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Sensory scientist, Anthony Saliba

It had to happen - the application of psychology and sensory analysis to discover what wine drinkers like and dislike.

Sensory scientist, Anthony Saliba, is developing a taste-tested methodology, not just to promote tastier wines but to encourage more efficient wine making in changing climates.

"It's to help growers and wine makers produce what they know will sell, rather than try to command higher prices from 'premium' grape varieties," Dr Saliba (pictured) said.

"Some consumer research has recently shown that what wine experts like does not correlate with what average drinkers will like, so there is a gap in the market.

"The best recent example to fill the gap is New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, commanding high prices because consumers like the taste so much."

Growing up with a Mediterranean background on the Mornington Peninsula in a family that made their own wine and grew their own vegetables, Dr Saliba has completed two years of a research project at the National Wine and Grape Industry Centre (NWGIC) at Wagga Wagga.

"Traditionally the industry worldwide makes wine according to how experts, such as wine writers, show judges, and wine makers define quality," he said.

"They communicate wine flavour through descriptors like blackberry and cherry, but these terms confuse many consumers, who struggle to articulate what they like and don't like."

Previous research by individual wine companies involving sensory analysis to enhance their own products had not been shared with the wider industry, Dr Saliba said.

Now Dr Saliba is developing his method to give all consumers their voice.

"A trained panel of experts give the descriptors, then I get consumers to indicate how much they like a wine on a nine point scale, from like to dislike, to deduce their preferences exactly," he said.

Part of the project is looking at chemical markers in wine which will signal to growers and winemakers how to create flavours that consumers like.

"We will also produce a field manual to explain growing conditions needed to promote more of the flavours that consumers like for a given variety," Dr Saliba said.

"We won't simply tell growers they need to provide winemakers with grapes that taste more 'citrus' for instance."

The yardstick variety for the project is Hunter Valley Semillon but the methodology being developed will be applicable to any other variety from any other region.

Dr Saliba wants to hear from regions interested in this approach being applied to their own "regional hero".

Factoring in production influences of climate change, the goal is to command a higher price per litre with less emphasis on volume to generate profit.

"When anyone considers using a new variety or revisiting an old one, applying this research at the start will enable fine tuning of practices to ensure flavour consistent with consumer demand, reducing the chance of wine going unwanted," Dr Saliba said.

Dr Saliba says it's all about producing specific flavoured wines people will love and happily pay for.

He expects the new method to most suit bigger producers, but smaller ones could also benefit from tapping a market much bigger than the "premium" end.

"In the past it has been difficult to command higher prices unless you are one of the few whose vineyard produces recognised premium grapes," he said.

"The super premium market in Australia accounts for around one per cent of sales by volume, whereas the taste proven market is likely to be more like 25pc," he said.

NWGIC is a three way partnership between NSW Department of Primary Industries, Charles Sturt University and the NSW Wine Industry Association, with funding from the Grape and Wine Research and Development Corporation.

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- Ron Aggs

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