

*Wine.com:
An Assessment of Navigation, Architecture,
Interface Design, Controlled Vocabulary and Metadata*

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Introduction

Wine.com is a virtual storefront aiming to “promote the wine lifestyle, through innovation” (Wine.com, 2016a). These innovations include a website incorporating Next Generation Catalogue (NGC) features (Yang & Hoffman, 2010; Yang & Hoffman, 2011), design elements and calls-to-action that foster user engagement (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). However, critical departures from web design best practices undermine some aspects of accessibility (Simonson et al., 2012; Taylor & Jourdre, 2009; Yang & Hoffman, 2011; Zhang, 2016a, 2016b). Other innovations include inventory more extensive than typical wine retailers, combined with a distributed shipping network specialized in handling volatile products and responsive to state/interstate shipping regulations (Wine.com, 2016b). The Wine.com website combines design elements, interactive features and discovery/engagement tools that effectively replicate the in-person shopping experience for users (including direct access to experts), and, importantly, redefine shopping experience by enabling users to engage in new ways not possible offline (Puentedure, 2014).

Searching, Browsing

Browsing and basic keyword searching is available and globally accessible, as is an adjacent link to Advanced Search (Taylor & Jourdre, 2009; Yang & Hoffman, 2011; Zhang, 2016a, 2016b). The Advanced Search comprises the Wine Finder tool, wherein users click to select from 11 facet/sub-facet hierarchies, but with no option to input search terms (adding this would be an improvement). Here, hierarchies offer greater depth but less granularity vs global+local navigation (see below) (Taylor & Jourdre, 2009); For instance, vintage year, specific appellation, alcohol volume and bottle size facets are unique to Wine Finder.

Wine Finder is not prominently featured on the site. Providing a globally accessible hot button as a visual marker may improve its prominence (vs the text link). Additionally, the label “Advanced Search” inadequately represents Wine Finder’s functionality.

Navigation

Wine.com initially loads with two pop-up boxes. The first asks users to identify their ship-to state. This communicates both commercial purpose and geographic coverage, and, as a facet/filter selection, functions tailors content to a specific user characteristic. The second pop-up invites users to chat with an expert. While the ship-to pop-up can be closed, the chat pop-up can only be minimized and remains globally accessible.

The website combines global and local navigation, but limited contextual navigation and no site map (supplemental navigation).

Global navigation comprises three top-level categories – Wine/Gifts/Discover – in a menu positioned left-hand top, underneath site logo.

Wine category is organized by topic, comprising eight facets – Varietal/Top Rated/Trending Now/Great Deals/Price/Region/Fine Wine/Special Designation) plus two facets (Wine Clubs/Glassware & Accessories) borrowed from Gifts category. Also organized by topic, Gifts comprises six facets: Type/Price/Occasion/Gift Cards/Trending Now/Corporate Gifting. Category distinctions are not exhaustive; When Wine top-level category is clicked, search results include Gifts, while local navigation for Wine category is displayed.

Local navigation (relative to top-level category) is accessible via pop-up box when a top-level category is scrolled over. With the exception of Discover facet and Wine Clubs subfacet, local navigation repositions to left-hand sidebar once the user makes initial selection and remains accessible providing multiple filtering options.

Organization and display order differs between facet hierarchies within local navigation. Within Wine category, for instance: Varietal subfacets are organized by type (e.g. red wine) and specific type (e.g. Cabernet Sauvignon), and display order is based on relevance/popularity; Region sub-facets are organized by geography, with display order based on relevance/popularity; Price and Top Rated and sub-facets are organized and displayed in ascending order by price and rating+price, respectively; Special Designation sub-facets are organized by type or bottle size, and displayed in no discernable order.

Overall, organization is general->specific, embodying subject-predicate-object entity relationships and down-to-child drilling. Hierarchy structures are narrow and deep (Taylor & Jourdre, 2009; Yang & Hoffman, 2011; Zhang, 2016a, 2016b). Using global+local navigation, users can drill down a maximum of four levels via single facet/sub-facet filtering:

Example 1.

Top-level category	Wine
Facet	Varietal (e.g. red wines)
Subfacet1	Type (e.g. Pinot Noir)
Subfacet2	Item (e.g. Marcassin Marcassin Vineyard Pinot Noir 2010)

Example 2.

Top-level category	Wine
Facet	State/Country (e.g. California)
Subfacet1	Region (e.g. Napa Valley)
Subfacet2	Item (e.g. Screaming Eagle Cabernet Sauvignon 2010)

Depth is then expanded by application of additional filters in local navigation sidebar.

Overall, navigation and category/facet/sub-facet organization for Wine and Gifts effectively represents item attributes, such as type and coverage (Taylor & Jourdre, 2009; Yang & Hoffman, 2011; Zhang, 2016a, 2016b).

Discover category is displayed and structured differently, with slightly less depth. Local navigation pop-up includes photos for three facets. Altogether, eight facets offer different tools for user engagement aimed at motivating purchase, such as What We're Drinking. Local navigation remains accessible for only some facets when selected. One facet link diverts users offsite to Wine.com Blog.

Some facet/sub-facet hierarchies only appear when local navigation pins to sidebar; For instance, Publication, enabling filtering by rating source¹ (e.g. wine ratings from Wine Spectator); and Wine Style, enabling filtering by temporal attribute (DCMI 2016a, 2016b). Wine Clubs facet is excluded from sidebar local navigation, likely because filtering is unnecessary.

Contextual navigation is primarily embedded within “The Winery” descriptions provided in surrogate records, linking to Region (facet/sub-facet1) or Type (sub-facet2). Additional contextual navigation to express more intra- and inter-facet relationships would be an improvement, especially to support the site’s discovery aim (Broughton, 2006; Wine.com, 2016a).

Surrogate records include hyperlinked metadata strings positioning items in type+region context; “Cabernet Sauvignon from the Sonoma region”, for instance. This type of information helps position items relative to the site overall (Taylor & Jourdre, 2009; Yang & Hoffman, 2011; Zhang, 2016a, 2016b).

Providing a site map may be an improvement, though global and local navigation are robust and function as a “fail safe” (Zhang, 2016b).

Vocabulary

Naming of categories, facets and sub-facets generally utilizes industry-specific vocabulary. Publication metadata hints at industry sources for controlled vocabulary and authority control. Item names comprise proprietary product names. Although vocabulary is contextualized, novice users can comprehend it; organization and expressed facet/sub-facet relationships assist with comprehension. In some cases, facet labels, such as Top Rated and Fine Wine, provide clues for interpreting their idiomatic sub-facet labels.

Design, Interface

Wine.com is visually appealing, incorporating images reinforcing wine lifestyle (e.g. depicting people engaging in wine-related activities) and encouraging/motivating purchases. On the homepage, scrolling menus of Critics’ Picks, Top Sellers and Most Popular enable users to ‘browse the shelf’, replicating aspect of in-person shopping experience (Yang & Hoffman, 2011).

User engagement is incorporated throughout the site via calls to action, such as invitations to post reviews, create personalized wine lists, join communities, and follow on social media (Simonson et al., 2012; Taylor & Jourdre, 2009; Yang & Hoffman, 2011; Zhang, 2016a, 2016b).

Because local navigation does not display with surrogate records, position relative to the overall site is difficult to discern. This can be particularly confusing, for instance, as gift items include wine. No hyperlinked path is provided within surrogate records, such as wine->red wine->Cabernet Sauvignon->(item name), though the URL does display a path (Yang & Hoffman, 2011). Providing a hyperlinked path within each page display may be an improvement, especially since users presently must click backspace to return from surrogate record to results list (Taylor & Jourdre, 2009; Yang & Hoffman, 2011; Zhang, 2016a, 2016b).

Facet titles appear in larger font, all caps, in local navigation pop-up. Sub-facets1 appear in smaller, left-aligned text sub-facets2 appear in same size font, but are indented. When local navigation is pinned to sidebar, colour variation (red text) indicates which filters have been applied, standing in as a kind of history path.

Some hyperlinks are differentiated by text colour, though visited hyperlinks are not. Some hyperlinked text is undifferentiated; For instance, type+region text is hyperlinked in results list (but not in surrogate record), and is not differentiated by colour or underline. Consistent use of visual markers such as text colour and/or underlining to differentiate hyperlinked text would be an important improvement throughout the site (Taylor & Jourdre, 2009; Yang & Hoffman, 2011; Zhang, 2016a, 2016b).

The Wine Articles section within the Discover category is where the most contextual navigation is concentrated, and here the embedded hyperlinked text is differentiated by colour and underlining, and this function very well. The Wine Articles link leads to a page that appears to provide a call-to-action for users to go through a set of steps for find a product to meet their needs, but there is no functionality to do so. Instead, each link diverts to a different page within the site, and elements of the steps cannot be combined. Additionally, the section title Wine

¹ However, filtering by rating is limited to 90+ and 94+ within the Top Rated facet.

Articles is confusing, as users may think this section contains articles about wine (e.g. news articles).

Notably, some text headers in the site are underlined but not hyperlinked, which is poor web design practice (Taylor & Jourdrey, 2009; Yang & Hoffman, 2011; Zhang, 2016a, 2016b) as underlining is a commonly understood visual cue for hyperlinks (for an example, see: <http://www.wine.com/v6/red-wines/learnabout.aspx?class=1>).

Metadata and Schema

Within search results, item listings include: cover image, item name, type and region/appellation (all hyperlinked access points); expert rating, customer ratings, shipping information, price, and red or yellow wine glass icon denoting red or white wine, respectively. This metadata is repeated in surrogate record webpages, plus description (About the Wine + The Winery), productID, new arrival alert icon, alcohol content icon, Wine Style; and Find Similar Wine² and Recently Viewed (hyperlinked access points). Much of this metadata serves as value-added information (Taylor & Jourdrey, 2009; Yang & Hoffman, 2011; Zhang, 2016a, 2016b), including pop-ups that explain what icons mean.

Wine.com utilizes Open Graph protocol markup (indicated by .og in the source code), which is based on Resource Description Framework Attributes (RDFa) (Open Graph protocol, 2014; RDFa, 2016; Resource Description Framework, 2016; Taylor & Jourdrey, 2009; WC3, 2014). Within the source code, “meta” and “link” elements are incorporated into header, and identifiable RDF attributes include link rel (rel/rev), type (typeof), content, meta property (e.g. meta name), href and src, among others (Open Graph protocol, 2014; RDFa, 2016; Resource Description Framework, 2016; WC3, 2014).

Development of RDF was shaped by Dublic Core (DC), and some metadata provided by Wine.com are mappable to DC elements (DCMI, 2016b; Open Graph protocol, 2014; RDFa, 2016; Resource Description Framework, 2016; Taylor & Jourdrey, 2014; WC3, 2014):

1. Title (Specific Wine Name)
 2. Creator (Winery)
 3. Subject (Type + Region)
 4. Description (About the Wine, The Winery)
 5. Publisher (Winery)
 6. Date (Vintage)
 7. Type (Varietal, Type)
 8. Format (Bottle Size?)
 9. Identifier (Rating; Wine Style)
 10. Language (English)
 11. Relation (Similar items)
 12. Coverage (Region; Ship-to?)
 13. Rights (Ship-to?)
- Plus:
Temporal (Wine Style)

(DCMI, 2016a, 2016b; Wan, Cheong, Ning, & Lingxiao, 2011).

² The Find Similar Wine list may serve as substitute for local navigation here. Notably, it is organized in reverse order, moving from specific downwards to general.

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