Traditional Wine Taverns and their Hard Landing in the 21st Century: The Case of the Viennese Heurigen
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Abstract

Vienna is a city with 1.8m inhabitants on the Danube with a long and important wine history. Today vineyards cover 612 hectares on Viennese hills (Arbeithuber, Waxenegger and Skurnik, 2011). The history of wine in Austria goes back to 276 AD when the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Probus cancelled an edict that forbade wine growing outside of Italy i.e. in the Roman provinces. The Heurigen, Vienna’s traditional wine taverns, have played and still play an important role in both the Viennese wine and food culture and wine marketing i.e. sales (Keen and Robinson, 2001). The term Heurigen (ˈhœɐ̯ɪɡən) in singular, literally meaning “this year’s”, and has three distinct usages: young (this year’s) potatoes, this year’s wine and the traditional wine tavern where the latter is sold (Robinson, 2006). The Heurigen is subject to many laws. Some of them date back to as early as the time of Charlemagne, who passed more regulations concerning viticulture and wine than any other emperor (Keen and Robinson, 2001). A verdict of 795 AD declares that “vintners should have ready at least three to four grape wreaths each year.” While there is still uncertainty as to the precise meaning of this regulation, the most accepted interpretation is that the wreath signifies the times of serving wine (Sinhuber, 1996, p. 12). In 1784, Austrian Emperor Joseph II, son of Maria Theresia and brother of Marie Antoinette, issued the most important law in this regard. It allows all winemakers to open their facility which, in the old days, was usually a shed, to the public, where they sell their own wines. The particularity of Joseph’s law lies in a small but significant detail: selling one’s own wine was and still is almost entirely free from taxes. Small wineries in Austria are taxed on a flat rate basis and wine and food sales at the Heurigen are included in these “all-in” regulations. Therefore, traditionally Austrian wine taverns firstly use their own facilities to sell their wine, secondly they are mostly run by family members and thirdly they pay no additional taxes on their on-trade sales. These three factors make it possible that in a Heurigen wine and food can be offered at much lower prices than in a restaurant. But Austrian wine taverns operate under a number of limitations which in detail vary from region to region. The most important regulations concern opening times and the type of food and drink they can sell. Heurigen, therefore, do not have the right to be open all year round, but, depending on the region, only two to four weeks in a row and a limited number of weeks per year. Furthermore, a traditional (tax free) wine tavern does not have the right to sell hot food, coffee, beer, soft drinks such as Coca Cola or Fanta, or purchased (not self-made) wines or spirits. In a Heurigen the young, dry and mostly white wine is accompanied by bread and hearty food such as Liptauer (a cheese spread made of soft cheese, paprika and spices), cold, thinly cut pork roasts (Schweinsbraten, Kümmelbraten and Surlbraten) as well as sausage products such as black pudding or liver sausage. Apart from its marketing and culinary importance, the music which was created at the “fin de siècle” by the Schrammel brothers and which is still played in Viennese wine taverns is part of the rich European cultural heritage (Notley, 1997). The Heurigen or Schrammlmusik is a musical genre in itself and was originally played by three to four musicians (violin, button accordion and contraguitar). The melancholic lyrics of the songs mostly deal with drinking (wine), pleasure in life and, ironically, death. The Heurigen songs are said to express the “… whole sweet carefree Viennese love of life and at the same time a deep despair to have to die some time” (Sinhuber, 1996, p. 195). Moreover, the Viennese Heuriger, comparable to the traditional English pub, can be seen as a “social institution” where people share a table and eat and drink together regardless of social class or wealth (Kopsitsch, 2008). However, changing life styles, in general, and consumption patterns, in particular, seem to be affecting the Heurigen and its culture. According to the provincial chamber of agriculture, Vienna counted more than 500
wine-taverns in the 1960s, in the 1980s a little more than 250, and in 2011 “only” 125 (Landwirtschaftskammer Wien, 2011, p. 32).

Research Goals:

The aim of this study is to investigate whether or not changing ways of consumption play a role in the decrease of Heurigen wine-taverns in Vienna. Moreover, we want to find out which issues are of importance for the Heurigen to survive and flourish in the 21st century.

Approach:

To find answers to our research questions a qualitative research design was chosen. Therefore the present paper will be based on the study of the existing research literature about the so called traditional Viennese Heuriger and on interviews undertaken with different actors and at different places in Vienna. Specifically, problem-centred interviews following Witzel’s model (1982, 1996) were carried out. The interviews focus on how wine-tavern owners and/or managers may or may not meet new challenges connected with changing consumption patterns. Between November 2012 and May 2013, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with both Viennese wine growers and owners of wine taverns, as well as with the project leader for wine- and fruit growing at the Agricultural Chamber of Vienna (Landwirtschaftskammer Wien) (who is also a wine grower and owner of a wine tavern himself), managers of the Vienna Tourist Board (Wien Tourismus), the official destination marketing agency of Vienna, and an Austrian wine specialist, who organized a Heuriger tour for us. To get a clear overview, it was imperative to visit wine taverns located in diverse districts, and various types of taverns in the Austrian capital. Therefore, the interviews with Heurigen owners led us to the districts Neustift am Walde, Döbling, Grinzinger and Stammersdorf. Visits included a small family business, some larger wine taverns, and taverns focused on bus tourists. The combination of traditional taverns with Heuriger considered innovative, and of conventional taverns dedicated to package holiday tours and tavern proprietors trying to attract younger consumers will help us to better perceive the differences and the changes. Two interviews were carried out with the Vienna Tourist Board, emphasizing marketing strategies for Austrian and foreign tourists, and measures undertaken to defy potential risks and to promote the Viennese wine culture. The meeting with the project leader of the Agricultural Chamber provided information about the role of the city of Vienna with regard to its vineyard, wine growers and Heurigen owners, and the development of the selection in the Austrian capital. The discussion with one of the best known young Viennese wine growers using innovative growing methods completed the enquiries.

The interviews lasted between one and three hours and were all transcribed. They followed general guidelines concerning questions about the current situation, new challenges for wine growers and Heurigen owners, adapting to and anticipating current ways of consumption and measures undertaken to face the changing consumer demand.

- the current situation
- changing lifestyle and consumer expectations
- altering purchasing contexts
- new quality standards
- innovative marketing concepts

Results:

Critical factors concerning peoples’ nutrition and recent food trends in the “western world” such as the globalisation of food products, low versus high calorie diets, reduced consumption of alcohol, the desire for a healthy lifestyle and the fast food trend are part of our findings and discussed in detail. Due to the very limited number of scientific studies in this field our results contribute to expanding the academic body of knowledge. Our study might seem very specific, focusing on Viennese wine taverns only. Nevertheless, our findings could contribute to enhancing the awareness of the gap between tradition and today’s reality. Our insights are novel in this field and may be applied in general and for all types of traditional gastronomical concepts throughout Europe which seem to be unable to attract a younger clientele.
The managerial implications presented in our paper can be useful to those running and/or planning to open a Heurigen in Vienna or a similar establishment i.e. offering traditional food, drink and atmosphere. The Heurigen business concept, after all, is very attractive and interesting if done properly. It is also highly profitable for those who are able to face and respond to the challenges resulting from new trends in consumption.

References: