Wine tourism programmes – a Hungarian case study

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Abstract

Wine tourism – or enotourism – is a relatively new form of tourism, which main purpose is tasting, consumption or purchase of wine on the spot, i.e. at the wine growing areas or in their neighboring. Wine tourism may have different forms and activities, for example visiting wineries and vineyards, or taking part actively in harvesting, or just simply taking part at wine tasting events at restaurants, or at organized wine tours, wine festivals or other special events. The industry around wine tourism has grown significantly in the past decades.

Of course, the key element of wine tourism is wine itself, but nowadays, the wine tasting venues are not just for tasting and purchasing wine. Wine tourism sites should offer a wide range of services (such as restaurants, accommodation, tours and recreational facilities) providing a complete tourism experience for the customers.

In our study, we describe the different elements of wine tourism as the part of the wine production’s value chain and the players of the wine tourism sector. In the first stage of developing wine tourism activities, the ‘rural’ feature is in focus, i.e. the consumers will make their choice based on the natural characters and the product itself. In the second phase, the focus is on the recognition of the different areas or touristic sights, and cooperation between public agencies and companies should be broadened.

Keywords: wine tourism, wine marketing, Hungarian wine regions, marketing strategy

1. Introduction

In the past decades, tourism has experienced a continued growth and deepening diversification to become one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world. Modern tourism is closely linked to development and the number of new destinations is continuously growing. These dynamics have turned tourism into a key driver for socio-economic progress. (www.2unwto.org)

One part of tourism is wine tourism, which is a popular industry of our time and it constitutes a challenge for those regions which may implement it. Potential difficulties in applying wine tourism lie in the false estimation that it is just a visit to a winery. On the contrary, visiting a winery is only one of the components that formulate the practice of wine tourism. In fact, the term refers to a class of theme tourism, in which contact with the wine is the focus, not the end in itself (Hall et al., 2000).

The promising potential of wine tourism can be attributed to the fact that it is a synergy of two very successful sectors: those of wine and tourism. Under that perspective, wine tourism is an important marketing tool for wine-related economic activities to increase revenues and for wine regions to establish a brand name of origin and boost rural economy. Wine constitutes an important element of the attractiveness of a destination region since gastronomy is part of touristic activities and motives (Hall et al., 2000).

Therefore, it is necessary to introduce briefly all the definitions relevant to the tourism product in general, in order to comprehend better how it is practiced, what are the motives which induce the tourism experience and why niche markets like wine tourism do emerge. Than we try to overview of the theoretical background of wine tourism.

2. Wine tourism

2.1. Wine tourism in general

Although tourism is a fast growing industry at a global scale and a strategic factor for local development, it is hard to provide a comprehensive definition. There are some definitions which have tried to describe tourism by determining three key elements present in the tourism practice, namely the purpose of the trip, the distance travelled and the duration of the trip. Although there are several descriptions given for each one of these perspectives, there is no universal agreement upon a definition.

However, it is important for a general description of tourism to be applicable in both international and domestic contexts in order to measure its size and impact. Therefore, the World Tourist Organization has proceeded to the adoption of a standardized definition of tourism: “tourism is the activities of persons travelling to, and staying in, places outside their usual environment for not more than one continuous year for leisure, business and other purposes” (WTO, 1999 in Gonzalez and Bello, 2002:53).

The definition given by the WTO (1999) that tourism is the interaction of two factors: on the one hand there are tourists seeking for new experiences and in need of support facilities and services and on the other hand there is a great number of resources providing these experiences, services and facilities.

Tourism has long been associated with gastronomy, since one of the ways to experience a new culture is through tasting the local cuisine and drinks. Wine tourism is
a concrete example of a niche market developed to serve this type of special and sophisticated tourist demand.

Wine tourism has been defined as visitation to vineyards, wineries, wine festivals and wine shows for which grape wine tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of a grape wine region are the prime motivating factors for visitors (Hall et al., 2000). This market-based definition has informed a proliferation of consumer studies of wine tourists and wine festival visitors (Hall et al., 2000).

Market forces and demographic trends are the most important consumption-related factors that are impacting on wine tourism. Several researches have experienced that wine tourists are mainly those in the older age groups (40s and 50s) that have greater knowledge of wines. Charters and Ali-Knight (2002) found that wine tourism age demographics vary from region to region and stresses the importance of the next generation of wine consumers to the growing number of small wineries that they choose to visit (Carlsen, 2004).

### 2.2. Wine tourism sector

In our research we wished to explore the main factors and activities of wine tourism using a system approach.

Wine tourism sector is a complex sector which has three main players: the consumers (travelers or wine tourists), the suppliers, and the different destinations or organizations. Their needs and the provided resources and activities are depending on each other. Figure 1 summarizes the most important interactions of the system.

![Figure 1: System of wine tourism (by authors)](image)

If we assess the benefits of wine tourism, we shall concentrate on three main fields: the wine sector itself, the different destinations, and we shall not forget about the benefits for the host communities, which benefits will produce additional, non-measurable value for the society, the individuals or the environment. We summarized the benefits of wine tourism as follows:

**Benefits for the wine sector:**
- Increased wine sales
- Education of the visitors
- Fostering brand loyalty
- Attracting new market segments
- Higher profits from winery sales

**Benefits for the destinations:**
- Generating increased number and spending of visitors
- Attracting new and repeat visitors
- Developing a unique image
- Overcoming through slow demand periods

**Benefits to Host Communities:**
- Attracting new investment
- Developing new facilities (e.g., restaurants and attractions)
- Strengthening community pride
- Creating successful events for residents and visitors

The value chain of wine tourism is based upon viticulture, which need many resources and includes different activities. The second step is wine production, which special form of utilization is wine tourism. The relations of the wine tourism value chain are illustrated by Figure 2.

![Figure 2: The value chain of wine tourism (by authors)](image)

Accordingly, wine tourism may be considered as a special form of the value creation process, which uses different resources, from the initial product, the wine, through the natural values, the landscape, the knowledge of winemakers, the recreational services, catering, etc. which may add and represent a significant value to the primary products (i.e. grape and wine) of this value chain.

Wine tourism is a complex experience, as travelling, learning about a diversity of landscapes, the encounter with the wine producers all add up to the experience of getting familiar with wines. Wine tasting and wine consumption get a personal touch in the cellar, where the visitors – wine tourists – may learn about the grape-vine varieties, and the specialties of the region, the wine varieties and the vintages. This way the participants of wine tourism do not just use services but get much more than that, they will get a substantial experience and a special knowledge as well.
Wine consumption and wine tourism is a tool of community development, therefore it is excellent option for group of friends, colleagues, business partners to spend some substantial time together.

3. Wine regions of Hungary

The number, boundaries, sizes and names of the Hungarian wine regions are probably more varied than in other wine producing countries. With the EU Wine Law as of 1 August 2009 a new age started. The earlier wine region system, the origin registry and territorial categories were replaced by the sectors of Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI). PDO (territories of wines of a strong habitat effect and of traditions) and PGI (territories of wines with a looser connection with the habitat) replaced our previous wine regions and the sectors of wines with a protected legal status (http://bor.hu/maps).

Fig. 3 illustrates the geographical structure of the Hungarian wine regions.

In Hungary, wine tourism is closely connected to making a personal relationship with the wine producers and cellar masters, and the different wine regions. There are special wine routes which connect the different wine regions and subregions. Many producers – together with the tourism agencies – have worked out a tourism branch based on wine-specific attractions. The diversity of the Hungarian wine regions is reflected in the variety of the wines.

Neszmély wine region, where the examined organization (Hilltop Neszmély Ltd.) can be found, is located on the right bank of the Danube in Komárom County. This wine region occupies the south-western part of the Gerecse Hills, its northern part slopes toward the river Danube. It reaches the northern foothills of the Vértes Hills and the Bakony Mountains, where the hills meet the Kisalföld, i.e. the Small Plain of Hungary. Neszmély wine region has a temperate continental climate with less annual fluctuations of temperature than in the Great Plain. The region – because of its hilly parts and the closeness to the River Danube – is characterized by relatively high humidity, moderate rainfall, and rather low heat quantity and isolation. Spring frosts are infrequent and not particularly severe when they occur. The cool and damp conditions are ideal for the production of delicate aromatic wines, almost exclusively white. The whole area of the Neszmély wine region is about 1485 hectares.

4. Case study

In our case study, we introduce one of the largest wine producers of Hungary. The company was established in the 1990s, the time of the political and economic transition in Hungary. Hilltop Neszmély Zrt. (Ltd.) was first called Interconsult. A British customer suggested Hilltop as a brand name because of the picturesque location of the winery. This led to the idea of using Hilltop as a company name. Although at first time the company used this name only for their catering establishments, the restaurant and the hotel, later they decided it would be the ideal name for the winery as well. (www.hilltop.hu)

In the first few years, the name and the products of the Hilltop winery were unknown in Hungary. This situation started to change in 1996 when they focused on launching domestic sales and marketing activities. The success of the 1997 Csereszegi Főváros won the “White Wine of the Year” award even though 7,500 wines were entered in the competition. International success attracted the attention of wine lovers in Hungary, and our reputation grew.

The company started to plant international types like Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris or Gewürztraminer instead of focusing on authentic Hungarian vines. Hilltop being a new winery, the only way to win over wine lovers was to offer popular wines. Later, after the first success, the Hilltop brand in itself was a guarantee of quality, so the company could come out with more enterprising wines as well. In their view it is very important that they have control from grape to bottle, their wines stem from their grapes. (www.hilltop.hu and company documents)

The company has started its wine tourism activities with the Wine Hotel and Restaurant. The building of the Wine Hotel and Restaurant is just few hundred meters from the winery. It is on the top of the hill, called Melegeshegy, with a spectacular view to the River Danube and the vineyards on the hill. The restaurant has three separate halls: the upper hall is suitable for 35–40 guests, the small panoramic hall is comfortable for 15–20 guests, and the large panoramic hall makes room for 150–160 guests. The terrace, which is shaded by a vine-trellis can provide seats for 60–80 guests.

The Wine Hotel currently has 8 twin rooms in the Wine Hotel (4 rooms above the restaurant and 4 in the guest house next to the winery). Extra beds are available in 2 rooms, so this means accommodation for 18 people altogether.

Around the Wine Hotel and Restaurant there is a park of approximately 4-4.5 acres with a stone lookout tower (which was built few years ago with the support of EU funds) a modern playground, a grassy and a paved event area and a 25 m by 12 m swimming
pool. There is a cellar which can seat up to 140 people and there are some production facilities which are used for the introduction of the different processes of harvest.

The facilities of the restaurant and the area of the hotel may be used by all the guests of the winery, it is not exclusively for the hotel guests.

Several programs are available at Hilltop, from family events (weddings, birthdays, celebrations, bachelor and bachelorette parties, silver and golden wedding anniversaries, christenings and high school graduation, family reunions and family harvests), through company events (trainings and team-building events, meetings, business breakfasts, lunches and dinners, wine dinners and harvests. Schoolchildren from the neighbor cities and villages are also among the regular guests of the company for, outdoor activities, harvest for kids, programs at Easter and on St Nicholas day.

An important element of the wine tourism activities of the company is organizing plant visits with wine tasting, wine courses, harvests, cycling, riding, horse-drawn carriage and sleigh rides, village olympics, cellar tests, and wine-tasting competitions. They organize different annual events throughout the year (carnival ball in January, Swabian ball in February, Spring ball in March, Hilltop Wine Festival in September, Stew Making Contest at Harvest-time, St Martin’s Day new wine festival with goose feast, New Year’s Eve ball). In increased demand for wine courses could be detected in the past years, with the supervision of the chief winemaker of the winery.

In summary, the company may provide the wine tourists with a wide range of attractions according to their needs. The most popular programs are family celebrations, wine tasting courses and business vents. An important strength of the company is the spectacular area and the closeness of the main production facilities of the company.

5. Results and Conclusion

Wine tourism plays an important role in the marketing strategy of the company. We have noticed its importance in the communication of Hilltop (there are special pages for the Wine Hotel both at the official website of the company and its social media site. The company recognized the importance of wine tourism and strives to meet the expectations of consumers and the trends. They successfully use their touristic activities for community building activities.

Activities connected to wine tourism may strengthen the image, the place of origin, the region’s tourist treasures, tourist attractions and historical curiosities. The favorable conditions of production, the exceptional, sunny and warm climate are strength of the company and the touristic activities. The website and the social media site keep close contact with the consumers, for example it describes different wine types, promotes wine tourism, and wine tasting programs.

In summary, based on the findings of the first step of our research, it may be stated that the examined company has built the basic pillars of wine tourism activities. As the next step, we would check our basic findings by a survey conducted among the present and the possible consumers of the company.

References