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High price makes wine taste better

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RESTAURANTS charging inflated prices for wine could be doing their customers a favour. A study has found that people who pay more for a product do enjoy it more.

The researchers discovered that people given two identical red wines to drink said they got much more pleasure from the one they were told had cost more. Brain scans confirmed that their pleasure centres were activated far more by the higher-priced wine.

The findings could help to explain why rich diners are often willing to pay thousands of pounds for a bottle of fine wine. It seems much of the real pleasure is generated by the high price paid rather than by the quality of the vintage.

Evidence that factors unconnected with the intrinsic qualities of a product can be manipulated to make it more attractive have huge implications for all retailers, not just restaurateurs.

"These results shed light on the neural effects of marketing," said Antonio Rangel, associate professor of economics at the California Institute of Technology, who led the research.

Such studies reflect the growing interest in the new discipline of neuroeconomics, one of the aims of which is to understand the subconscious appeal of luxury products, designer labels and brand names that cost more but offer little extra quality.

Rangel used functional magnetic resonance imaging to observe the brains of 20 people as they were given the same Cabernet Sauvignon and told it cost anything from £2.50 to £45 a bottle. The subjects were asked to describe how pleasurable the wine was to drink, and most described the "higher-priced" wine as much more enjoyable.

The researchers observed changes in a part of the brain known as the medial orbito-frontal cortex, which plays a central role in many types of pleasure. They found that the cortex became more activated by the "expensive" wines than by the cheaper ones. This, said Rangel, showed that the increase in pleasure was real, even though the products were identical.

Hugh Johnson, the doyen of wine writers, said: "The same thing happens if people see a designer label. The psychology is the same - it's not money; it's reputation. It's the prestige."

He believes, however, that wine experts would not be fooled by superficial qualities such as price. He said: "Most people who drink wine regularly know the real retail price and resent the big mark-up in restaurants. I think it spoils it."

Rupert Wollheim, a master of wine who runs ripegrapes.co.uk, an online wine retailer, said that the response described by Rangel was well known in the wine business.

He said: "Price is just one of the elements, but if you served the same wine in better glasses or a grander environment, that would also make people think the very same wine was better."

Some restaurants have made a virtue of the phenomenon. In Gordon Ramsay's London restaurant Pétrus the wine list includes an 1899 Château Latour Premier Grand Cru Classé at £12,500.

Other researchers point out that the subjects in the study were not paying for the wine. The pleasure they

derived from the belief that they were drinking expensive wine might have been diluted if they had been picking up the bill.

Scott Rick, a researcher in neuroeconomics at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, said: "There are people who derive pleasure from spending, and those for whom it is painful.

"In a study of 13,000 people it emerged that 15% were spendthrifts to whom spending gave pleasure and 25% were tight-wads to whom it gave pain, and the remaining 60% fell in between the two."