**In Defense of Premium E-Juice**

Premium e-juice gets a lot of flak. Whether it’s because standard-quality liquids are slapped with the ‘premium’ label and priced accordingly – despite deserving neither – or because the raw ingredients of e-juice are extremely cheap but the resulting products are priced as if they’re gold-plated status symbols, many vapers think it’s a rip off.

This is understandable: the fact is that the products often don’t match up to the expectations and it’s questionable whether we should be paying so much even if they did.

But even if you accept these (basically valid) arguments, there is more to the issue than e-juice companies playing us for fools. There may be valid criticisms of *any* product that prices itself based on a perceived premium (as [argued by Steve Ceaton](http://vapenewsmagazine.com/february-2016/smackdown-which-is-better-premium-or-standard-e-liquid) in a previous *Vape News Magazine* article), but we shouldn’t be so quick to write off premium e-juice.

**The Problems with ‘Premium’**

In a nutshell, the big issue with anything premium is that you’re often paying more for the *impression* of quality – usually through packaging and design – rather than *actual* quality. An e-juice brand that spends a little more time on putting together an awesome label design and some pretentious flavor descriptions can basically sucker us into thinking we’re getting some of the best flavors on the market.

We don’t even need to look at e-juice to see this in action: the world of wines is a perfect example. There you have the affordable bottles you pick up when you just want something to drink, but also the *way* more expensive ones you’d pick up for the sort of people who deeply sniff the mouth of the glass and comment on the bouquet before they even take a sip. There are even professional wine tasters, who describe a particular vintage in flowery language and have drawn-out debates about the merits of pairing a Côte de Nuits Grand Cru with a specific cut of steak.

But reality comes crashing down when you realize that [wine tasting is basically junk science](http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/jun/23/wine-tasting-junk-science-analysis). Despite the pretentiousness, it seems that the perception of ‘premium’ quality affects the best of us. [One example experiment](http://www.newyorker.com/tech/frontal-cortex/does-all-wine-taste-the-same) involved serving wine experts the same mid-range wine out of two different bottles – one for a high-end wine and one for a cheap-as-hell table wine. The results show that the experts were fooled: they described the wine as “woody,” “balanced” and “complex” when it was served from the expensive bottle and “weak” and “flat” when served from the cheap bottle.

What does this mean for e-juice? It suggests that even the reviewers among us would probably class a juice as tasting better if it was dripped from a [Black Note](http://www.blacknote.com) bottle in comparison to an unlabelled plastic one.

**The DIY Problem**

Another key issue for premium juice brands is something all DIY e-juice mixers already know: PG, VG, nicotine and food flavorings are *cheap*. When you can put together a bottle of e-juice for so little, why should premium juice companies charge over 50 cents per ml or even up to $1 per ml? It seems like a monumental rip-off. Surely it’s better to just mix your own e-juice or – at very least – stick with the budget companies on the basis of the mark-up alone?

**Ingredients Are Cheap; Expertise Isn’t – An Analogy**

The situation for the premium juice mixers isn’t looking too good. But there is a key point that’s missed in the DIY argument: your raw ingredients may come cheap, but the ability to mix them into a delicious e-juice is a different matter. The expertise to create awesome e-juice flavors isn’t something that you can easily put a price on, and it’s only gained through experience, practice and venturing up a ton of blind alleys.

The point can be illustrated pretty well with a simple analogy. The DIY argument is basically like going into a high-end restaurant, ordering a beautifully-prepared beef wellington and then complaining when you get the bill, “well, the meat won’t be *that* expensive when you buy it in large amounts, the raw ingredients for the pastry cost almost nothing, and the pâté isn’t going too expensive either: you’re ripping me off!”

The waiter or the chef would rightfully take issue with your claim. Firstly, you’re free to buy the ingredients, make the pastry yourself and put the whole dish together at home. Secondly, if you were to do that, the result would *not* be even close to as high-quality as the meal you just ate: even if it came out the way it’s supposed to, the flavors wouldn’t be as robust and well-balanced, and the meat wouldn’t be cooked to such tender perfection. It would cost you a lot less, yes, but the result would be much less enjoyable.

The fact is that when you go into a nice restaurant and order a dish, you’re not *only* paying for the ingredients. You’re paying for the meal to be made *for* you, and you’re paying for it to be made by somebody who’s spent years perfecting his or her cooking ability. You’re paying for the *expertise* as well as the ingredients. And that’s before we even touch on the issue of the waiter’s wage, the upkeep of the restaurant and the whole gamut of other expenses associated with running a restaurant.

It’s easy to see how this applies to e-juice. The ingredients of e-juice may be cheap, but the mixer has likely spent years learning to put together an e-juice that’s mouth-wateringly delicious when it comes time to vape it. The flavor you’re buying has likely been through countless revisions, with different components being tweaked, the result being tested, then re-tweaked, re-tested and so on until the juice is ready to be put on sale. Likewise, the bottles, equipment, premises and other production costs have to be taken into account in exactly the same way.

There’s a great [breakdown of the economics of making e-juice by a reddit user](https://www.reddit.com/r/electronic_cigarette/comments/3fks4s/lets_talk_about_ejuice_and_how_much_it_costs_to/), if you’re interested in the specifics, but the core point is easy to understand even without the detail: pretending the cost of PG, VG, nicotine and flavorings means that your e-juice should be cheap ignores most of what goes into making a great flavor.

The bottom line is: if you’re willing to go through the steep learning curve of DIY mixing, enduring the failures and screwing up the measurements countless times before you earn the expertise of a seasoned mixer, then DIY is a much cheaper way to vape. The problem is that many vapers – *most* of us, really – aren’t eager to invest that much time.

**To Go Premium or Not To Go Premium**

But the first point – that we may be fooled into thinking expensive-*looking* e-juice tastes better when it really doesn’t – still needs to be addressed. The food analogy helps here too. Perhaps wine tasting really is nonsense, but most of us can confidently state, for example, that we’d be able to tell a premium burger from something you’d pick up at McDonald’s. *Anyone* would prefer an authentic, home-cooked lasagna to a loveless, pre-prepared, microwave-from-frozen one.

For e-juice, it may be true that a $20 liquid isn’t easy to differentiate from a $30 one when it comes to quality, but any vaper can tell the difference between a budget mix and a premium one. On one hand you have single-note flavors that are just about good enough to keep you away from cigarettes, and on the other you have multi-tonal, delicately-crafted flavor sensations that are instant all-day vapes. Not *every* juice claiming to be ‘premium’ deserves the title, admittedly, but the popular ones got where they are for a reason.

In short, if you just want something that just gets the job done, budget e-juice (or DIY mixing) is a great way to vape and maximize your savings. But if you want something truly delicious – unless you’re good enough to make it for yourself – ‘premium’ juice really is worth the extra cash.