Guest editorial

Editorial

Welcome to this special issue of *IJWBR* themed "Aesthetics, Ephemerality and the Luxury of Wine: Implications for Luxury Wine Marketing and Brand Management" with well-known marketing scholars Leyland Pitt and Pierre Berthon as the guest editors. On behalf of *IJWBR*, I want to express my gratitude towards Leyland and Pierre for undertaking this big task and for successfully pulling together all the "nuts and bolts" of this special issue.

This issue contains five interesting articles, a rather reflective editorial by the guest editors, and an insightful "viewpoint" contribution by Bill Harlan, proprietor of Harlan Wine Estates in St Helena, California, USA.

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Guest editorial

It is always enjoyable and insightful to tie together a series of seemingly unrelated events and then to trace how they came to fruition in a culminating project. This special issue of *IJWBR* is a case in point. It began 10 years ago when the first co-editor was invited to be part of a Harvard Business School team to write a case study on the fabled Bordeaux first-growth, Chateau Margaux (Deighton *et al.*, 2006). This entailed a lengthy visit to Margaux (Oh, the hardships of case writing!), as well as meetings with negociants and others involved in the complex, ancient but intriguing Bordeaux distribution system. Writing a Harvard case can be a daunting task, but perhaps even more challenging is to write the teaching note that every case requires. Teaching notes cover every possible aspect of the case study that might arise in a class discussion, with detailed attention to every issue that a teacher using the case might encounter. Mostly, the teaching notes end up being much longer, and of course far more detailed, than the case study itself. The first co-editor was given the task of preparing and co-authoring the Margaux case teaching note (Deighton and Pitt, 2008). And so, as he usually does when confronted with something too complex to deal with by himself, he turned to the second co-editor, a colleague and friend with whom he has co-authored more than a 100 peer-reviewed articles and worked with for more than 20 years.

One of the issues raised in the Margaux case is the difference between connoisseurs (those who know wine) and luxury buyers (those who purchase a wine because it is expensive and affords them status). The first co-editor naively assumed that if this was the case, then a luxury wine brand like Margaux not only competed against other Bordeaux greats like Lafitte and Haut Brion but indeed also against all luxury brands, such as Louis Vuitton, Rolex and Hermes. The second co-editor disagreed, using the example of his mother who was soon to celebrate her eightieth birthday: "What gift do you think she would appreciate more? A bottle of 1982 Chateau Margaux that she can enjoy on her birthday with her children, or a Rolex wristwatch?" he asked. He argued that luxury really had to do with two important dimensions: aesthetics (the experience and sensibility of the consumer) and time (whether an offering endures and is experienced over time or consumed in the moment – that is, it is ephemeral).

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These ideas became an integral part of the case teaching note. However, by now, we were so intrigued by the notions of aesthetics and ephemerality that we decided to pursue them further and co-authored a paper on these issues for luxury brands in general that was submitted to, and eventually published in *California Management Review* (Berthon *et al.*, 2009). Our experience in the publishing of this paper was not one that always occurs – the review process didn't simply lead to us eventually publishing a different paper; in this case, it really did result in a better paper. In the first submission, we had attempted to define a luxury brand and relied on the existing marketing literature to do so: countless and tired reiterations that a luxury brand was always scarce and expensive and meant something special to the individual consuming it. An especially astute reviewer pointed out that if this really was the case, then just about every brand could be a luxury brand, depending on the context of its consumption. He/She used the example of an impoverished child in Africa who is fortunate enough to be able to enjoy a can of Coca-Cola on a rare occasion. While to most consumers in the developed world, Coca-Cola epitomizes a mass market good, to the child the can of Coke is a rare luxury: it is scarce and hard to come by and so is enjoyed infrequently; it is expensive and represents a large portion of the child's expenditure, and it is special – for a few moments, the child has their hands on a product that might also be enjoyed by the ruler of the country. The reviewer's advice to us? Don't try to define a luxury brand. That's almost impossible and probably meaningless. Rather focus on the conceptualization of luxury – that can be your work's most useful contribution. And so we did.

The paper was published in 2009 and has since been quite widely cited. However, like many academics, we stored the offprints on our bookshelves and got straight on to the next writing project. Imagine our surprise when in the summer of 2014, we received an email from Brigitte Coutu, the personal assistant to Bill Harlan, of Harlan Estates in Napa, inviting us to have an online conversation with Bill, who, she said, had been carrying our CMR paper around with him for quite a while, and suggesting that everyone at the estate read it. It always comes as a pleasant shock to academics when those outside of academia read and appreciate their work! The sad truth is that most academic literature has little or no impact in the real world.

So we had our online conference with Bill and quickly discovered that he knew our own work even better than we did. Toward the end of our conversation, Bill suggested that it might work better if we came to visit him in Napa and to continue our discussions there. Margaux and Harlan in the same decade […] […] we thought we might have died and gone to heaven.

In what has become a very crowded winescape, Harlan is to Californian wine what Petrus is to Bordeaux and what Vosne Romanée-Conti is to Burgundy. The great British wine writer Clarke (2015) notes:

> All too often when a billionaire decides to buy or create a vineyard and winery, he believes that money spent, publicity bought and a stratospheric price charged will bring instant icon success. These guys should check the dictionary. Icon status needs to be earned, not bought. Even so, the good pieces of vineyard will survive and flourish. The ones based solely on hype and manipulating supply and demand will crash in flames.

A man of modest beginnings, Bill Harlan made his fortune in property and investments in California before purchasing his first wine estate in 1984. While his first vintage was produced in 1990, he refused to release it for six years, until he could be sure that it met the quality requirement that he had set for it. It has been reported that it was not until 2004 that Harlan began to turn a profit in wine (Marcus, 2004). Bill Harlan was in it for the very long haul. He didn't believe that by simply spending lots of money, buying lots of publicity and charging stratospheric prices, that Harlan would become an icon. He refused to buy success. He was, is and always will be determined to earn it.

We were delighted when *IJWBR* Editor-in-Chief Johan Bruwer invited us to co-edit a special issue of this journal on the aesthetics and ephemerality of luxury wine because we saw it as an opportunity to expand the notions of wine luxury beyond the hackneyed characteristics of price, scarcity and exclusivity. We quickly turned to Bill Harlan and asked him to write a special piece on his perspectives on luxury wine. "I really don't like the term luxury, when applied to wine. We try to never use the word at Harlan", Bill said. "That's just what we're looking for", we replied. We really wanted to include a unique viewpoint on the aesthetics and ephemerality of special wines from someone who doesn't just study and write about it from an academic perspective, but who also makes it, markets it, lives it and breathes it. It is therefore with great pride and pleasure that we introduce this special issue of *IJWBR* with an invited piece from our friend, Harlan (2010), whose philosophy is:

> If we can enrich people's lives, and just maybe inspire them to do something beyond what they might otherwise have done, that brings us great satisfaction. Our purpose is to help our patrons to have an even more enjoyable and healthy life.

We believe that Bill Harlan's piece really sets the scene for this special issue of *IJWBR*, bringing as it does a refreshing new perspective on luxury wine.

The five papers that comprise this special issue bring a number of useful theoretical and managerial insights to the marketing of luxury wines. In the lead article, Taplin traces the emergence of iconic luxury brands in Napa. A series of in-depth interviews with some of the region's great names sheds light on how key individuals created a niche market for a finely crafted product and a few brands that, it could be argued, have attained similar status to first growth Bordeauxs in a relatively short period. External validity for this reputation matching has come from the fact that these wines have also attained the highest ratings by some of the world's best-known critics and writers. Next, Hannah Wolf and her colleagues use self-congruency theory to develop a conceptual framework of the perceptions of, and motivators for, consumers that drive luxury wine consumption. Then, they follow two papers based on data gathered at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm that explicitly explore the notions of aesthetics and ontology in luxury wine. In the first of these, Daniel Hall uses a hierarchical clustering procedure to identify market segments in the USA based on consumers' views of aesthetics and ephemerality. In the second, Stiehler, Caruana and Vella use an aesthetic and ontological framework to classify and investigate consumers' attitudes toward luxury wine brands as a product category in two very different markets, namely, a broad group of customers in the USA, and young consumers in South Africa. Despite the obvious differences between the countries and the consumers themselves, they find that the aesthetic-ontology framework holds across both settings and provides a useful way to segment and target customers in both markets. Finally, Paschen and her co-authors focus on Canadian ice-wine, a luxury wine that has received little attention, despite the fact that these products attain prices that match the great Sauternes, particularly in Asian markets. They develop a theoretical model based on the aesthetic-ontology framework to segment the ice-wine market.

We hope that the papers presented in this special issue will stimulate further research on alternative ways to understand luxury offerings in general, and luxury wines in particular. Exploring luxury from perspectives other than the tired notions of scarcity, exclusivity and high price might not only be more challenging and interesting but also has the potential to shed new light on how consumers experience luxury. Bill Harlan's short piece, we believe, provides really refreshing insight into how a man, who has created an iconic wine, deliberates and feels, and should stimulate wine scholars into thinking beyond their traditional boundaries. The five papers presented here show at the very least that there are other ways to conceptualize and research luxury wines. We hope that this special issue will motivate further research into this fascinating area, and that *IJWBR* will be the outlet of choice for this work.

We express our sincere appreciation to *IJWBR* Editor-in-Chief Johan Bruwer for affording us this opportunity, and also for his support and assistance. We also thank our many anonymous reviewers for their contributions and for helping our authors produce what are hopefully not just different papers, but better ones.

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Further reading

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