends, family, cellars, aroma, and grapes, which shows that the word ‘wine’ is also associated with social relations with the territory, the senses, and sensations (drinking a glass of wine). The “Gulf of Castellammare” instead occupies the third place in the saliency index and is an expression of territorial identity (Alonso and Parga, 2019; Ribas, 2013) (see Table 1). This is due to a strong notion of identity as the territory of the Gulf of Castellammare is recognized as a wine-growing area with a specific quality brand, the Bianco di Alcamo DOC.

Table 1. Determination of saliency in Castellammare del Golfo

Items	Frequency	Average Rank	Saliency
Castellammare del Golfo	29.3	4.1	0.238
Friends	23.4	3.4	0.229
Family and Friends	23.4	1.2	0.650
Cellars	23.4	3.8	0.205
Aroma	23.4	4.8	0.163
Grape	17.5	3.5	0.167
A glass of white wine	17.5	1.2	0.486
Wine tasting	17.5	3.6	0.162
Celebrations	17.5	4.2	0.139
Sea	17.5	4.2	0.139
Gastronomy	17.5	3.52	0.166
Alcohol	17,5	1.98	0.295
Taste	11.6	5.4	0.072
Sampling	11.6	4.3	0.090
Culture	11.6	2.1	0.184
Pleasure	11.6	1.4	0.276
Family	11.6	2.3	0.168
Free time and fun	11.6	1.2	0.322
Cheer	11.6	3,6	0.107
Tradition	11.6	2.2	0.176
Calm	11.6	4.6	0.084

One of our questions during the focus groups was: *in your opinion what makes a wine good?* Various testimonies of interviewees are reproduced below. In answer, they told us that “good wine is what one likes according to the tradition of the territory”. Another answer, “Among all the wines I know I like Catarratto more than the others and I drink only this one. When he offers me a Syrah or a Cabernet, French wine or any other type, I don’t prefer them because I’m used to ‘Catarratto’ and its fruity aroma that satisfies me”. Another answer: “Catarratto is a wine that I like because it is a fresh and velvety wine”. Another answer: “I like is “Catarratto” both to be combined with food and as an aperitif (associated with cheeses, meats, peanuts, and olives), especially if served fresh”. “The ‘Catarratto’ grape has a strong structure, ripe fruit and full as a storm, and a lot of yellow flesh to bite into. The body is impressive, with a smoky finish, with hints of malt and pine resin. Everything is taken to the extreme in “Catarratto”, so much so that its density and tannins are renowned”. “Once upon a time, it was used to produce wines so full-bodied as to seem to eat marzipan, today there is a tendency to have a more dynamic interpretation, thanks to which the “Catarratto” is rising from its ashes to aspire to the great protagonist of Sicilian white wine. Flavor, acidity, and a lot of fabric invite pairings with substantial dishes, even with pork. I can combine it with veal with tuna sauce, spaghetti with clams, Mantuan-style pumpkin Tortelli, rice noodles with shrimps and vegetables, ravioli with herb parmigiana, truffle risotto, spaghetti carbonara, pad thai”. “I like still white wines produced with “Catarratto” grapes that are generally fresh, of medium structure, with moderate acidity and alcohol content. The nose has citrus and floral notes (lemon peel, bitter orange, and orange blossom), hints of tropical fruits such as pineapple, and passion fruit with the addition of a herbaceous and slightly fruity note. Excellent flavor and strong mineral sensations can sometimes lead to a slightly bitter finish. I like these features. Other answers on what characteristics a good wine should have answered us: softness, velvety quality, and balance in the mouth (Casadó-Marín and Anzil, 2022; Gracia, 1986). The moment in which the wine is consumed is also important (Poulain, 2019; Skinner, 2020). common consumption habits vary according to the people involved. For example, regular consumers at meals and in their free time drink “Catarratto” wine as they consider it important for their diet and because their parents also drank it. For those who consume it only as an aperitif, its importance is determined by the structure and by the fact that you want to drink a good glass of wine, especially served cold. The “Catarratto” is a wine that reminds us of the land, the company that makes us rediscover the past, and the peasant traditions of the past. In the past, wine was considered a food or a complementary product of food with its own gastronomic identity. We found out from older people, which was also confirmed by doctors that this is true. In fact, in the past, manual labor in the fields was required, and a bottle of wine was never lacking for those who worked in the fields. Over the years, our communities considered the highest per capita income. What happened is that it became wine, and we see the hedonistic aspect because our basic food needs are largely covered.

3.2 Menfi

In Menfi the highest frequency associated with the word “wine” is friends (29.3%), followed by gastronomy, aroma, pleasure, and culture (23.4% each) (Table 2). In this area, social aspects and gastronomy combine with those of feeling good among friends and taste and tradition.

Table 2. Determination of salience in Menfi

Items	Frequency	Average Rank	Salience
Friends	29.3	3.7	0.264
Gastronomy	23.4	2.89	0.270
Aroma	23.4	4.61	0.169
Pleasure	23.4	4.55	0.171
Culture	23.4	3.85	0.203
Celebrations	20.7	4.82	0.143
Family	20.7	2.44	0.283
Cellars	14.3	3.62	0.132
Tradition	14.3	3.1	0.154
Free time and fun	14.3	3.45	0.138
Taste	14.3	4.7	0.101
Territory	14.3	4.1	0.116
Work	11.6	3.2	0.121
A glass of red wine	11.6	1.2	0.322
Alcohol	11.6	1.85	0.209
Color	8.9	3.02	0.098
Tasting	8.9	3.62	0.082
Consumption	8.9	7.37	0.040

The salience index is very strong compared to the fact that wine is a tool for creating social relations and territorial identification. Here are some extracts of the interviewees in focus groups in the Menfi area. When asked about the characteristics that good wine should have, consumers and wine drinkers replied. Consumer 1: "I must like good wine. For example, if I eat a slice of red meat or cheese, I'm a big sponsor of red wine. I don't like white or rosé wine. So when I choose to order at a restaurant or when I shop, it's always red for me. In addition, the wine should be consumed at the right temperature, I also like cold red wine. I like the red wine of Nero d'Avola because it has a strong flavor, it is a robust wine and it is also a wine that I drink with friends, sitting in front of the fireplace in winter". I don't drink wine: "I don't consume wine due to health problems. Sometimes I would like to enjoy wine for the image of a glass of wine to be with others and because it is a noble drink. Wine gives me a feeling of superiority and well-being".

Wine consumer 2: "I like red wine, especially the one with not too high graduation. It must be fruity and it must be suitable for being comfortable in families and for celebrating some event. Another interesting aspect was the concept of "wine culture". According to distributors, the wine culture derives from the information that consumers request when ordering and purchasing the product. As far as the group is concerned, the aspect of our analysis has expanded to include the diet, in particular the Mediterranean one. In particular, an oenologist explained to us that young people do not drink wine in large quantities as was the case in the area in the 1960s. Wine is a component of the Mediterranean diet. Another winemaker explained to us that making wine is an art form that fascinates those who do it well. The world of wine, if you like it, is fantastic. It is a beautiful thing that fascinates you, that involves you in transforming grapes into wine appreciated by consumers, a drink that has always accompanied man's life. He said yet another winemaker: "A good wine is born in the vineyard in the fields, from the pruning of life to the harvest". As for health workers: they told us

that wine has always accompanied gastronomy. Today, compared to the past, the wines consumed are not of high alcohol content. A health worker told us that a glass of wine a day contributes positively to health. Wine has a gastronomic connotation. Still, another explained to us that food and wine must have the same importance in human nutrition. Yet another health worker told us that wine is sharing, company, and parties. From the data collected, the cultural representatives linked to wine in these two Sicilian production areas occupy a special role. As evidence of the strong culture of wine, Inycom organizes Menfi, an event to promote the culture and image of wine in the area. In general, the Nero d'Avola of Menfi has a taste of ripe red fruits, blackberry, and raspberry above all, characterize the bouquet, made intriguing by notes of brine and a slight spiciness. In the mouth, it is fragrant, soft, and velvety, with delicate tannins, perfectly integrated into a juicy and persistent finish.

4. Conclusions

The results of the research show that the cultural associations to the word 'wine' are many and varied from traditions to families to the territory to feeling good with friends, so wine is a symbolic element of feeling good together and connected with the territory. Wine is perceived as a product that healthily accompanies the consumer's diet, and is also "healthy if consumed in moderation" by some interested parties. In particular, "Catarratto" and "Nero d'Avola" are wines that accompany meals and aperitifs that do not have a high price tag and are, as we have seen, well-known in the area. Although we are talking about two territories that have their history, we see wine as the basis of relationships, sharing, pleasure, and gastronomy in both territories. In both areas of study, albeit with culturally different traditions, wine unites a lot in terms of evocations to the mind and gastronomic traditions. Wine, which has always accompanied human life, has now become a product in societies with a high per capita income that is never lacking in consumers' diets but that goes even further and always accompanies all moments of human life. The results of this study can be used as a valuable marketing tool for companies that produce and market wine. Advertising with the aspects that emerged from the survey (family, friends, landscape, sea) contributes to potentially increased product sales. Considering that the wines in the study "Catarratto" and Nero d'Avola "are wines known and appreciated all over the world, whose cultivation contributes to the creation of spectacular agricultural landscapes" (Sgroi, 2022b, c), the results of this research contribute to creating the conditions, through marketing actions, for an increase in sales in Italy and abroad as wines produced in the heart of the Mediterranean and in particular in Sicily, an area with a strong vocation for this cultivation.

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