

THE CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATING SUSTAINABLE WINE- GROWING INTO WINE TOURISM - EXAMPLES FROM SLOVENIA AND ABROAD

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Abstract In an increasingly competitive tourist market, wine and enogastronomy are becoming key elements in the development of tourist products in regions that cultivate grapevines, in Slovenia and internationally. It has been claimed that no kind of tourism can develop in regions without wine; however, from today's perspective, this claim seems an exaggeration. Nevertheless, enogastronomy is an integral part of many contemporary tourist products. As such, it combines tradition, history and heritage and also improves the recognisability of a given destination on which modern wine tourism products rest. On a global scale, wine tourism is growing, and the forecast for the future is likewise promising. The essence of a wine tourism product is to connect food and wine, i.e. enogastronomic or culinary experiences, and to follow new trends. The trend is to consolidate this segment of tourism services, in particular through leisure activities and relaxation at the destination of choice. Food and wine thus become part of the cultural experience of the visited destination and equal the experience of visiting a museum or a concert or may be an equal component of such a package.

Keywords:

cultural experience,
wine tourism,
enogastronomy,
tourist destination,
Slovenia

1 Introduction

On a global scale, wine tourism is a fast-developing tourist product that grew out of the expectations and activities of the wine industry in the New World (USA, Australia and New Zealand). One reason for encouraging this type of tourism was that global consumption of wine had decreased, and an effort was made to increase its consumption through tourism. In Europe, around 600,000 trips take place annually that are primarily tied to wine tourism as a tourist product; indirectly, this tourist segment accounts for around 20 million tours. Tourist experts are optimistic about the future of wine tourism and predict that the demand will grow between 7 and 12 percent per year (UNWTO, 2012).

As part of the tourist package, wine and food may be used to outline the image of a particular destination and represent part of its additional and diversified offering. This can be a powerful element in addressing new tourist markets as well as an opportunity for innovative and high-quality experiences within the existing products. Wine and food can also mitigate the problem of seasonality; they have the potential to extend the season of a tourist destination, encourage engagement by the local community in the processes of creating such tourist products, and enable visitors to discover destinations from new perspectives and with new features that were previously unknown.

The product of wine tourism should thus be visible and understood as a business opportunity with considerable development potential for a tourist destination. Some regions can use it to overcome economic crises; by marketing regional products, it is possible to include small producers and family businesses, which thereby generate new jobs and foster prosperity by giving added value to local products. This is a good reason for family hotels, restaurants, tourist farms, vineyard cottages etc. to include in their portfolio local and home-made products as these are both diverse and of high quality.

The wine tourism product range includes not only conventional wine-growing products but increasingly the products of sustainable wine-growing and related enogastronomic services. This trend is particularly evident in countries such as Italy, France and Spain, where sustainable wine-growing is well developed. In Slovenia, sustainable wine-growing is developing with individual wine-growers in the Styria

(Štajerska) and Primorska regions. Wine-growers in the Brda in Goriška region have made the most progress in this segment of tourist products and it thus comes as no surprise that Brda became the European Destination of Excellence in 2015. The region has become recognizable precisely through wine tourism.

2 What is wine tourism as a product?

This field has been the subject of many studies since the turn of the century, when this product commenced appearing more frequently in the plans and operations of individual destinations. The majority of some ten cited authors have defined wine tourism as “visitation to vineyards, wineries, wine festivals and wine shows for which wine tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of a grapevine region are the prime motivating factors for visitors” (Hall et al., 2000, 3). Getz and Brown (2006) define the key success factors of a given wine-tourist region (Figure 1), considering wine tourism simultaneously as one form of consumer behaviour, the strategy that tourist destinations use to create local development and market local wines, but also as a marketing opportunity for wineries that can sell their products directly to the buyer.

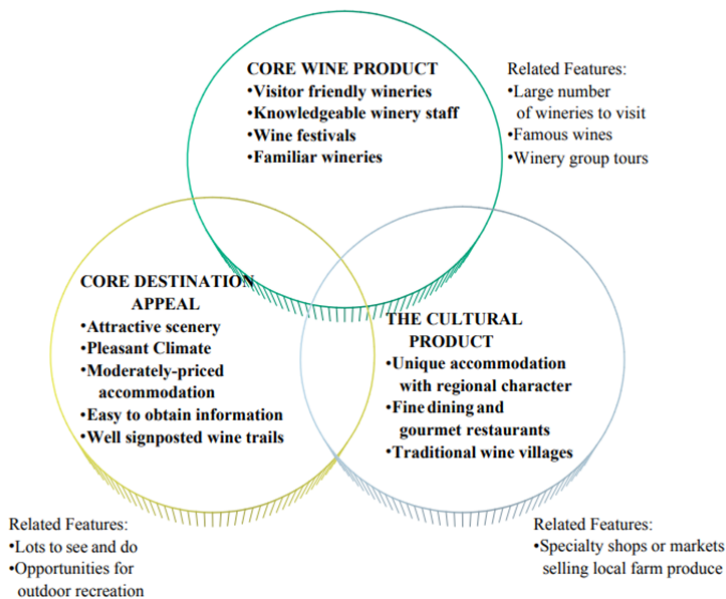


Figure 1: Critical factors of success according to Getz and Brown.

Source: Getz and Brown (2006)

The development of wine tourism may be connected with the planning and development of “wine trails”. The first wine trails appeared in 1934 in Burgundy, France; later, other European countries followed the same model. The key objective was to help the wine-makers market their products. When wine trails appeared in California and South Africa, they were originally planned as integral itineraries, which, in addition to the experiences and flavours, i.e. wine and gastronomy, offered the experience of a cultural landscape, its natural and cultural heritage, the life of the local population etc., i.e. as a product of wine tourism. Wine tourism as a concept represented a link between wine-making, first and foremost the wineries, and other tourist offerings of the destination, i.e. the tourist industry of the destination (Manila, M., 2010). In Europe, this concept developed slowly and expanded over the last few decades of the 20th century.

However, this concept is not new in Slovenia. After independence in 1991, the project of Tourist Wine Trails (Vinske turistične ceste - VTC) was initiated by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food of the Republic of Slovenia; however, not all VTC locations in Slovenia reached their full potential. The concept was based on a special kind of agricultural product marketing, according to which farms offer their products and services under the label of “wine trails”. Of course, in developing the package, the concept presupposed partnership between stakeholders from the public, private and non-governmental sectors, which turned out to be the most difficult step in organizing VTCs in Slovenia. Cooperation between wine-makers, i.e. wineries, tourist experts and tourist stakeholders, remains vital for the development of wine tourism as a quality tourist product.

In some environments, wine tourism is offered in combination with eco-, cultural, adrenaline and other types of sustainable tourism, so that visitors typically do not distinguish between individual types of tourism (Charters, 2002).

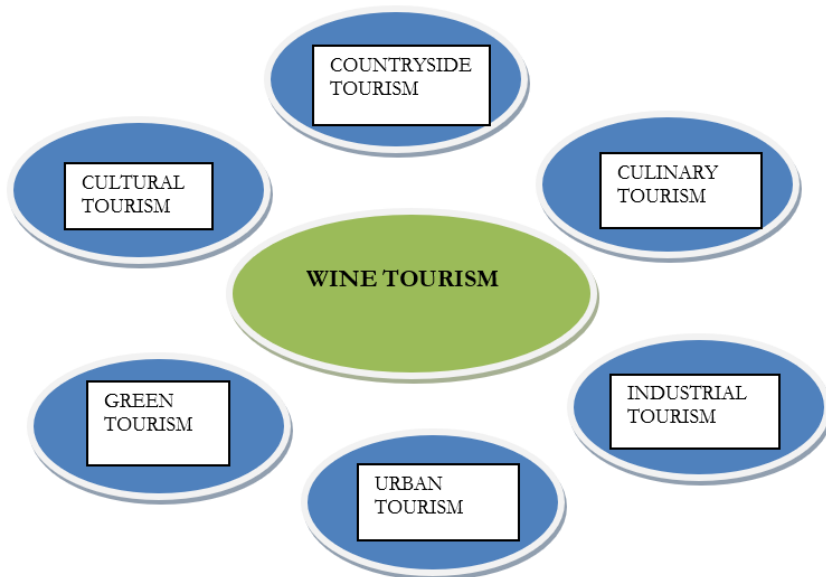


Figure 2: Wine tourism - at the crossroads of other types of sustainable tourism.

Source: Charters 2002

It is necessary to introduce new business activities that are local and compliant with the environment, utilizing the local natural and demographic potential. Using this approach, the responsibility and thus motivation for success is transferred to the actual owner (farmer), who is able generate a higher income with additional engagement. Opportunities no doubt exist, including the segment of sustainable, integrated or organic crop production, depending on the situation in the market and above all, on awareness of these opportunities among the stakeholders at a particular destination (Koščak, 2014).

Wine tourism thus comprises products that may be ranked into several categories. The development of these products presupposes close cooperation between protagonists of two key sectors - tourism and wine culture - both of which are part of a national strategy and operate in the context of local partnership. It should be assumed that wine tourism is based on three key dimensions: the regional, the local heritage and the wines offered. The following table includes the typology of wine products:

Table 1: The typology and elements of the wine tourism product

Wine tourism products	What these products constitute
Wine trail	Marked itineraries in wine-growing regions for the discovery of the vineyards, wine, cellars etc.
Vineyard hiking	Marked itineraries enabling discovery of the vineyards in a ride.
Organized tours and stays in the vineyards	Packages including accommodation, catering and transport, with a variable duration, in which they are proposed activities involving the discovery of the vineyards in one or more components (oenological, gastronomical, cultural, technical, formal dining).
Wine cellar visits	Visiting the cellars; wine producers are known for their wine cellars.
Museums of wine	Places of culture with the goal of presenting the world of wine and transmitting a "savoir-faire" and ancestral traditions.
Holidays and festivals	Events aimed at keeping local traditions, encouraging the promotion of wine and animating the territory; E.g. the local wine festival "Cviček Week".
Professional salons, local fairs, wine sales promotion	Strictly commercial activities to promote wine sales.

Source: Mănilă 2010

3 Wine tourism in Europe ... and in Slovenia

On the other hand, the European Charter on Oenotourism (2006, p.2) defines wine tourism as “ the development of all tourist and “spare time” activities, dedicated to the discovery and to the cultural and wine knowledge pleasure of the vine, the wine and its soil”. Wine tourism is a very complex concept covering several research fields, stakeholders’ interests, territorial strategies and business perspectives. Firms and the territories where they are located are interlaced realities. The evolution of territories is influenced by the strategies adopted by firms, as well as regional characteristics and dynamics. The interconnection between firms and territories is thus a key issue for territorial sustainable development. This issue is particularly important for the tourism industry as regional attractiveness depends not only on a territory’s endogenous resources and on the landscape but also on the interaction of spatial enterprises.

Wine tourism products are increasing in Europe, in particular with the development of wine trails/roads. It is interesting that, although 70 per cent of global wine production takes place in Europe, wine tourism products are best developed in California, South Africa, Argentina, Australia and New Zealand. In these countries, such products are part of the tourist presentation of entire wine-making regions, including the necessary tourist logistics and infrastructure. In Italy, wine tourism has been an integral part of the national tourist programme since 1987 (“citta del vino”), in Spain since 1994 (ACEVIN) and in France since 1997 (RAVIVIN), after national and international exchange networks were established between cities and local producers with the aim of integrating and competing with countries where this product was more developed (Lingon-Darmaillac, 2008). It should be noted that the proportion of sustainable wine-growing is not always indicated by these statistics. Some data from Austria suggest that the proportion of organic vineyards in Austria has exceeded 6 per cent (Harm, 2014).

An analysis of the autonomous community of Aragon in Spain (based on a sample of 43 wine-makers in the community) demonstrates that approximately 33 per cent of all producers are family businesses with fewer than 10 employees. Exports generates 50 per cent of their income. However, almost 73 per cent of all wine-makers offer one type of wine tourism product, whereby they averaged 5,573 visitors per year, most of them over the summer. The majority are open throughout the year, and have longer working hours in the summer. They mostly do not charge an entry fee; if they do, the fee is around 6€. Profit is generated by direct sales, which on average represents 15 to 20 per cent of the total market share. Regarding the particular example, wine tourism has made the area more recognizable and has improved the image of the wine-makers, the tourist image of the area, the tourist destination trademark etc. (Iglesias, Navarro, 2014).

The general global trend in the consumption segment (agriculture, cuisine and the energy sector as well as tourism) is to look for products that comply with the principles of respect for the environment, sustainability and environmental protection. This also applies to the narrow sector of wine-growing or wine-making. The experience of pioneering countries in the field shows that sustainability and integrated production are becoming increasingly important factors for the industry. Their experience also shows that the proportion of sustainable products in the portfolio of tourist products will have to expand in the future. However, a few

conscientious individuals are not enough; instead, a well-planned and organized approach is required that will allow the story of sustainability or sustainable production to become an integral part of the comprehensive story of a given wine and tourist destination. Sustainability is an opportunity for wine tourism; however, its economic feasibility must also be considered. If these trends turn out to be economically viable, wine-growers will no longer be able to ignore it.

Vineyards and wine are components of a cultural heritage, which is connected to history and has been an essential element for the economic, social and cultural development of different wine regions. Wine Culture has grown as part of the life, culture and diet of these regions since time immemorial. As a cultural symbol the importance of wine has changed over time, moving from an imperative source of nutrition to a cultural complement to food and conviviality and compatible with a healthy lifestyle. Promoting Wine Culture adds authenticity to its origins, and creates a product strongly linked to gastronomy, the pleasures of taste as well as the underlying heritage. According to the Deloitte European Enotourism Handbook Vintur Project (2005, p.4) “Without the wine culture, wine tourism does not exist. The wine culture is the thematic axis of this product and the tourist must be able to perceive that during all the steps of their wine tourism trip and in any component of the Wine tourism value chain. One should be able to “breathe” the winemaking culture. The enological-cultural value determines the weight of the wine element as an axis or a vertebra of the tourist experience”.

In Portugal, the cultural appreciation of wine reflects the diversity of the 14 wine regions, the *savoir-vivre* and culinary habits. The art of viticulture and winemaking has also developed in improving the association of wine with gastronomy, history, tradition, origin, local quality products and dignified social settings. One important issue is the geographical characterization – the role of the land, the physical climatic environment as well as the social nature of the various winegrowing regions. This therefore plays a distinctive role in the historical, natural and winemaking heritage as well focusing on their singular identities. The wine tourism holistic landscape is important, as it is an authentic cultural element of great value which extends to all of the territory and has a sufficient potential to shelter a significant quantity of tourist services, activities and singular experiences (Salvado, 2016).

The Vulkanland tourist destination in the south of Austrian Styria is a telling example. After the whole area identified with the Vulkanland trademark, the initiative attracted individual wineries, which formed a consortium or started developing new types of wines on their own, using names such as Eruption, Caldera etc., which merged with the overall image and orientation of the destination. Today, Vulkanland is a recognizable tourist destination in Austria, and local wines and cuisine represent two of its most important developmental goals (more details are available here: <http://www.kloecherweine.at/cms/weinbaumuseum/>). Vulkanland is interesting for a further reason, its key orientation in enogastronomy is to emphasize local specialities and specific features. The local winery thus saw an opportunity in the old self-rooted grapevine variety “jurka” and created a prestigious sparkling wine that became extremely successful with visitors and wine tasters due to its organic production methods.

This necessarily raises the question of the potential of our self-rooted grapevine, the “šmarnica” from Slovenia and the Dolenjska region, which has been seen as a poisonous and harmful wine because of its methanol content, which apparently causes madness, blindness, irrational behaviour and aggressiveness (Malnič, 1990). Its real name is *Noah* and originates from Hebrew; the grape was named “šmarnica” because it grows ripe around the Christian feast day the Nativity of Mary (“Mali šmaren”). The grapevine belongs to the species of self-rooted grapevines that are a cross between two or more varieties of vine. They are typically more resistant than cultivated grapevines, do not require propagation and are less labour intensive. In the past, “šmarnica” typically grew in condensed vineyards with vines trained to individual stakes or wire and not trained over a trellis, as was typical of other self-rooted grapevines (Malnič, 1990).

The harmful “šmarnica” stereotype developed gradually to become widespread in Slovene society. It was only later, after sample analysis showed that wine made from the “šmarnica” grape contained only small quantities of methanol, but that “šmarnica”, in fact, was dangerous for other reasons. Its main problem was not the methanol but the competition that this wine represented for quality varieties of wine that experienced a major crisis in the market after the First World War. (Slabe, 2007).

Our purpose is not to advocate the quality of wine from this grapevine from Dolenjska but to emphasize that this and other self-rooted grapevines are an opportunity to create tourist products that are based on a “story”. The story is the guiding principle in successful tourist products in Slovenia and abroad. The Austrians created a successful story out of the Uhdler wine blend that comprises several self-growing varieties of grape. It is interesting that the European Parliament has granted Austria the exclusive right to make and sell wine from self-growing grapevine varieties until 2030.

Similar to the self-growing grapevines, a few endemic grapevines from Dolenjska likewise have specific development potential. The endemic “lipno” grapevine is a particularly important variety; however, it has almost disappeared from the Dolenjska vineyards. The largest vineyard that features this variety is owned by the well-known wine-maker Marjan Jelenič in Jablance nad Kostanjevico na Krki (Štepec 2013: 86-87). A good example of the revival of endemic varieties of grapevine that can serve as a role model comes from the region of Vipavska dolina. This region has managed to create a good wine story from the reintroduction of endemic varieties such as “zelen”, “pinela”, “klarnica”, “vitovska grganja” and “pikolit”.

Regarding the integration of sustainable wine-growing in the tourist sector, another successful story is that of The Matjaž Farm in Paha and The Story of Cviček (more information is available at: <http://www.matjazeva-domacija.si/klasicen-program.html>), which is an upgrade of what “cviček” means in Dolenjska as the odd man out among the wines. In a nutshell, the story is not just about wine and its associated cultural landscape, but about so much more. The Story of Cviček first and foremost presents the local architecture of a typical Dolenjska poor peasant farmer (today it is part of the prestigious international Houses of Tradition tourist network), and it takes the visitor into the past by offering a visit to the old house and its cellar, culminating in the barn where the visitor is introduced to the processes taking place in the vineyard throughout the year. With the help of multimedia, the visitor learns what “cviček” means as a wine and how it is made. Of course, an integral part of the story is the pleasant enogastronomic experience of tasting local and home-made food and various sorts of “cviček”; the highlight of the visit is the tasting of the winning “King of Cviček”, the top award-winning wine from the annual “Cviček Week” festival, which rounds off this tourist product from the region of Otočec.



Figure 6: The “Matjaževa domačija” country house.

Source: author, 2018

4 Vineyard retreats in Dolenjska

Slovenia is the country with the largest number of vineyards and wine cellars per capita. Slovenia is also a country where heritage and tradition are cherished, which is also manifested through the "Vineyards Retreats" touristic project, developed some decade ago in SE of Slovenia in the region of Dolenjska. Vineyard retreats are smaller tourist facilities located in the midst of vineyards offering magnificent panoramic views. A wine cellar with stored wines lies under a modern furnished apartment.

Vineyard retreats were launched on the domestic and foreign touristic markets in 2010. Guests explore Slovenia's natural and cultural heritage, traditions as well as everyday life during their stay. Mostly they complement the amazing nature, beautiful cultivated landscapes, warm hospitality and cleanliness. Especially they enjoy cuisine as well as wines, some of which they usually take home with them.

On worldwide touristic platforms, vineyard retreats have great feedback and hold rates higher than 9 (out of 10). Although we have witnessed a disturbing trend of abandoned vineyards in recent years, it is the product "Tourism in vineyard retreats" which brings added value and helps to restore the exceptional cultural landscape by halting the cutting down of vineyards.

5 Sustainability & niche tourism matters more and more

The general global trend in the consumption segment (agriculture, cuisine and the energy sector as well as tourism) is to look for products that comply with the principles of respect for the environment, sustainability and environmental protection. This also applies to the narrow sector of wine-growing or wine-making. The experience of pioneering countries in this field shows that sustainability and integrated production are becoming increasingly important factors for the industry. Their experience also shows that the proportion of sustainable products in the portfolio of tourist products will require to expand in the future. However, a few conscientious individuals are not sufficient; instead, a well-planned and organised approach is required that will allow the concept of sustainability or sustainable production to become an integral part of the comprehensive story of a given wine and tourist destination. Sustainability is an opportunity for wine tourism; however, its economic feasibility must also be considered. If these trends turn out to be economically viable, wine-growers will no longer be able to ignore it. Vineyards and wine are components of a cultural heritage, which is connected to history and has been an essential element for the economic, social and cultural development of different wine regions. Wine culture has grown as part of the life, culture and diet of these regions since time immemorial. As a cultural symbol the importance of wine has changed over time, moving from an imperative source of nutrition to a cultural complement to food and conviviality and compatible with a healthy lifestyle. Promoting Wine Culture adds authenticity to its origins, and creates a product strongly linked to gastronomy, the pleasures of taste as well as the underlying heritage (Koščak, O'Rourke, 2020).

In terms of volume, we understand that at least in Slovenia, wine tourism is a niche product. Niche tourism refers to how a specific tourism product may be tailored to meet the needs of a particular audience/market segment. Locations with specific niche products are able to establish and position themselves, as niche tourism

destinations. Niche tourism, through image creation, helps destinations to differentiate their tourism products and compete in an increasingly competitive and cluttered tourism environment. Through the use of the niche tourism life cycle it is clear that niche products will have different impacts, marketing challenges and contributions to destination development as they progress through it. This is also extremely important and an opportunity in the post COVID-19 environment, where safety will matter a lot to many visitors, which will want to select destination and products showing that there is a minimum risk to bigger volume of visitors.

Both natural and cultural structures are important, but attractiveness is also related to distance to markets (real and perceived). Getz (2000) drew the process and contents of wine destination development, involving attractions, services, hospitality, training, infrastructure, organisational development and a marketing plan, and we will add competitive value co-creation strategies. Enotourism should therefore be seen as an ecosystem, combining all different stakeholders' interests, being permeable to the external environment, influencing and being influenced, secured by mutual benefits of management networks. This complex ecosystem is sustained on three pillars, the Wine Culture, Territory/ Landscape and Tourism, combining all different stakeholders' interests inside this landscape.

When discussing the nexus between wine tourism and destination development, wine is seen to be a significant niche tourism product that acts as a key destination pull factor as it is inextricably linked to the destination and its image (Kivela and Crotts, 2006; Novelli, 2005). Wine tourism has surfaced as a growing area of special interest tourism significant to the regional tourism product and a key factor in the business strategy and development of the wineries and the supply side at the destination (Yuan *et al.*, 2005; Charters in Carlsen, 2006). Kivela and Crotts (2006) discuss how food and wine can provide a viable alternative to destinations that cannot benefit from other more traditional forms of tourism, or substantial natural or cultural resources. It offers rural destinations the opportunity to attract visitors who will come and spend time and financial resources liberally within their region. There exists a symbiotic relationship between wine and a tourism destination as the destination provides the wineries, and the natural and cultural backdrop that make it an ideal product for tourist consumption (Kivela and Crotts, 2006).

6 Tourism in vineyard cottages in Slovenia

Vineyard cottage tourism covering the Slovenian SE regions of Dolenjska, Bela krajina and Kozjansko - Obsotelje and brings together 40 owners of vineyard cottages, who have outsourced their accommodation capacities for tourist purposes. In 2017, the Slovenian Tourist Board committed itself to be making Slovenia: “A green boutique global destination for high-end visitors seeking diverse and active experiences, peace, and personal benefits. A destination of five-star experiences.” (Slovenian Tourism Strategy 2017 – 2021, 2017). The green, boutique and sustainable tourism, certainly belongs to the product Vineyard cottage tourism. The product of vineyard cottages is looking forward to the cultural and natural heritage of our country. Owners of vineyard cottages were doing their best to transform the abandoned cottages into an environmentally friendly tourism accommodation embraced in innovative tourist product. Vineyard retreat tourism was in 2011 awarded as second most innovative tourist product in Slovenia by the Slovenian Tourist Board.

In 2012 Destination Management Organisation (VisitDolenjska, 2012) in Dolenjska, selected 5 key tourism products that the destination intends to develop in the future on domestic and foreign markets: Natural and Cultural Heritage, Active Holidays, Health and Relaxation, Food and Wine, Tourism in the Vineyard Cottages - as new, but some of the most promising tourist products. Statistics in recent years shows that the Vineyard Cottage Tourism offer have seen annual growth in volume and increase of visits from different tourism markets. The number of overnight stays is as much as 60% higher in 2019 than it was in 2016, indicating that vineyard cottage tourism is on the rise and that tourists are looking for peace, nature and sustainable tourism.

Table CS2: Vineyard tourism statistics (2016-2020)

Year	Guests	Nights	Overnights
2016	802	978	3330
2017	750	974	3706
2018	840	1349	5333
2019	995	1426	5475
2020	1637	1877	5810

Source: DMO, 2021

From the last evidence, it is clear that also this product and offer suffers from the effects of COVID 19 pandemic, in the late spring of 2020 there were around 40% less visitors compared with previous seasons. However, after the all-year statistics were made, it is also obvious that guests from the foreign markets were in minority and the domestic market was the most important in the 2020 tourist season. Figures are thanks to the vouchers, introduced by Slovenian government, somehow “rescuing” the season. It is very likely, that the situation will be similar in 2021. However, it could be concluded that those visitors who seek peace and tranquility will be most likely to continue to select such niche products and local destinations in the future.

7 What is the tourism product about?

Typical for Slovenia are small vineyards, which represent unique cultivated landscapes in Europe and Slovenia's winegrowers can even be considered hobby gardeners in a way. Nevertheless, each winegrower produces his own wine, usually even several sorts of wines. The winegrowers are gathering in Winegrowers Associations which offer additional education, tastings, ratings, technical visits (local or European wide), as well as different events to their members.

Each vineyard has an own vineyard retreat, a building, where wines are processed and stored in cellars, while a nicely decorated apartment lies above. Unfortunately, most of those apartments are only used to a very small extent, perhaps only few times each year. Every retreat also has a balcony or terrace with possibility to barbecue and they are usually located in stunning panoramic locations.

There are more than 30,000 vineyard retreats in Slovenia and a few years ago, the idea was born that these more or less forgotten assets should be revived and enriched with benefit. For this reason, the “Tourism in Vineyard Retreats” consortium was established in Dolenjska region, where owners of retreats, interested in renting them out as tourism infrastructure, are connected together. The travel agency Kompas Novo mesto was authorised to market the product for which a specially developed marketing model in form of so-called "dispersed hotel" was created. The agency is responsible for the complete marketing process and financial transactions, including the settlement of the tourist tax, while the retreat owners are responsible for keeping their unit well maintained.

Each guest is welcomed with homemade products (salami, bacon, bread etc.) and an invitation to visit the cellar. During their stay, the guests also have access to this cellar, so they can consume the wine stored there. They are also informed about options for 7-day tourist programmes in the nearby region and 7-day tourist programmes around Slovenia, all prepared by Kompas Novo mesto. Many of the guests also visit neighbouring Croatia and Italy during their stay. The majority of the guests (90%) are foreign, and statistics shows that each year the numbers of visitors have increased by 20-40%.

Retreat owners are closely connected with local producers; they also offer advice on natural and cultural sights of the area as well as recommending events to visit. Many of the local producers offer special discounts for vineyard retreat-guests, giving the retreats an additional role as promoters of the whole tourist region.

Guests are especially fond of guesthouses, restaurants and farm tourisms where they can taste the local cuisine. More and more retreats are upgrading their offer with saunas as well as hot- and massage tubs, which helps to extend the season, practically throughout the whole year. Adding to the touristic infrastructure of the area are many walking and cycling paths as well as the possibilities for horseback riding and rowing. The number of providers is growing every year, which is also a significant encouragement for the Association members.

8 Positive effects of such products

Tourism in vineyard retreats have exceptionally positive effects:

- preserving and restoration of traditional housing heritage, without interventions in existing space
- new, unique accommodation facilities,
- the wine is marketed together with the facility,
- vineyards are preserved despite the recent trends of cutting down vine trees in the region.

Although the older generations considered vine growing and wine processing as hobby, entertainment and way of life, the younger generations are unfortunately losing interest in vine growing. This often leads to cutting down vineyards after the older generation can no longer take care of them. It is a fact that most of the vineyards are in very steep areas where it is not possible to grow any other crops, and often the abandoned vineyards are overgrown by bushes and thorns. In a few decades, this can cause enormous damage to the appearance of the cultural landscape, which local inhabitants are so proud of. It is important to say that tourist arrivals enhance the beauty and tidiness of the vineyards and even more importantly, the exceptional landscapes of Slovenia's countryside are preserved.

9 Marketing

Some retreats are occupied already for 3-4 months each year, which adds to their value in form of rental fees, as well as additional income of consumed wines and local products. Furthermore, other local suppliers, such as those operating natural and cultural heritage sites, benefit from retreat guests. Typically, the guests are highly aware of nature and are escaping from mass tourism, noise and polluted air. They enjoy the unspoiled nature, the sound of bird songs in the morning, sunsets and starlit sky in the evening. Some providers have also prepared special culinary packages for cuisine lovers: while staying in the vineyard retreat each night the guests are taken to a different guesthouse, restaurant or farm tourism, where they can taste the diverse offer of Slovenia's cuisine.

To enhance market visibility, the Winegrowers Association hosts different bloggers and reporters, while also being active on social media (Facebook, Instagram), although they believe that a satisfied guest is by far the best promotion for them. They are very proud of the ratings higher than 9 on world-known platforms, such as Booking.com, which shows outstanding satisfaction of their visitors and guests. Guests complement the beautiful nature, warm hospitality and cleanliness.

Usually the host will invite the guests to dinner, where they are briefed about local offers, cuisine, recommended interesting tourist locations in the vicinity and traditional events. Each guest is offered postcards with vineyard retreat images, which the hosts then on behalf of guests will then take to the post office. This provides the opportunity for some additional low-budget promotion. As the project

started with Dolenjska and Bela krajina sub-region, then continued in Obsotelje and Kozjansko, and added Lendavske gorice in 2019, it is now covering already one-third of Slovenia.

10 Conclusion

It is unrealistic to expect Dolenjska to compete in wine tourism with other regions and countries as a wine-growing area given its quality, production volume, natural and cultural potential, reputation in the tourist market and the current marketing input in the field of tourism. However, it is necessary to point out the “Tourism in Vineyard Cottages” tourist package, which was a major step forward and proved that systematic work and cooperation could help Dolenjska become more recognizable in this segment of its tourist industry.

Nevertheless, additional research into tourist markets, more coordinated activities and approaches are required for the successful future development of wine tourism in Dolenjska. It would be important to integrate and unite all stakeholders in the tourist industry, private, public as well as the enthusiasts in order for them to work together in a coordinated manner. This includes cooperation of wineries, hotels, tour operators, restaurants, wine cellars, farmers, food producers and wine merchants. All should be guided by an analysis and assessment of whether wine tourism can be integrated across the various fields and place the idea of a sustainable product, including wine and food. The main objective should be how to turn this into a convincing and marketable tourist product (Koščak and O'Rourke, 2020).

It is likely that the tourism of the past decades, the mass movement of tourist invasions, will definitely be an image of the past. Also from the perspective of the current Corona pandemic, mass tourism was nothing else but an open wound in many national economies on the European continent permanently reinfected by the hordes of consumer tourists. Mass tourism demands drastic changes and fundamental rethinking. The future will show if new forms and proposed long overdue change to a scientific, human, rational and conservative niche tourism will be the single, practical cure for our collapsing tourism industry. And the product “Vineyards retreats” is exactly matching all elements of the niche tourism, which is, to Winegrowers Associations the future of the sustainable tourism in Europe and world-wide.

Of course, this requires a long-term commitment, whereby both providers of services and visitors must understand that the satisfaction of both is key to ensuring the sustainability of the product. Nevertheless, the rich natural and cultural heritage that includes wine tourism products in Dolenjska represents an opportunity and a challenge for better cooperation among all stakeholders. The challenge for the future lies in following the principle “Act cooperatively, promote the collective and deliver the individual”.

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