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Is the “kalimotxo” a heretic cocktail?[1]

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[1] A more complete version of this article has been published in Décision Marketing.

Is the “kalimotxo” a heretic cocktail?

The philosopher Gaston Bachelard said that the alchemical opposite of wine is water (Bachelard, 1947). Later, the semiotician Roland Barthes argued that the mythological opposite of wine is milk (Barthes, 1957). Today, and still from a French point of view, it is certainly possible to postulate that the symbolic opposite of wine is not a generic substance but a brand, and this brand is Coca Cola.

A substantial amount of research has shown that wine is still perceived by French consumers as the result of a craft or artisanal activity, a product that is rooted in the soil—the regional “terroir”—and strongly associated with tradition. Wine is profoundly “experienced” as a national product (Amine and Lacoeuilhe, 2007; Celhay and Trinquecoste, 2007; Saulle, 2008; Simonnet Toussaint, 2004). Conversely, one might assume that Coca Cola is perceived more as a modern industrial product: a brand evoking ideas of globalization and the standardization of tastes and consumption patterns. Furthermore, it is undoubtedly perceived as a symbol of the United States.

To the French, wine is an “authentic product.” That is to say, a product which doesn’t lie about itself. In several maxims, it is associated with the theme of truth. Wine is believed to loosen people’s tongues and make them tell the truth. As Horace said: “wine reveals the hidden secrets of the soul.” Wine is also thought to free the mind and give access to Truth, as Pascal wrote: “Too much and too little wine. Give him none, he cannot find Truth; give him too much, the same.” In contrast, Coca Cola may very well be the quintessential “marketing product,” and, interestingly, several studies have shown that marketing in France is associated with lies and manipulation (Celhay and Trinquecoste, 2007).

Given this background, how can we explain the consumption, first in Spain and now in France, of the kalimotxo, a cocktail made by mixing equal parts of red wine and Coca Cola? Should we consider that this is an anecdotal phenomenon, resulting from a student experiment gone wild? Or should we consider that this new form of wine consumption is a symptom of increasing globalization, threatening the preservation of our regional and national identities? Finally, might we consider that this new form of consumption is a new opportunity for the French wine industry, reflecting a real need of consumers?

In this paper we will consider these questions and try to provide some answers.

Table 1: Is Coca Cola the symbolic opposite of wine?*

Themes associated with wine:	***Themes associated with Coca Cola:***
Regional “terroir”	Globalization
Craft work	Industry
Diversity	Standardization, uniformization
Authenticity, truth	Marketing
France	United States
Tradition	Modernity
Gastronomy	Fast-food
Adult drink	Youth drink
**The associations with wine have been verified by several qualitative studies on the social representations of wine in France (Amine and Lacoeuilhe, 2007; Celhay and Trinquecoste, 2007; Saulle, 2008; Simonnet Toussaint, 2004); however, the associations with Coca Cola are only hypothesized and would need to be confirmed by empirical studies.*	

1. The "Real" History of the Kalimotxo

The history of the kalimotxo is difficult to trace because it is the source of many legends. So if you ever have the chance to participate in a “wild” tasting, you will certainly hear about the man who saw the man who saw the man who made a kalimotxo using a Petrus, a Margaux, or any other wine with the reputation of being priceless.

According to "La verdadera historia del Kalimotxo" published by the Bilbao collective “Funky Project,” the kalimotxo was created thirty years ago during the festivities of Puerto Viejo in the Province of Biscay (Muguruza and Al., 2006). According to the legend, the members of a cuadrilla called “Antzarrak” decided to mix the wine they were selling with Coca Cola when they realized that the wine had not been kept in good conditions and had become undrinkable. Originally called “rioja libre” in reference to “Cuba libre” or “cuba libre del pobre”, the kalimotxo got its final name because of the nicknames of two members of the cuadrilla: “Kalimero” (the cartoon character) and “Motxo”. Since then, the term has become kalimotxo and is widely used throughout Spain.

2. Spelling and Pronunciation

The pronunciation of “kalimotxo” is “kalimotcho,” with the letter “x” being pronounced “tch” in the Basque language. But the spelling and pronunciation vary with the region. Thus, in the French part of the Basque country it appears under the spelling “kalimutxo” and the pronunciation is “kalimoutcho.” This word itself is ironic because it suggests that the cocktail has great organoleptic qualities (“calidad mucho”: much quality). Farther north, a “c” often replaces the “k” and the cocktail is then written as it is pronounced in French; that is to say, “calimucho,” “calimocho” or “qualimucho.” In any case, it is generally advisable to use a

table wine of poor quality, cutting it halfway with cola, and to serve it chilled. Some bars also add a slice of lemon.

3. Magnitude of the Phenomenon

Initially limited to the Basque country, the consumption of kalimotxo then spread to the rest of Spain and France (Leizaola, 2006). It has since become known internationally and thus it cannot be regarded as an anecdotal phenomenon. According to Concha Peñaranda, director of Provir, "it's a phenomenon that affects young people between 15 and 23 years old: they drink it in the streets during 'botellon.' (...) This is not new in Spain... And nothing indicates that the Calimocho is going to go out of fashion" (Penaranda, 2005).

In Spain, the success of the cocktail is so great that it has become a source of concern for the government and is perceived as a real market opportunity for the wine industry. Thus, it is possible to read in the press that: "The Spanish Ministry of Health is preparing a bill to prevent the consumption of alcohol by minors. The authorities include in their line of sight the famous 'botellon,' the nighttime public youth gatherings where you can drink strong spirits, beer, and also 'calimocho,' a mixture of wine and Coca Cola" (Viti-net, 2007). One can also read that the anti-botellon "law" "has been heavily criticized by Spanish wine professionals: one of the flagship beverages of those 'botellon' is the calimocho, a mixture of table wine and Coca-Cola …" (Viti-net, 2004).

In France, this new mode of wine consumption has had a more limited appeal. It is nevertheless interesting to note that the cocktail was mentioned in a report on the competitiveness of the French wine industry and submitted to the National Assembly: "The new technologies developed with the support of INRA should aim at producing new types of wines in order to better respond to new trends in global consumption: this type of product should reach a new kind of consumer (...) looking for a fruitier taste. Wine can even be mixed with other drinks. In Spain, another great wine country, a new drink has appeared, the qualimucho, which has been a big success with young people" (Martin and Voisin, 2006).

The relative success of this cocktail raises several questions: as Coca Cola appears to be a kind of "anti-wine," at least from a French point of view (see above), what is the meaning of this mode of wine consumption? And, since the kalimotxo seems to appeal to a certain class of consumer—the youth market—what consumer need is the kalimotxo responding to? Last, if there is a need for this type of drink, is it possible that the kalimotxo could be a new opportunity for the French wine industry to boost its sales of wines, as has been the case in Spain? Is there a possibility of positioning wine for new occasions of consumption?

4. The Wine of Transgression

According to Asier Perez, the popularity of the kalimotxo in the Basque country has reflected the need to re-build a regional identity (Perez, 2006). He notes that we are what we consume and then points out that the kalimotxo started to gain in popularity in the 70s at a time marked by the construction of the postmodern Basque identity, which was built mainly by rejecting other more established identities, such as the Spanish national identity or the identity of previous Basque generations. Thus, because it combined an American icon (Coca Cola) with a Spanish symbol (wine from that country), the kalimotxo, being neither Spanish nor American, was a drink that young Basque people could claim as a unique element of their own culture. For Perez, this identity was structured around ideas such as rebellion against the system, even nihilism, but also a burning desire to party. This state of mind has been expressed through the slogan "Martxa bay, borroka ere bai!" (Fight yes, but party too!). It was not a coincidence that the cocktail originally attracted mainly young people between 15 and 23 years, many of whom were involved in anti-globalization activities and Basque separatism. These young people drank the kalimotxo while listening to "rock radical vasco," another unlikely mix of Anglo-American culture and Basque folklore.

But how can the success of the cocktail be explained in the rest of Spain, where associations with the Basque separatist movement seem quite irrelevant? Three explanations are possible: First, from a very pragmatic point of view, the kalimotxo provides a cheap drunk. Indeed, a major advantage of this drink is its low cost as it is made with table wine. Also, the kalimotxo is well suited to the palate of young consumers because it is sweeter and less astringent than wine alone. From this perspective, the success of this cocktail recalls the "premixed" or "ready to drink" alcoholic drinks in Europe and reflects an emerging trend in youth's relationship with alcohol. In fact, a recent study conducted by SORGEM for Pernod Ricard identified a new consumer profile: the "player" who maintains a more playful relationship to alcohol and prefers cocktails and sweet liquors to strong spirits that burn the palate. Last, drinking the kalimotxo during "botellon" and other street parties expresses a search for freedom and the desire to break with parental codes. Concha Peñaranda summarizes these three points: "There are several reasons for this phenomenon: most drinkers are students with limited financial resources. Sometimes they are underage and do not even have access to places where they can drink alcohol. Above all, they aspire to a certain freedom; they want to congregate in environments where they can show up at their leisure without being controlled by anyone... The Calimocho, according to consumers, tastes better when you use cheap, fruity

table wine, recently bottled. This is a different type of wine consumption: it is for people who have few resources at a moment in their lives, who like the taste, or who want to be part of the social phenomenon that the drink represents ...” (Penaranda, 2005).

In France, similar explanations seem plausible. In addition to its low price and sweet taste, which, as in Spain, corresponds to the taste of consumers between 15 and 20 years old, the kalimutxo is a "wine of transgression," according to the sociologist Isabelle Saulle (2008), who explains that this too is a reason why it is appreciated by young consumers. Transgression is very characteristic of the relationship young consumers have with alcohol. According to Céline Simonnet Toussaint (2004), young consumers go through two phases in this relationship. The first phase is the time of discovery, transgression, and excess. This consumption—which may become binge drinking—characterizes 14- to 20-year-olds and reflects a quasi-experimental search for physical limits. After this first phase of seeking drunkenness, young consumers between 20 and 25 years move into a second phase and begin to approach their adult pattern of consumption, with the return to or the appearance of wine as the drink of choice. Wine consumption in its traditional form can thus appear as a rite of passage to adulthood. From this perspective, the kalimotxo is the drink of youth, mainly between 15 and 20 years, only to be abandoned thereafter. Wine is the drink of parents and mixing it with Coca Cola (its symbolic opposite) is a very obvious form of transgression. The kalimotxo is part of the first phase described by Céline Simmonet Toussaint, and it is a telling example of the need to reject parental codes and culture to assert one’s own identity.

5. Conclusion

For wine lovers, preparing and drinking a kalimotxo is certainly a form of heresy. However, as we have seen, this cocktail has had a degree of success in Spain and France. It seems to fit the needs of a specific segment of consumers (in terms of price, taste and symbolic meaning).

Is it possible to draw some lessons from this conclusion?

On the domestic market, the French wine industry has to deal with a continuous decline in wine consumption. This decline is described as "generational" because new generations of consumers drink less wine than their elders on the traditional occasions of consumption, such as mealtimes. Faced with this situation, most experts agree that a key challenge will be to position wine for new occasions of consumption. For example, Philippe Aurier suggests that wine professionals should try to convince consumers that wine is an alternative drink, for example, in night clubs (Aurier, 2005).

Insofar as the kalimotxo is a wine drink for such youth-oriented occasions of consumption as student parties, can it be considered as a new outlet for the wine industry? Should we consider creating a brand of kalimotxo distributed as a "ready to drink" like Smirnoff Ice? Or should we consider creating a special brand of wine for preparing kalimotxo, to be sold cheaply and packaged in tetra packs like those used by Don Simon Sangria? More generally, should we, like the producers of cognac, assume that "cutting" the wine with various soft drinks is a way to recruit new consumers?

These questions remain open and deserve further study. But two difficulties may already be mentioned: First, since the kalimotxo is associated with transgression, it is possible that young consumers would not be seduced by a brand that tries to "capture" this new form of consumption. Second, in a legal environment where producers and distributors of wines and spirits are expected to promote responsible drinking, how can one justify the launch of a brand that is geared toward a consumer segment known for binge drinking?

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