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Wine tourism: a showcase for the agroecological development of vineyards? Part 1

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This study aims to link the environmental challenges faced by the wine sector with the wine tourism dynamics in winegrowing regions. It aims to understand how wine tourism can enhance and promote environmentally friendly actions and biodiversity in vineyards. The research covers various stakeholders and scales. It examines how highlighting agroecological practices in the wine tourism offers (in particular maintaining and/or enhancing biodiversity) can simultaneously interest tourists, benefit winegrowers and promote the ecological transition of winegrowing regions.

Wine tourism, enhancement of landscapes and agroecological transition of regions

At the heart of the process of developing cultural and regional heritage[1, 2], vineyards are an integral part of regional identities[3, 4]. In France, vineyards and winegrowing landscapes have been transformed since the 1950s as a result of the profound changes in the sector[5, 6]: from the industrialization of agriculture to urbanization and the growth of built-up areas, along with changes in consumption patterns, global competition and the opening up of vineyards to tourism[7].

Today, these issues have been supplemented by new concerns, with climate change and the conservation of biodiversity at the top of the list[8,9,7]. Winegrowers must not only adapt to these challenges to ensure the viability of their wines, but also that of their estates, in a context where consumers are more vigilant than ever and demand "healthy" products that are "good for the environment".[10,11,12]. Consumer awareness of health and environmental issues, new regulatory requirements, combined with new agronomic challenges and the wish of winegrowers themselves to reduce their exposure to pesticides, are all leading to a gradual transformation of production methods, an adaptation of cultivation practices and a change in the way vineyards are managed. The landscapes reflect these changes.

Wine tourists are privileged spectators of these changes. Since the early 2000s, tours of wine cellars have evolved from a purely commercial activity into a genuine tourist activity[13]. Wine tourism is now a way to boost and diversifying the economy of winegrowing regions, and offers new outlets for winegrowers.

Biodiversity at the heart of attractive and diverse winegrowing landscapes

Research into landscape ecology demonstrates the role and importance of biodiversity in everyday spaces[14]. From untouchable, untouched nature with its remarkable biodiversity, the focus has shifted to the need to conserve ordinary, functional biodiversity at the heart of human activities and societies. The landscapes reflect this paradigm shift (Figure 1)[15].

If tourists are among the privileged spectators of this landscape transformation, it is because, as sociologist Jean Viard puts it, they "enter society through the landscape and not through its inhabitants"[16]. In the context of French winegrowing landscapes, tourists are witnesses to the intimate relationship between winegrowing practices and landscape issues.



FIGURE 1. Wine tourism, a means of enhancing winegrowing landscapes and transforming them (showcasing woods surrounding vineyards, hedges, grass cover between rows, etc.).

The AOC regulations governing wine-growing areas require a particular form of vineyard management and landscaping, depending on the area of production.

Winegrowing landscapes are subject to relatively strict regulations, as they are the place where these issues are played out while also being a showcase for winegrowing practices. While landscapes reflect the "long history of the French vineyard"[17] and the diversity of its terroirs[17], the wine world is becoming increasingly aware of "the value of winegrowing landscapes and the emotional and cultural images that go with them"[18] as wine consumption becomes increasingly integrated into a complex eno-cultural context. Alongside sensory perceptions, which form the basis of the intrinsic qualitative perception of the product (based essentially on the match between terroir/grape variety/winemaking), perceived quality, the foundation of the image and support for the economic development of the appellation, "increasingly includes complementary components relating in particular to health, the environment and heritage values"[19]. Consequently, promoting the typical character of the landscape is "an important means of communication, through wine tourism activities, but also through the media"[19].

This makes it all the more attractive for winegrowers to be actors in this landscape management project, and use it to promote the quality of their vineyards and wines.

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All the more so as the winegrowing landscape constitutes a cultural medium associated with wine, but free from the regulatory constraints associated with alcoholic beverages.
This is what Paul Dubrule's report (2007)[20] on wine tourism highlights when he outlines the link between the challenges of showcasing heritage and the role of landscapes in the development of winegrowing regions.
At a time when, for tourists more generally, "travel is no longer just a quest for emotive images […] but also for a multiplicity of emotions", and "gustatory, auditory and tactile experiences can thus leave a strong mark on the memories of new tourists"[21], wine tourism enhances the value of wines and their tasting by integrating them into a specific landscape resulting from a specific history and geography. The typical character of know-how, landscapes and place leads to enhancement of the product itself. As a result, wine tourism is not only playing a growing role "in enhancing the value of winegrowing regions", but is also "contributing to the image and added value of these regions' wines"[22].

Multiple initiatives

This interaction is fertile ground for linking wine tourism, the economic development of the wine sector and the agroecological transition of winegrowing regions, and many players in the French wine industry are already making use of it. While the white paper on wine tourism in Champagne pointed out that sustainable wine tourism was one of visitors' four main expectations, the "Slow Tourism Lab", created in 2017 at the initiative of the Aube tourist board, is the world's first incubator for companies wishing to innovate in sustainable tourism in general and "ecological wine tourism" in particular. The regional Vitirev project in Nouvelle-Aquitaine, launched in 2019 and aimed at accelerating the move away from pesticides by incorporating agroecological practices into the region's vineyards, also has a focus on developing sustainable wine tourism, notably through the creation of training courses for wine industry professionals provided by academics from the Institut des Sciences de la Vigne et du Vin (ISVV). Other initiatives are emerging from individual vineyards, also promoted to consumers through wine tourism. ■

Sourced from the research article: " L'œnotourisme, nouvel allié de la transition écologique au sein des vignobles ? exemple en Val de Loire " (Norois, 2021). .

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