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Wine tourism: a showcase for the agroecological development of vineyards? Part 2

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This study aims to link the environmental challenges faced by the wine sector with the wine tourism dynamic 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 offer (in particular maintaining and/or enhancing biodiversity) can simultaneously interest tourists, benefit winegrowers and promote the ecological transition of these regions.

Wine tourism, a showcase and a means for sustainable development

The following results are from an 18-month study conducted in the Loire Valley between 2019 and 2020. A 6-month field study was conducted in the vineyards, divided between participant observations at wineries and semi-structured interviews with tourists and wine tourism stakeholders. The estates covered by the study varied in terms of status, size and environmental certification. The "wine tourism experiences" observed took place in different contexts, in different AOCs, and were offered and led by different stakeholders. The 112 wine tourists surveyed also came from varied backgrounds. This entire study took place in the Anjou-Saumur vineyard of the Loire Valley, so the results obtained in the field should first and foremost be seen from a regional perspective. The observations took place on 10 estates over 30 half-days. The results of this study could be supplemented by other field studies, to open it up to other winegrowing regions.

Advantages of the methodology used

The aim of the observations was to identify the types of tour offered by wine estates, the topics covered, and to take into account the types of interaction that take place as part of the wine tourism experience (words that stand out, potentially tense situations, approval or complicity, etc.). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with wine tourists following their tour. After characterizing the respondents (socio-demographic characteristics, but also wine knowledge, frequency of wine-related tourist activities, etc.), the aim was to establish how they had chosen the wine estate visited, their criteria for choice, but also the context of their tour and the other activities planned as part of their stay. Following that, they were asked to think about the tour they had just made, in particular what they had most enjoyed, their discoveries, and their relationship with the area in question, with several questions focusing on the winegrowing landscape. Biodiversity and agroecology were among the topics discussed: questions on these subjects were asked at the end of the interview, with the aim of capturing the respondents' understanding and definition of the concepts, as well as their sensitivity to these topics (even if this sensitivity may have been apparent at other times during the interview and during the observations). Finally, the aim of the semi-structured interviews with wine tourism stakeholders (wine tourism managers, tourist offices, departmental and regional tourist boards) was to identify the strategy adopted by the various stakeholders to promote tourism in winegrowing areas, and the role of environmental and landscape issues in this strategy.

Main results

The study showed that the link between promoting tourism in winegrowing regions and their agroecological development is a fertile ground that can be considered not only on an individual scale, but also within the framework of collective strategies. In the Loire Valley, the importance of collective strategies as part of the agroecological transition of winegrowing regions took shape in 2004, when the Saumur-Champigny winegrowers' union embarked on a program to develop biodiversity in its vineyards. Over the past 15 years, other appellations, unions and interprofessional bodies have followed suit. For all that, the link to developing these same regions through wine tourism is often lacking.

Wine tourism is a way of promoting the actions implemented by professionals, helping to create value in a more environmentally friendly model. While tourists come primarily to discover a product and the know-how behind it, many of them also want to understand the production process, with a constant focus on environmental issues. Biodiversity is tangible, observable and plays an important role in highlighting these environmental issues. As such, the implementation of new agroecological practices and wine tourism can form a profitable duo for those involved in both the wine sector and in the development of winegrowing regions.

Observations have shown that the wine tourism offer, particularly when it includes a tour of the vineyard, can promote agroecological practices and dynamics through the lens of functional biodiversity (Figure 1).

The observations and interviews showed that these agroecological practices and dynamics, particularly those promoting biodiversity, were widely valued by visitors and could thus be assets for the development of tourism and the promotion of winegrowing regions.



FIGURE 1. Roses at the edge of the plot, grass cover between the rows and chickadee nesting boxes in isolated trees surrounding the vineyard: promoting functional biodiversity. Photo credits: N. Rouiai, 2019, Anjou.

The translation of this article into English was offered to you by Moët Hennessy.

Lastly, our interviews with stakeholders in the wine and tourism sectors showed that the link between agroecology and wine tourism is to be found in the very nature of these two dynamics: choosing to offer a complete wine tourism package, and in particular to agree to give tours of the vineyard, generally requires openness and transparency regarding practices. This last point was widely emphasized by winegrowers and estate managers during the semi-structured interviews. In all the estates studied, it emerged that the development of wine tourism went hand in hand with increasingly environmentally friendly viticultural practices: reduction of inputs, development of biocontrol to varying degrees depending on the estate.

While it also emerged from the interviews that wine tourism in itself was not driving new practices, the openness represented by offering a rich wine tourism offering – i.e., not limiting its offerings to simple tastings and, in particular, giving tourists the chance to see the vines – often coincides with an approach to winegrowing that is "transparent", as they put it, and geared towards the agroecological development of the vineyard.

As such, wine tourism can be a lever for the agroecological development of vineyards. Beyond the individual practices of winegrowers, this phenomenon is reinforced when collective strategies are put in place with this in mind. Those involved in the development and planning of winegrowing areas (associations, local authorities, interprofessional bodies, winegrowing federations, local, departmental and regional tourist boards, etc.) all have a role to play. This can be achieved by supporting and training sector stakeholders. Since 2021, a sustainable tourism fund, managed by the French Agency for the ecological transition (ADEME) and designed to fund sustainable tourism initiatives, has been set up throughout France. On a regional scale, branches of the French Bird Protection League (LPO) support winegrowers in their efforts by providing expertise and equipment (nesting boxes, etc.). On a departmental level, the departmental tourist boards generally offer resource centers, guides to environmental/wine tourism practices, and support for tourism project owners to help them assess the environmental impact of their activities. The role of local authorities can also be seen in the development of walking and cycling tracks, or in the organization of events for the general public aimed at promoting landscapes, regions and wineries through sustainable mobility.

The winegrowers emphasized their interest in taking part in this type of event, which promotes the winegrowing region while having the potential to raise the profile of their own estates and wines. While they say that wine tourism strategies are above all individual and reflect the choices of estates and winegrowers, they also insist that collective strategies help to develop tourist destinations and structure the identity of vineyards. ■

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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