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

"Old" and "new" ways of food and drink consumption differ significantly. Globalisation, technical innovations in nutrition processing and recent food trends in the Western world make it ordinary for us to consume foods which our parents at that age did not have or know about. Factors for these changes are numerous and include changes which have economic, political, health-related, animal welfare and environment protection backgrounds. The industrialisation and globalisation of foods in contrast to "old" locally grown and consumed produce, the availability of sugar and fat at all times, low versus high calorie diets, reduced consumption of alcohol, the desire for a healthy lifestyle, the fast food trend, the avoidance of red meat or the avoidance of meat altogether are some of the developments connected to these changes and express "old" vs. "new" ways of consumption. Due to the very limited number of scientific studies in this field, this paper deals with a relevant topic in times of food and drink globalisation: managing traditional offers in today's rapidly changing consumption environment and will contribute to expand the academic body of knowledge. While analysing the example of the traditional wine taverns called Heurigen in Vienna, the study, although dealing with a niche topic, may serve as a blueprint for many other old-style market offerings such as the traditional English Pub, the Alsatian Winstub, the Bavarian Braustube the Bouchon Lyonnais and others. These forms of gastronomy, while not situated in a very touristic environment, have to face harsh challenges due to a shifting marketplace and changing ways of consumption. The number of Heurigen in Vienna fell from over 500 in the 1960s to around 250 in the 80s and about 125 in 2012 (Landwirtschaftskammer Wien, 2011, p. 32). Apart from explaining the history and the social importance of traditional Viennese wine taverns, it seemed important to also provide an explanation from the legal perspective to help answer the research question. Our findings emphasise that thanks to its special fiscal status Heurigen has been a potentially highly profitable business model since 1784.

2. Viennese wine taverns

Vienna is a city with 1.8 million inhabitants on the Danube with a long and important wine history. Today vineyards cover 612 hectares on Viennese hills (Arbeitshuber, Waxenegger and Skurnik, 2011). The outskirts of Vienna to the south, east, north and west are wine growing areas. Nevertheless 87% of all vineyards are located in the hills of the 19th and 21st Viennese districts in the north-west where they form the right and left bank of the Danube. This is also where the famous wine and Heurigen villages like Grinzing, Neustift and Stammersdorf are situated.

The history of wine in Austria goes back to 276 AD when the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Probus canceled 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 & food culture and wine marketing i.e. sales (Keen and Robinson, 2001). The term Heuriger (ˈhɔɪ̯ ʀɪɡɐ) in German means "a wine grower" in singular, literally meaning "this year's", has three distinct meanings: young (this year's) potatoes, this year's wine and the traditional wine tavern where the latter is sold (Robinson, 2006).

2.1. Legislative regulations, offer and prices

The Heurigen is subject to many laws. Some of them that date back as early as the time of Charlemagne, who was unique in the quantity of regulations he imposed concerning viticulture and wine (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 still is 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 Theresa and brother of Marie Antoinette, issued the most important law in this regard. The law of Joseph II from 1784 allows winemakers to open their facility, which was usually in those times, to the public to sell their own wines. The particularity of Joseph's law lies in a small but significant detail: the sale of wine made from one's own produce was and still is quasi-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. Traditionally Austrian wine taverns primarily use their own facilities to sell their wine, secondly are mostly run by family members and thirdly pay no additional taxes on their off-trade sales in the Heurigen. 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 must comply with a number of important limitations whose specific details vary from region to region. The most significant regulations concern opening times and the food and drink that is served. A Heurigen does not have the right to be open all year round. Depending on the region it can only be open from two to four weeks in a row and a limited number of weeks a year. Furthermore a traditional wine (tax free) wine tavern does not have the right to sell hot food, coffee, beer, non-traditional soft drinks such as Coca-Cola or Fanta as well as purchased (not home-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, Kärntnerbraten and Surbraten) as well as sausage products and stuffed pig's stomach or liver sausage. A real Heuriger is therefore very limited in its actions in order to respond to consumption trends. Neither is it allowed to offer wine which was bought elsewhere (e.g. from another region that is fashionable at the moment), nor does the Heurigen manager have the right to provide non-traditional foods such as Sushi, Spanish style tapas or Italian antipasti, even if they are only cold dishes.

2.2. Cultural importance

Apart from its marketing and culinary importance, the music which was created at the "fin de siècle" by the Schramm brothers and which is still played in Viennese wine taverns is part of the rich European cultural heritage (Notley, 1997). The Heurigen or Schrammelmusik 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), fun 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 be wiped out some time," (Sinhuber, 1996, p. 195). This type of music can be compared to the Portuguese Fado (literally meaning fate, destiny). This type of music constitutes an important part of Portuguese cultural heritage (Notley, 1997). The Heurigen or Schrammelmusik is a musical genre in itself and was originally played by three to four musicians (violin, button accordion and contraguitar). The melancholic
quarter = 0.25 l) was EUR 1.64 for white (Grüner Veltliner) and EUR 1.78 for red (Zweigelt or other); a glass of sparkling water was between EUR 0.60-1.30 with an average price of EUR 0.90 (n=150). Furthermore, her work shows that in 2002 120 out of the 150 Heurigen investigated had a Heurigen and buffet concession. Only 30 had a full restaurant license and therefore the right to sell beer, coffee, hot food, etc. Those with a full restaurant license, however, did not benefit from the tax advantages mentioned in section 2.2. (legislative regulations and prices). Over all, Strobl’s (2002) findings emphasise the importance of the traditional tavern as a distribution channel for Viennese wine. Baumgartner (2004) investigated the situation of Heurigen in one specific neighbourhood of Vienna (Grinzing) and compared traditional taverns (Heurigen or Buschenschank) with those having a full restaurant license (Heurigenrestaurant). Her findings indicate that traditional taverns are mostly frequented by locals (60%) whereas restaurants in a wine tavern style attract mostly tourists (62.5%). Heurigen regulars were fifty or older (48%) and had all heard about the Heurigen via word-of-mouth recommendation (100%, multiple response allowed) whereas tavern style restaurants had 60% of clients who, above all, searched for information and addresses on the Internet (multiple response allowed).

Baumgartner (2004) compared traditional taverns with ones operating with a full gastronomy license. To this end, ten traditional Heurigen (Buschenschanken) and eight restaurants of a similar style were analysed. Results show that 73% of the restaurants are open all year round whereas, due to legislative regulations, most traditional taverns are open nine months maximum (80%). The majority of Heurigen-style restaurants work with staff (62.5%), whereas traditional taverns only employ additional service or kitchen aid (40%) in the high season (summer and autumn). Music is played mostly in restaurants (75%), traditional taverns mostly go without music. The average visitor to a Heurigen style restaurant is significantly younger than the typical visitor to traditional taverns, where nearly 50% are fifty years of age or older. The majority of visitors to real Heurigen are regulars (60%), who are mostly Viennese, whereas restaurants only have 12.5% regular visitors. Guests to Heurigen-style restaurants are mainly tourists who come from Asia, Germany, France and Eastern Europe, whereas traditional tourists come from the rest of the world. Vienna has 12.3 million tourists per year (Statistik Austria – (Austrian Statistics) 2012). Of the restaurants 62.5% have established agreements with travel agencies and tour operators whereas only 30% of the taverns have something similar. Baumgartner (2004) resumes that tavern owners intentionally change their legal status when they want to expand opening times, expand the menu (hot food, vegetarian or not so typical dishes, beer, coffee or wine from other producers), and attract a younger clientele and tourists.

Schiener (2007) investigated the expectations of visitors to traditional Heurigen in the province of Burgenland, south of Vienna. To this end, he interviewed 279 guests from 13 different taverns. Results were derived from cluster analysis, cross tabulations and significance levels. Female respondents made up 53.4%, the majority (47.7%) between 41 and 60 years old, married (60%), with an average level of education (22% had only compulsory school, 10% a university degree) and were mostly from the region (64%) or from another Austrian province (30%); only 3.6% were foreigners. As for the frequency of their visits, 34% had visited a Heurigen at least once a week, 27.2% at least twice a week. Schiener (2004) then formed three clusters, named them and described their respondents’ views and expectations. Even today, smoking is not entirely banned from Austrian restaurants and bars, a highly relevant factor in this type of client’s decision to visit a Heurigen and to return.

Type 1, the “No-smoke, No-music” type, is the smallest Cluster (26.5%); not a regular Heurigen visitor and married (65.5%). They are almost equally distributed across the sexes (49.2% male; 50.8% female). This group is generally very satisfied with what Heurigen offer and accepts the limitations to house made wine and traditional (mainly cold pork roast and sausage) dishes. They would like a general non-smoking policy and prefer places without music. Possibilities for children (outdoor) are very much appreciated. Only 50% of the “No-smoke, No-music” type comes from within the region.

Type 2, the “eager music lover”, is the biggest cluster (44.8% of the sample). They welcome non-smoking areas but are against a general ban. They visit a Heurigen about two times per month, prefer places with music and totally accept the limited offer of food and drinks. The vast majority, 70%, come from within the province. Type 2 also appreciates when there is playground for children to entertain themselves.

Type 3, the “demanding smoker” is a regular (at least once per week), primarily male (66.2%) and single (51.5%). The “demanding smoker” wants a broader offer regarding food and drinks and is the least satisfied with the overall wine quality and the current situation. Furthermore, he is totally against a non-smoking policy.

More recently, Beiglböck (2007) also analyzed the visitor structure of traditional taverns in the same region, pointing out that measures to attract young people and tourists would absolutely be necessary.

4. Empirical study

After summarising the different types of Heurigen guests and their claims, as emphasized in the existing research literature, and in order to answer the research question on management requirements to face the challenges connected with new ways of consumption, expert interviews appear to be an appropriate method due to the fact that some taverns operate very successfully while others don’t. As previously mentioned, consumer observations have been carried out by Schiener (2007) and Beiglböck (2007). Nevertheless, they did not help in finding answers to the issues addressed in this paper. Furthermore, consumer observations in this field are limited to those visitors who do visit traditional taverns but do not seem to provide new insights concerning the ones who don’t. The expert interviews lasted between one and three hours and were all transcribed. They followed some general guidelines concerning questions about the current situation, new challenges for the growers and Heurigen owners, adapting and anticipating future ways of consumption and measures undertaken to face the changing consumer demand. Changing lifestyle and consumer expectations, altering purchasing contexts, new quality standards and innovative marketing concepts were explicitly discussed. Problem centred interviews following Witzel’s model (1982, 1996) were conducted with different actors and at different places in Vienna. Between November 2012 and May 2013, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with Viennese wine growers as well as with owners of wine taverns, as with the project leader for wine- and fruit growing at the Agricultural Chamber of Vienna (Landwirtschaftskammer Wien) (who is coincidentally a wine grower and owner of a wine tavern), managers of the Vienna Tourist Board (Wien Tourismus), the official destination marketing agency of Vienna, and an Austrian wine specialist, who organised a Heurigen tour for the authors. 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 the authors to the districts Neustift am Walde, Döbling, Grinzing and Stammersdorf. Among the places visited there was a small family business, some bigger wine taverns, and taverns orientated to bus tourists. The confrontation of traditional taverns with Heuriger considered as innovative, and of conventional wines dedicated to package holiday tourists and tavern proprietors trying to attract younger consumers will help 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 furnished information about the role of the city of Vienna with regard to its vineyards, wine growers and Heurigen owners, and the development of the offer in the Austrian capital. The discussion with one of the best known young Viennese wine growers who uses innovative growing methods completed the enquiries.

5. Analysis

5.1. Changing consumer expectations

In the past, the Heurigen wine taverns served mainly as a profitable way of commercialisation for winemakers (Fritz Wieninger3). This was facilitated by the fact that some taverns operate very successfully while others don’t. As previously mentioned, consumer observations have been carried out by Schiener (2007) and Beiglböck (2007). Nevertheless, they did not help in finding answers to the issues addressed in this paper. Furthermore, consumer observations in this field are limited to those visitors who do visit traditional taverns but do not seem to provide new insights concerning the ones who don’t. The expert interviews lasted between one and three hours and were all transcribed. They followed some general guidelines concerning questions about the current situation, new challenges for the growers and Heurigen owners, adapting and anticipating future ways of consumption and measures undertaken to face the changing consumer demand. Changing lifestyle and consumer expectations, altering purchasing contexts, new quality standards and innovative marketing concepts were explicitly discussed. Problem centred interviews following Witzel’s model (1982, 1996) were conducted with different actors and at different places in Vienna. Between November 2012 and May 2013, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with Viennese wine growers as well as with owners of wine taverns, as with the project leader for wine- and fruit growing at the Agricultural Chamber of Vienna (Landwirtschaftskammer Wien) (who is coincidentally a wine grower and owner of a wine tavern), managers of the Vienna Tourist Board (Wien Tourismus), the official destination marketing agency of Vienna, and an Austrian wine specialist, who organised a Heurigen tour for the authors. 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 the authors to the districts Neustift am Walde, Döbling, Grinzing and Stammersdorf. Among the places visited there was a small family business, some bigger wine taverns, and taverns orientated to bus tourists. The confrontation of traditional taverns with Heuriger considered as innovative, and of conventional wines dedicated to package holiday tourists and tavern proprietors trying to attract younger consumers will help 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 furnished information about the role of the city of Vienna with regard to its vineyards, wine growers and Heurigen owners, and the development of the offer in the Austrian capital. The discussion with one of the best known young Viennese wine growers who uses innovative growing methods completed the enquiries.

1 one of the brand modules of the destination strategy mentioned in the brand manual is the ‘savour vivre’, including traditional wine taverns and coffee houses. http://b2b.wien.info/media/files-b2b/brand-manual
2 Fritz Wieninger
3 Interview on the 6th of May, 2013.
4 Clemens Költinger, Vienna Tourist Board, 6th of May, 2013.

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“dynamic, uncompromising” or “selective”, used in the discourse of young winemakers, seem to take into account the new demands5. The allusion to quality also appears in the official documents of the young tavern owners and wine growers, which emphasises that this is a rather new phenomenon6. Nowadays, Viennese soil is too expensive to be used for the production of cheap wines, even if the Heurigen wine is still the most consumed beverage in the Heurigen taverns. In the past, nearly the whole production was drunk in traditional wine taverns, whereas today top restaurants and specialist suppliers have become key purchasers and suppliers of high quality wine7. The direct sale of bottles in the traditional wine taverns has lost importance. Today, Viennese wine can be consumed outside the traditional wine taverns, transferring thus a part of the consumption from districts outside of the capital to modern taverns and vinothèques in the city centre. In fact, young consumers often enjoy drinking the regional wine in a more stylish atmosphere instead of in wine taverns which often have more dated decoration and are more family orientated. Whereas the Viennese wine was essentially a locally sold product, today the top-on-the-range winemakers export a third of their production to countries as Germany, the USA, Japan, the Netherlands, Finland and Switzerland, but also, in smaller proportions to reputed wine producing countries like France, Italy and Spain8. To increase awareness of these local wines, the Vienna Tourist board invites winemakers to foreign countries in order to familiarise international consumers with Austrian wines, and to tell stories about their products9.

As aforementioned, consumers are not only looking for high quality concerning wine. They are simultaneously looking for fine gastronomy and expect to find low-calorie products, such as salads, instead of fatty roasted pork in the traditional taverns. Further, they pay more attention to pairing their wine and their meals. The traditional Heurigen buffets were substantial and had to neutralize the high consumption level of alcohol10. Today, public campaigns about a healthier diet, the vegan, vegetarian and organic trends, the ecological and the Slow Food movement11 and sustainability claims have changed traditional habits. People eat lighter products, appreciate the recipes of modern cooks and drink smaller quantities of wine, and non-alcoholic drinks have to be proposed in every wine tavern. Stricter regulations and frequent security controls of the police in the streets also shape the consciousness of the consumers.

5.2 New marketing strategies

To keep old and to attract new visitors, traditional wine taverns have to adopt new marketing strategies. People don’t just go to any wine tavern, they make their choice based on the name of the tavern owner. They go to Wieninger, to Mayer am Pfarplatz, or to Fuhrgasli Huber. The name of the tavern owner, generally the head of the family, is a quality guarantee transmitted from generation to generation. Today, these names have become brands12.

Tavern owners and wine growers have to find various forms of communication having a strong impact on both traditional and younger customers. They must present themselves and their business on their homepage, send newsletters and participate in wine competitions and wine presentations13. Five of the young wine estate and tavern owners, called also the ‘young wild’ who produce about half of the Viennese high quality wine have undertaken proactive strategic measures in forming the ‘Wien Wein’ group14. In brochures and on the organisation’s homepage they practise intensive personal branding in presenting themselves in a flattering way in different places around Vienna, or in doing their job in the vineyard, in the winery or in the wine tavern. The synergy between the winemaker and the wine tavern is very profitable, and Fritz Wieninger is generally considered a pioneer, developing strategies for the coming years15.

6. Results: An changing tradition and modernism

In a changing world with evolving consumption behaviour, even very traditional and renowned wine institutions have to follow new trends to survive. In order to study modern solutions, we decided to focus on wine growers and wine taverns belonging to the ‘Wien Wein’ group. To attract younger, more urban and international consumers, their communication stresses a new identity between tradition and modernity.
regionality and globalisation. This is a very delicate undertaking, wine taverns having to take care not to lose their typical atmosphere, constituting a still important part of their attraction. Moreover, Austrians are very proud of their country and particularly their wine growers, who enjoy the best image among all professional groups.22 Wine taverns have to cater more cosmopolitan and international customers. Therefore, a certain patriotic feeling has to be respected while transmitting a modern image open to new trends and customers. Reinforcing Vienna’s identity as a capital of wine seems to offer the ideal opportunity to fulfill this balancing act.

The best examples incorporating this double orientation are the logos of wine growers and wine taverns. For example, the logo of the Wieninger brothers (Fritz Wieninger is the winemaker and his brother Leo the tavern owner) is composed of the skyline of Vienna, discovered by chance by Fritz on a postcard some years ago (in black and white showing the simplified skyline of ‘Vienna by night’)23, followed by their family name. The logo addresses not only the local wine consumer, in using the famous skyline with Vienna’s most well-known emblems, St. Stephen’s cathedral and the Giant Ferris Wheel, can easily be remembered by wine drinkers who come from outside Vienna.

Figure 2: Logo of the wine tavern and wine grower Wieninger

Another example is the logo of Mayer am Pfarrplatz, showing the profile of the old wine tavern, placed above the name of the Heurigen written in a rectangle makes an allusion to traditional Viennese street signs.

Figure 3: Logo of the wine tavern and wine grower Mayer am Pfarrplatz

In pointing out the traditional vocation of the logo, stressed by the mention of being one of Vienna’s oldest wine estates, the Heurigen wants to remain “an absolute must for both Viennese and tourists alike”24. The third wine estate of the Wien Wein group is in a unique position since it is owned by the City of Vienna itself. It goes without saying that the name of Vienna appears, and that the logo aims to reflect a typical Viennese symbol, the coat of arms of the capital, offering the possibility of identification by traditional and modern consumers.

Figure 4: Logo of the wine estate Weingut Wien Cobenzl

The two other wine growers and Heurigen taverns limit themselves to a modern typography of their name. Whereas Christ adds his name in Russian and in Chinese, signalling to consumers his international orientation,

Figure 5: Logo of the wine estate Christ

Edlmoser uses a simple writing style for his name, which is followed by the word ‘Wien’, Vienna.

Figure 6: Logo of the winery and Heurigen Edlmoser

His self-proclaimed “innovative” Heurigen wine tavern is run by himself and his family,25 an additional dichotomy of tradition and modernity.

The managerial implications presented in our paper can be useful to those running and/or planning to open a Heurigen in Vienna or something similar i.e. offering traditional food, drink and atmosphere. The Heurigen business concept, after all, is both very attractive and with a promising future if done properly, and highly profitable for those who are able to face and respond to the challenges resulting from new ways of consumption.

7. Discussion

The present study might seem very specific, focusing on Viennese wine taverns only. Nevertheless, these findings contribute not only to the academic body of knowledge but also to enhance the awareness of the gap between tradition and today’s reality within the food and wine sector. Our insights are novel in this field and may be applied in general to all types of traditional gastronomical concepts throughout Europe which seem to lack attractiveness for a younger clientele.

The Viennese Heurigen, comparable with the traditional English Pub, can be seen as a “social institution” where people share a table and eat and drink together regardless of socioeconomic status (Kopsitsch, 2008). However, changing lifestyles in general, and of consumption, in particular, are significantly 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). Therefore, it is high time for Heurigen owners to find new issues, resembling those chosen by the Wien Wein group. Otherwise they will simply disappear, or be replaced by pizzerias, fast food restaurants or sushi bars. Our findings suggest a number of managerial implications.

1) Tavern owners must back high quality wines, produced according to innovative growing and production methods, and have to propose wine styles corresponding to current trends. They must additional offer food to pair with the wine and respecting trendy nutritional preferences.

2) The Viennese Heurigen should focus on both local and international visitors. A co-operation with the Tourist Board could be useful.

25 Ibid.
3) Taverns should be better adapted to the younger generation in choosing a more modern decoration and places for families with children etc.

4) Proprietors must be aware of the importance of personal branding, and marketing initiatives creating strong brand loyalty and location attachment. Co-operation with marketing agencies seems essential.

5) Alternative local, national and international distribution channels have to be considered.

8. Limits and openings

The findings may be generalisable to other Heurigen taverns and to other types of gastronomic institutions in the world, even if local Viennese conditions must be taken into consideration.

Whereas former research very often focussed on the traditional character of the wine taverns and their folklore, this study represents an initial attempt to summarise the critical situation and to propose solutions for the Heurigensterben, the so-called death of the Viennese wine taverns.

Further studies providing new insights could address consumers who don’t yet visit traditional wine taverns. They could represent new targets contributing to not only the preservation of the traditional gastronomy, but also to its adaptation to modern consumer trends.

9. Bibliography


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