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Wine tourism in Spain: The case of three wine regions

Abstract

By far the main focus of contemporary wine tourism research has been in 'New World' regions, while it appears to be under development in much of the 'Old World.' The present study adds to this underdeveloped body of research in that it addresses a range of wine tourism development issues, across three prominent 'Old World' wine regions: La Mancha, La Rioja and Penedès. A total of 94 wineries participated in the study. Respondents' answers and comments indicate that while many of the participating wineries are several generations, or centuries, old, wine tourism appears to be in its 'tentative' stages, that is, only starting to gain momentum. One positive aspect is that most participants (68.1%) indicated that their wineries are open to the public mainly to generate interest for their wine brands among visitors, while 61.7% use the cellar door to educate customers, thus demonstrating wineries' longer-term strategy to 'convert' visitors to brand loyalty through wine tourism. Given the critical role tourism plays for Spain's economy, with over 50 million visitors per year, these findings can have important implications for the long term sustainability of the wine industry in many of the nation's wine regions.

Keywords:

wine tourism; wine regions; winery operators; opportunities and challenges; Spain

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of wine tourism has experienced major developments. Wine tourism has for instance grown 'on the ground' as different wine regions have begun to embrace this activity as a way to improve, that is, in commercial terms, the local wine industry or even the rural region. Wine's marriage with food (Bode, 1992), and the increasing importance of gastronomy as a drawing card for visitors (Ricolfe, Merino, Marzo, Ferrandis, & Rodríguez, 2008) also help bring the wine product close to hospitality and tourism. The scenic value that vineyards provide in many rural areas and their significance in helping preserve the cultural patrimony of the region, to the point of being considered patrimony of humanity in some cases (Elías, 2008), further

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emphasise the importance of preserving vineyards and the critical role wine tourism could play in such preservation efforts.

In the academic field, the last few years have witnessed increasing interest among researchers in exploring wine tourism. However, to a great extent studies published on the subject have been conducted in New World wine regions or countries. The works of Hall, Sharples, Cambourne, Macionis, Mitchell, and Johnson (2000), Dodd, and Beverland (2001), Charters, and Ali-Knight (2002) and Getz, and Brown (2006a, 2006b), to name a few, clearly point at leading efforts among researchers to highlight the inspiring developments in 'New World wine nations. In contrast, despite being traditional wine-producing nations, wine tourism research has to a great extent been ignored, or even avoided in the past in much of the Old World, including Spain. In fact, with the exception of Gilbert's early study in 1992, little research was conducted on Spain's wine tourism until very recently. The previous paucity of research is giving way to new developments, and to considerable interest in wine tourism, both from an academic and from an industry perspective. For instance, the establishment of certified wine routes recently with 13 in 2009 (Rutas Vino de España, 2009), and six others in the process of certification (López-Guzmán Guzmán, & Sánchez Cañizares, 2008) demonstrates that wine regions and local development agencies, if only slowly, are combining wine and tourism development.

In addition, growing interest about wine tourism development among researchers could lead to several positive impacts, and be of much assistance to an industry composed in its majority by small wineries with few resources to determine the potential value that wine tourism may have for them or their communities. Despite such promising developments and growth of interest, as would be expected for a country with 70 designations of origin (DO) (Quintana, 2006) much remains to be explored in the field of wine tourism in Spain. Areas of interest include wineries' efforts and challenges in amalgamating wine and tourism, the extent to which winery operators are willing to be- or are actually involved in wine tourism, or winery operators' experience with wine tourism to date. Furthermore, information related to how wineries see their relationship with their local community may provide another angle to wineries' main focus of producing and / or marketing quality wines. For example, researching the aspect of social responsibility and wineries' commitment to work together with their surrounding community could be of invaluable assistance to wine regions that are only starting to develop their wine and / or wine tourism industries. Gathering data from three popular Spanish wine regions (La Mancha, La Rioja and Penedès) this study seeks to shed more light on the areas above from winery operators' points of view.

Literature review: Current developments in wine tourism in Spain

Despite marginal involvement with wine tourism in the past few decades, interest in this sector has been gradually increasing in recent years. Such development is taking place at times when both Spain's wine and tourism industries are experiencing a downturn and serious exogenous threats. The increasing- almost ferocious- competition among destinations to attract sun and beach hungry tourists has had a number of im-

plications for Spain's tourism industry. For example, Spanish and overseas tourists have available a much larger- and often much cheaper- number of appealing destinations to choose from. The current global economic downturn has only exacerbated the current problems of Spain's tourism industry: Tourism numbers have decreased as a whole in recent years (ABC, 2009; Granadahoy, 2009), mirroring what in the meantime has become a global problem (UNWTO, 2009).

Lately, Spain's tourism agencies, as well as agencies representing other sectors (e.g., wine) have been coordinating efforts to minimize, if with only marginal results, the nation's great dependency on sun and beach tourists. The recent serious decline of mass tourism in the Canary Islands (BBC, 2009) to name one specific situation may help local tourism authorities rethink their past strategies. Such strategies were based on the belief that Spain's privileged geographic location and almost endless supply of sun and beaches at affordable prices would be sufficient to draw ever-increasing tourist numbers. The current state of the nation's tourism industry illustrates that mainly catering for low-budget tourist groups was essentially a short-term, unsustainable concept.

Only now, the sombre prospects of a long-term tourism slump appear to be forcing Spanish authorities and tourism stakeholders to slowly go back to the drawing board and design and execute more proactive long-term strategies. One way to evolve from such a situation is, according to Ivars Baidal (2004) to diversify tourism supply; in fact, diversification may help a region in positioning itself as a tourist point of reference (Vázquez de la Torre, Gutiérrez, & Santos, 2007), that is, as a tourist drawing card. The cases of rural tourism (Cánoves, Villarino, Priestley, & Blanco, 2004), agrotourism (Parra López, & Calero García, 2006) or even gastro-tourism (Ricolfe et al., 2008), in this last case particularly given the unique foods and cuisines many Spanish regions have on offer, demonstrate the potential for tourism diversification in many areas of the country. However, planning appears to be a fundamental problem in consolidating regional tourism policies (Ivars Baidal, 2004, p. 313), threatening the realisation of much needed projects to promote change.

Despite consumer trends that have resulted in a decline in wine consumption in Spain in recent years (Wine Spectator, 2008), Spain's wine industry is at the centre of new developments. The slow but decided pace of some wine regions in recognising potential opportunities of combining wine and tourism is evident in the creation of wine routes (Wine Tourism in Spain, 2009), or in the investment some Spanish wineries are making to host and educate visitors (see, for example, Alonso, Sheridan, & Scherrer, 2008). The establishment of wine routes as an experiential product (Díaz Armas, 2008) may contribute to the promotion of other landscapes of the country, help 'divert' the flux of sun and beach tourists to rural areas, while increasing the range of leisure activities many of those tourists have available during their stay. Clearly, many tourists venturing to explore wine regions may consider their overall travel experience to Spain as much more valuable and meaningful; in this context wineries could also be direct beneficiaries of wine tourism development.

While arguably wine tourism research in Spain has been almost non-existent for the past decade, in the last five years some researchers have been studying recent developments in Spanish wine regions. For example, Vázquez de la Torre et al. (2007), Vázquez de la Torre, and Navarro (2008) and López-Guzmán Guzmán, and Sánchez Cañizares (2008) studied the Montilla-Moriles wine route in the province of Córdoba in the Andalucía region, which opened in 2001. Vázquez de la Torre et al. (2007) identified opportunities that the existing wine route could create and that would support the development of complementary economic activities for the wine route's surroundings.

Interestingly, Vázquez de la Torre et al. (2007) also noticed that the views of tourists and operators clearly differed in regard to what they expected of wine tourism development. In fact, tourists wanted to see increase in complementary offerings, such as gastronomy or cultural festivals, while the winery operators wanted to focus on the promotion and marketing of the wine route. González González (2006) explains that there is agreement among some wine regions that wine by itself may not be a sufficiently strong magnet for tourists to travel to wine regions. Thus, tourists' expectation of complementary activities not only appears to be justifiable but also a necessary ingredient that would add to their enjoyment. Being able to identify- and value such activities would then provide a tangible tourism offer that 'revolves' around the wine product (González González, 2006).

Medina, and Tresserras (2008) studied the wine regions of Penedès, Piorat and Montsant in the Mediterranean region of Cataluña. The authors identified two different types of wine tourism promotion. The first type of promotion is composed of an emerging tourist destination that focuses on small and medium wineries; these wineries often lack the volume of production but strive for quality. The second type of wine tourism promotion is that of a recognized tourist destination that is in the process of maturing but heavily influenced by large wineries, even multinationals. The study also identified that winery operators, particularly those from smaller operations lack the necessary human and technical resources are barely involved with the tourist side of wine production. Medina, and Tresserras (2008) therefore argue for the need of the private sector and public administration (local council, city hall, etc.) to support the growth of this activity, or to educate the small winery operators about the advantages, and even the disadvantages of a higher level of involvement with wine tourism.

Hatanaka (2008) conducted research in Cangas del Narcea in the region of Asturias, Northern Spain, where the local grape growing industry suffered from decline in previous decades. Through the efforts of some local parties, a wine museum, wine festivals and visitation to wineries are today part of tourist activities destined to support and recover the wine industry in the region (Hatanaka, 2008).

Despite being the largest wine region in planted vineyards in Spain, and possibly in the world, surprisingly very little research has been conducted in Spain's Castilla-La Mancha region. Only Morales (2006) reports that recently this region established its wine tourism association that strives to provide visitors with an alternative activity du-

ring their visit. Also recently, Pérez, and Gutiérrez (2008) reported on the municipality of Peñafiel (Castilla-León region); where wine tourism is just starting to take off as part of the local administration's efforts to develop tourism in the area. In fact, while the number of wineries involved in this concept to date is low, recent success obtained in wine contests by wines of the region's Ribera del Duero DO have contributed to making wine tourism one Peñafiel's main cultural attractions (Pérez, & Gutiérrez, 2008).

The recent establishment and growth in the number of wine trails, and more researchers exploring wine routes and wine tourism development in Spain clearly suggest more interest and the potential for the wine and tourism industries to blend a very traditional industry, and to contribute to the nation's efforts to diversify current tourism offerings. With over 50 million annual visitors (UNWTO, 2005) the possibilities for Spanish regions to amalgamate 'sun and beach' tourism with other rural activities such as wine tourism are only beginning to be realized and executed. For researchers, these promising events offer many opportunities to explore the potential and threats that lie ahead for those Spanish wine regions that are striving for development.

The present study contributes to the emerging wine tourism literature in Spain, exploring wine tourism involvement among winery operators in the La Mancha, La Rioja and Penedès wine regions. Overall, the study seeks to gather information that answers one fundamental question: To what extent are wineries of these three popular wine regions involved in wine tourism? Furthermore, the study addresses several research questions in the context of these three pronounced Spanish wine regions, including the following:

- What are the main reasons for wineries to be open to the public? For instance, do wineries place more importance on short-term gains, or do they focus on long-term strategies for their survival?
- What benefits do wineries perceive in opening to the public?
- What are the main reasons for wineries not to be open to the public?
- What are the main visitor groups among those wineries open to the public?
- In what way(s) do wineries benefit their local communities?

The answers to these questions should shed invaluable light on industry perceptions of wine tourism development and the benefits pertaining. Additionally, the information gleaned should prove beneficial in helping to direct a more coordinated approach to wine tourism development throughout Spain.

The regions studied

During February 2009 wineries from the DOs of La Mancha, La Rioja and Penedès were selected for this study and subsequently contacted in March. Figure 1 illustrates the approximate geographic location of these three regions.

Figure 1
APPROXIMATE GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION OF THE THREE CHOSEN WINE REGIONS



Note: The region of Penedès is located near Barcelona.
 Source: http://www.wineweb.com/map_spain.html

The time of the year chosen to conduct the study, early spring when vines begin to 'awaken' from their winter hibernation was believed to be less taxing on winery operators than other times of the year, particularly during the harvesting season during autumn. The significance of La Mancha, La Rioja and Penedès as traditional Spanish wine regions was a fundamental reason for the researchers to approach winery operators of these regions and invite them to partake in the study. The large number of wineries in the three regions, an aspect that could help draw a sufficiently large number of respondents as opposed to other smaller Spanish wine regions was an additional reason for choosing wineries of these regions as participants. Table 1 illustrates the significance of these regions in terms of area of vineyards grown, wine production and number of wineries.

Table 1
BASIC INFORMATION OF LA MANCHA, LA RIOJA AND PENEDEÈS WINE REGIONS

Region	Production in hectares	Production in hectolitres	Number of wineries under designation of origin (DO)
La Mancha (2006-2007)	190,980	828,379	304
La Rioja (2008)	60,882	2,721,200	301
Penedès (2007-2008)	26,081	1,590,588	159
Totals	277,943	5,140,167	764

Sources: La Mancha DO (2009), La Rioja DO (2009), Penedès DO (2009).

Methodology

A first approach in the data collection process consisted in contacting winery operators individually. A search in the web pages of each of the designations of origin (DO) in these regions (La Mancha, La Rioja and Penedès) identified the contact details of each operation, including operations' email addresses. Budget and time limitations prevented the researchers from travelling to Spain to physically approach and interview winery operators in the regions above. To overcome these limitations, an online questionnaire was designed to collect data in the study. The main objective of the online questionnaire was to elicit answers to the core questions of the study posed previously (see above) and that include:

- If the winery is open to the public, what are the main reasons?
- If the winery is open to the public, what percentage of its customers is local, national, and / or international?
- In what ways, if any, does the winery operation benefit the local community?

For each of these questions, respondents had several answers to choose from (see Tables 3, 4 and 5). Additionally, space provided at the end of each question, as well as at the end of the questionnaire allowed for gathering respondents' alternative answers or their comments. The questionnaire also contained questions that sought to learn about such demographic areas as wineries' age or their size.

All wineries with email accounts found in web pages of the regions studied were contacted. The email addresses were compiled from each region's DO website. The email message sent to the wineries consisted of an explanation of the study's goals and also a statement inviting operators to participate in the study. Those messages sent to wineries that 'bounced back,' that is, that did not find their recipient due to such reasons as an invalid email address were not re-sent and the wineries no longer considered in the study. In all, 192 wineries in La Mancha with email addresses, 63.2% of the total number of wineries in this region, 241 in La Rioja (80.1%) and 137 in Penedès (with 86.2% of all wineries having email address) were contacted. The number of responses and percentage of those contacted per region follows: La Mancha 11, or 5.7% overall response rate, La Rioja 49 (20.3%), and Penedès 34 (24.8%). In all, 94 out of 570 operators whose wineries had email addresses accepted the invitation and completed the online questionnaire, a 16.5% response rate.

While the number of participants was considered sufficient for this preliminary study, it is acknowledged that the low response rate does not allow for making generalizations of the findings. In addition, it is recognised that because many wineries did not have email addresses, or not all winery operators may favour email communication, many winery owners may have been left out from the study, or may have decided not to participate in the study. However, given that the majority (60% or more) of the wineries were contacted, it was believed that emailing winery owners was a valid alternative method in view of the impossibility to travel to the wineries, or in view of the uncertainty that mailing printed questionnaires would reach potential respondents. Finally, in order to identify the comments some respondents provided in writing, in the

following section respondents' answers are labelled as Rioja Winery 1 (RW1), Penedès Winery 1 (PW1), La Mancha Winery 1 (LMW1) and so forth.

Results

When analysing the data collected (Table 2) several similar characteristics of the participating operations were identified. For example, the largest group from each region, and consequently the majority of the participating businesses were older than 20 years. In the Penedès region, one of these operations had existed for over 16 generations, another for four generations, one for three, and a fourth winery had been operating since 1913. In the La Mancha region one winery was 200 years old, whereas in La Rioja region one winery had operated for over eight generations, one for 132 years and by the same family, while two wineries had been operating for five generations and another two for four generations. At the other end, 34 (36.1%) wineries were 15 years old or less; these were predominantly operations from La Rioja and Penedès. In addition, only three of the wineries had more than 50 employees; the large majority had 15 or fewer employees, suggesting their small / family size.

Table 2

BASIC DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE WINERIES

Characteristics	Region						All	
	La Rioja		Penedès		La Mancha			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Age								
20+	27	55.1	16	47.1	7	63.6	50	53.2
6 – 10	9	18.4	5	14.7	2	18.2	16	17.0
11 – 15	5	10.2	5	14.7	0	0.0	10	10.6
1 – 5	4	8.2	3	8.8	1	9.1	8	8.5
16 – 20	2	4.1	4	11.8	0	0.0	6	6.4
Did not answer	2	4.1	1	2.9	1	9.1	4	4.3
Total age	49	100.0	34	100.0	11	100.0	94	100.0
Number of employees								
1-5	23	46.9	14	41.2	4	36.4	41	43.6
6-15	14	28.6	9	26.5	6	54.5	29	30.9
16-30	4	8.2	6	17.6	1	9.1	11	11.7
31-50	4	8.2	2	5.9	0	0.0	6	6.4
51+	3	6.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	3.2
0	1	2.0	2	5.9	0	0.0	3	3.2
Did not answer	0	0.0	1	2.9	0	0.0	1	1.1
Total employees	49	100.0	34	100.0	11	100.0	94	100.0

As shown in Table 3, very similar responses were noticed between the two regions (Rioja and Penedès) with most participants. Overall, operators were mainly interested in opening to visitors to increase awareness about their brands (68.1%), clearly indicating that winery operators focus on word-of-mouth advertising and on creating long-term relationships with their customers or visitors. Of interest was that educating visitors / customers was the second most indicated reason for being open to the public (61.7%), once again demonstrating the long-term focus of participants' strategies.

Furthermore, these findings illustrate that winery operators are more interested in creating synergies between themselves and consumer groups rather than in the short term benefits of on-site sales or more earnings per bottle.

Table 3

REASONS FOR WINERIES TO BE OPEN TO THE PUBLIC*

Reasons	Region						All	
	La Rioja		Penedès		La Mancha		n	%
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
To raise interest about our wine brands	32	65.3	27	79.4	5	45.5	64	68.1
To educate visitors / customers	25	51.0	26	76.5	7	63.6	58	61.7
To sell more wines	21	42.9	17	50.0	6	54.5	44	46.8
To increase the earnings in wine sales	11	22.4	9	26.5	1	9.1	21	22.3
To help the sales of our restaurant	3	6.1	3	8.8	1	9.1	7	7.4
Did not answer	7	14.3	1	2.9	0	0.0	8	8.5

*Multiple response

A total of 14 respondents indicated their reasons for being open to the public in writing. Some of these responses further suggest winery operators' intention to 'invest' in their customers / visitors:

PW1: *"To foment the wine culture and show visitors our viticultural area."*

PW2: *"To increase sales because we avoid the middlemen, but especially to take advantage of wine tourism as an extremely important marketing tool, that is, we open the doors of our house so that visitors get to know us, take a nice experience with them, we strengthen the image of the operation and help educate potential consumers on the wine culture."*

RW1: *"To meet a demand: people want to visit us and it is easier to say 'yes' than to say 'no' to them."*

RW2: *"To make our winery and wines known through the guided visits to our winery."*

RW3: *"To provide our customers with a service."*

Another (Penedès) participant (PW3) also acknowledged that *"Wine tourism is growing in the world of wines and we understand it is a way to promote the area, the level of quality, and of course our brand."* A different operator's strategy appeared to be less formal, thereby using the existing winery facilities and combining it with onsite accommodation (PW4): *"We are open to the public because there is always someone around, but we don't have anyone specifically to welcome visitors. We also have rural accommodation that complements well with the winery."*

In contrast, not having hospitality facilities at the winery, such as a tasting room or a restaurant were reasons for five respondents not to be open to the public. Similarly, five responses indicated that the costs of opening to the public would not justify wine sales, while only one response indicating security reasons, that is, the potential of accidents among visitors walking in the vineyards as a reason for not being open to the public. Furthermore, a fifth Penedès participant (PW5) explained that *"We only open when a group of visitors asks us to; we then negotiate a day for them to visit the winery."* Operator PW6 noted that *"In this winery we make wholesale wine and we do not bottle it. This is*

why we are not open to the public." Similarly, a different participant (PW7) admitted that *"We don't have our own brand, nor do we bottle our wines."*

With regard to the break-down of their visitor groups, and apart from La Mancha wineries, the findings (Table 4) once again illustrate similarities in the responses of La Rioja and Penedès wineries. Overall, local visitors make up for the great majority of wineries' visitor contingent. Furthermore, it is noticed that 'outsiders' are only marginally represented, suggesting the future potential for wineries and local / regional tourism agencies to develop wine tourism. Arguably, because of their proximity to the Mediterranean beaches, wineries in the Penedès region might benefit from visits of tourists that also seek sun and beach. In fact, one respondent from this region (PW8) indicated that the visitor break-down was 5% local visitors, 60% national, and that as many as 35% were international visitors. Moreover, PW9 recognized that *"Because the winery is so close from a very important tourist destination such as the Costa Dorada and near Barcelona, we not only receive visitors from that area, but also a considerable percentage of out-of-country visitors."* PW10, however, did not seem to view international visitors as a particularly appealing customer group, noting that *"... international visitors do not want to fly with wine,"* referring to airport requirements that do not allow hand carriage of bottles or fluids over 100 cl. Rather surprisingly, despite its physical distance from the ocean, more La Rioja wineries (14, 28.6%) drew international visitors than did for instance wineries from the Penedès region (6, 17.6%), suggesting La Rioja's appeal to some segments of international visitors as a long-established wine region.

Table 4

PERCENTAGE OF CUSTOMERS/VISITORS AMONG WINERIES OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Break down of sales to visitors	Region						All	
	La Rioja		Penedès		La Mancha			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
60% local, 20% national, 20% international	14	28.6	6	17.6	1	9.1	21	22.3
70% local, 20% national, 10% international	7	14.3	6	17.6	5	45.5	18	19.1
90% local, 5% national, 5% international	5	10.2	7	20.6	2	18.2	14	14.9
80% local, 10% national, 10% international	3	6.1	6	17.6	0	0.0	9	9.6
Did not answer	20	40.8	9	26.5	3	27.3	32	34.0
Total	49	100.0	34	100.0	11	100.0	94	100.0

A fundamental function of wineries in rural areas is related to their involvement with the local community. Asked in which ways they benefitted their community, participants saw their primary role as providers of employment among the locals (Table 5).

The importance of wineries as 'magnets' of outside visitors to rural areas was also recognised as a critical benefit for the local communities. Almost as many respondents recognised the importance of participating in local festivities and making wine donations. Comments from some operators also demonstrate their commitment to being benefactors of their local communities; such was the case of some Penedès respondents who saw their role in the following ways:

PW11: "Collaborating in wine tourism related activities locally."

PW12: "We work with physically challenged people."

PW13: "In the Baix Penedès area there are many types of accommodation, from 5-star hotels to rural tourism. The main attractive of this area is the 'sun and beach' tourism; however, because of its very limited resources in tourism terms, this type of tourism is strongly in need of alternative activities. For the accommodation operations of this area it is good news that a small winery with its personalised service is open seven days a week for people to visit and do wine related activities."

Table 5
WAYS OF BENEFITTING THE COMMUNITY*

Reasons	Region						All	
	La Rioja		Penedès		La Mancha			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Providing jobs for the local population	34	69.4	22	64.7	10	90.9	66	70.2
Attracting / drawing visitors to the area	33	67.3	24	70.6	5	45.5	62	66.0
Donating wines for local festivities	34	69.4	21	61.8	6	54.5	61	64.9
Assisting in local development initiatives (for example, helping improve local roads)	12	24.5	6	17.6	2	18.2	20	21.3
Did not answer	3	6.1	0	0.0	1	9.1	4	4.3

*Multiple response

Among the very few comments La Mancha participants provided, one (LM1) acknowledged the winery's role in "Maintaining the socio-economic fabric of the population." For LMW2, the importance of helping preserve the landscape and increasing the awareness about being environmentally friendly was a form of benefitting the local community: "We have increased our grape growers' (ecological) awareness in such a way that we are the largest winery in ecologic agriculture in Europe with more than 600 hectares that qualify as ecologic agriculture, and 300 more hectares that are to be converted to this scheme." A third respondent from La Mancha (LMW3) saw increasing the quality of the region's wines as a critical way to support the local community: "Improving the image of the wine in a region of great production and bad quality image such as La Mancha."

A statement from RW4 illustrated the strong impact of some of this region's wineries on their community: "This is a cooperative formed of 850 'socios' or stakeholders. Practically 90% of the community belongs to the winery, and our winery generates 75% of the local income." Participant RW5 saw the winery's role in providing proper access to visitors from different groups: "Our winery can be visited 100% by people in wheelchairs and by those visually impaired...", as well as in being a guardian of the local environment: "We have been pioneers in protecting the surroundings, utilizing a mere 20% of natural resources of what the sector utilizes on average." For other La Rioja winery operators, however, their winery was making an important contribution in marketing the region as a tourism destination, or in sponsoring community related activities and events:

RW6: *"Developing the viticultural sector regionally and making it known internationally."*

RW7: *"Giving prestige."*

RW8: *"What most attracts our visitors is the rumour about the quality of our wines and even the idea that we are different."*

RW9: *"Fomenting cultural events."*

RW10: *"Participating in city hall sponsored events such as Wine Day and biannual painting contests."*

Working with and for the local community has in many cases been a century-long tradition that wineries have learned to nurture, and more recently a way for the newer wineries to be involved in local causes and build the social fabric between themselves and the community. Doing so also demonstrates wineries' commitment to develop their region while counting on the local human asset as part of this process. Mirroring several participants' reasons for being open to the public, there appears to be agreement that long-term strategies such as investing in or becoming involved in the local community will contribute to the sustainable growth of tourism in wine regions. Supporting the local community by means of providing employment not only helps minimise the exodus of locals to metropolitan areas and the subsequent loss of locally available labour, but at the same time it helps maintain the authenticity element in the local communities and wine region. These valuable assets may further enrich many visitors' experience, contribute to their investment during their visit and help secure the future survival of rural communities.

Conclusions, implications, limitations and future research

Despite recent negative developments in Spain's wine and tourism industries, the progressive growth in wine trail development and many winery operators' willingness to jump onto the wine tourism bandwagon provide a promising outlook for the wine and tourism industries in years to come. These developments could have direct impacts on the wine and tourism industries' stakeholders, as well as on the communities where wineries are located. To date, and despite being a century long-established wine country, in many cases Spanish wine trails and wine tourism appear to be in their very initial stages. Thus it is not surprising that the bulk of wine tourism research in Spain has only taken place in very recent years. This study adds to the existing body of wine tourism research, exploring current developments in three traditional Spanish wine regions from wine operators' perspectives.

The current crisis in the tourism sector, the year-long decline in wine consumption that Spain has experienced and the aggravating effects of global recession illustrate current serious challenges for both the wine and tourism industries. Also, growing competition from more tourist destinations and more wine regions that not only produce quality wines but also are investing in tourism development emphasise the critical importance for the Spanish wine and tourism industries to find alternative ways to respond to the threats posed.

Wine regions such as Penedès are blessed with near-by beaches and tourist resorts. Other regions such as the world-known La Rioja, despite its physical distance from tourism centres or from the sun and beaches of the coastal areas are striving to become stronger magnets of visitors, using the wine product, the winery, the scenery and in some cases the local gastronomy as the core themes to draw visitors. Yet others with less fame and tradition struggle to move forward. Wineries do provide many benefits to rural areas, including the landscape, a traditional product (wine), and among those open to the public an additional activity and service to visitors to the area, thereby adding value both directly and indirectly to visitors' experience and to the local community where part of wineries' revenues are spent (taxes). In addition, as some operators indicated in this study, wineries also provide a number of critical benefits, if not quantifiable in money terms, but that are of great importance to the local population, particularly employment or donating wine for local events, thereby building or preserving the area's social fabric.

Figure 2
HOW WINERY OPERATORS VIEW INVOLVEMENT WITH TOURISM AND THEIR COMMUNITY

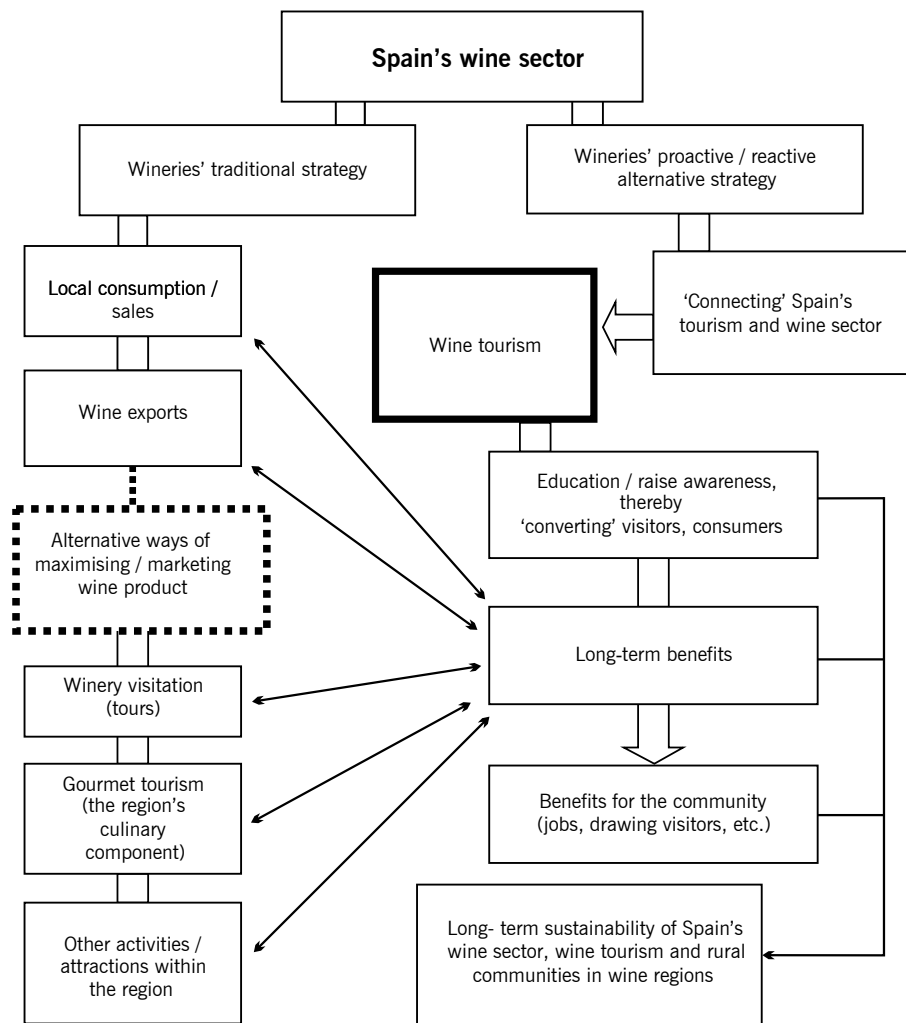


Figure 2 illustrates some of the findings and patterns identified in this study, particularly in relation to a) how winery operators see their 'mission' with regard to opening their businesses to the public, and b) how operators view their (positive) involvement with their surrounding community. Together, these views or perspectives, if executed may lead to a long-term, sustainable process with direct benefits for the wine sector in these or other wine regions, for the local communities and rural areas. In this context, maximising the potential of the different visitor segments available among the dozens of millions of tourists Spain receives each year provides an immense resource. Moreover, part of this already existing pool of consumers could be 'converted' to Spain's wines, and wine tourism, and activity that, in combination with food and the landscape of rural areas may be as fulfilling or even more fulfilling than the traditional sun and beach activities.

However, to further develop wine tourism wineries cannot be left alone to execute such costly and professional enterprise, particularly as the large majority are one-family ventures with very limited resources. Thus, if wine tourism is to grow, national, regional and local agencies need to foment such processes, investing in infrastructure, and promoting the local wine and gastronomy for the benefit of all.

Although this study provided valuable insights into the wine tourism sector in the three regions explored, certain limitations need to be recognised. Furthermore, the authors acknowledge that the overall low number of participants and that of the individual wine regions (La Mancha) do not allow for making generalizations or comparisons among the wine regions. However, this first effort of exploring wine tourism in regions where to date there has been very limited research provides several avenues for future studies. For example, using a larger number of respondents future research could further explore wine trail development in the regions investigated in this study, as well as winery visitors' views, expectations, demands and overall winery experience. The further exploration of these areas would provide stakeholders with very useful / practical information that would not only assist La Mancha, La Rioja and Penedès but also other Spanish regions, and even those in other countries that are making efforts to evolve as wine and / or tourism destinations.

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