

In the news

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

New research shows that there might be good reason to splash out on a more expensive bottle of wine — even if your palate isn't refined enough to discern any extra quality. Volunteers were given various wines to sample, two of which were presented twice with wildly different price tags. The volunteers reported greater enjoyment of the wines when they believed them to be expensive, and functional MRI imaging of activity in the volunteers' medial orbitofrontal cortex showed that the pleasure wasn't merely imagined — the additional cost really did make a difference.

Apparently, it's all about expectation. Antonio Rangel, an economist at the California Institute of Technology, says that "Subjects believe that more expensive wines are likely to taste better. These expectations end up influencing their actual experience." (*ScienceNOW*, 14 January 2008.)

According to Martin Yeomans, an experimental psychologist at the University of Sussex, "Expectation is a huge part of wine appreciation ... [it] can be set up by everything that happens before the wine is put in the mouth — the characteristics, the price, the vintage." (*BBCNews*, 14 January 2008.)

So, if a buyer gets taken in by luxurious branding, the chances are they'll be more satisfied. And this applies not only to wines, but to all luxury purchases, such as clothes, cars and fragrances. The results "shed light on the neural effects of marketing," according to Rangel. (*Telegraph.co.uk*, 13 January 2008.)

Connoisseurs beware, however: the effect might only work in the absence of expertise. Oliver Johnson, CEO of the UK-based Wine Society, says that experienced wine drinkers know when they buy an over-priced bottle: "They could get their hopes up ... only to have [them] dashed when it [doesn't] match their expectations." (*BBCNews*, 14 January 2008.)

Craig Nicholson