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Wine tourism in the Canary Islands: An exploratory study

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Abstract: Wine tourism is experiencing significant development in both new and old European wine regions. In the case of the Canary Islands, wine has been produced and traded for centuries but little is known about the current state or potential for wine tourism on the islands, despite the fact that millions of tourists, including many potential wine tourists, visit the islands each year. In this exploratory study, the perspectives of winery owners and managers on wine tourism are examined via in-depth face-to-face interviews among 23 small winery operators to reveal that the scope for exploiting wine tourism on the islands has been recognized and that some wineries are either already involved in wine tourism, including as part of a wine trail, or plan to be more involved in the future. It was also discovered, that there were a number of issues that challenge the development of their wine and wine tourism industry, including competition from non-Canary Island wines and anti-drink-drive laws that are inhibit passers by to consume wine at the cellar door. Operators stressed the need to find a balance between mass tourism and the niche produce of wine. Moreover, the findings identify avenues for future research on wine tourism development in the Canary Islands.

Keywords: Wine; Tourism; Wine tourism; Canary Islands; Wine operators

Resumen: Mientras el turismo del vino está desarrollándose en varias regiones vinícolas europeas, la evolución del mismo, o su potencial, en las Islas Canarias son poco conocidos. Este estudio exploratorio examina estas áreas entre 23 bodegas insulares. Los resultados revelan el potencial de desarrollo del turismo del vino en las islas, con bodegas que, o bien ya forman parte de este concepto, o planean aumentar su participación. Los bodegueros entrevistados reconocen impedimentos que están frenando el desarrollo de la industria vinícola y del turismo del vino en las islas, incluyendo la competición de vinos foráneos y leyes del control de alcoholemia que inhiben el consumo del vino en bodegas entre los visitantes. Asimismo, los bodegueros perciben la necesidad de encontrar un balance entre el turismo en masa y el nicho del producto vinícola. Finalmente, el estudio propone áreas de futura investigación sobre el desarrollo del turismo del vino en Canarias.

Palabras clave: Vino; Turismo; Turismo del vino; Islas Canarias; Operadores de bodegas

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Introduction: Wine Tourism

Wine tourism is a concept that involves visitation of cellar doors (Cambourne, 1998), wineries, and vineyards to taste wines (O'Neill, Palmer, Charters & Fitz, 2001). Recent wine tourism research encompasses studies in many distant geographical areas scattered throughout the world. For instance, Mitchell (1999; 2002) and Mitchell and Hall (2001) conducted pioneering studies in New Zealand exploring winery visitors' behaviours. The visitor dimension is also studied by Charters and Ali-Knight (2002) in Australia, Tassiopoulos, Nuntsu & Haydam (2004) in South Africa. Carlsen and Ali-Knight (2004) discuss wine tourism management in California's Napa Valley. Sharples (2002) investigates wine tourism development in Chile, Wargenau and Che (2006) in Southwest Michigan, Dodd (1995) in Texas, and Telfer (2001) and Getz and Brown (2006) in Canada. The potential gains that rural areas may obtain from wine tourism are also underlined in studies from Portugal (Correia & Ascencao, 2004), Israel (Jaffe & Pasternak, 2004), and Italy (Scottini, Menghini & Scozzafava, 2005; Di Gregorio & Licari, 2006). The wine tourism discussion has also been extended to several books, with Getz (2000) providing a comprehensive overview of the concept, Hall, Sharples, Cambourne, Macionis, Mitchell, and Johnson (2000) presenting wine tourism from different part of the world, and Carlsen and Charters (2006) expanded on previous efforts through their investigation of global wine tourism. This study complements this growing body of research by exploring wine tourism within the context of a popular tourist destination where wine, a traditional product with centuries of history, has lived in the shadow of the tourism industry: the Canary Islands in Spain.

Literature Review: Canary Islands' Tourism, Wine, and Wine Tourism

For decades, the Canary Island archipelago has been a synonym for - and a destination of - mass tourism and cheap package tours (McLane, 2000). Recent figures from

the Canary Institute of Statistics (2007) note that in recent years the number of tourist arrivals has been close to ten million, a stark contrast when compared to the islands' 1.6 million inhabitants. Many reasons prevail in tourists' minds to travel to the archipelago, often erroneously glorified among outside visitors as a party place, an image that is far from what renowned party destinations such as some Balearic or Aegean Islands may have in offer.

Despite the fact that low budget tourism continues to prevail as a very important economic activity (Canary Institute of Statistics, 2007), the Canary Islands provide a safe heaven for visitors in a number of ways. For example, the islands' all-year-round benign temperatures with lots of sunlight, beaches (Garín-Muñoz, 2006), and spectacularly varied forms of natural landscape are among the most attractive elements that the 'Canaries' offer to visitors and locals. Different microclimates also allow for the production of crops that, as the vineyards in the Tacoronte-Acentejo area or the banana plantations in the Orotava Valley, have over time become tourist attractions. The advent of agrotourism, a concept that involves leisure activities farmers organise to cater for visitors to rural areas (Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, 1992) suggests the potential of rural based tourism as an alternative to sun and beach (Parra López & Calero García, 2006). The combination of wine and tourism also appears to fit in this category.

Canary Islands' wine production is very marginal in comparison to mainland Spain's (García Fernández, 1999; Agriculture, Farming, Fisheries and Food Council, 2004). However, grape growing occupies 10% of cultivatable soil in the archipelago (García Fernández, 1999; Agriculture, Farming, Fisheries and Food Council, 2004). Moreover, the wine product has a long tradition and is well ingrained in the islands' folklore, its landscape, and agricultural heritage (García Fernández, 1999; El Día, 2001). Wine's tradition as accompaniment of meals, and as part of the local culture, for instance, consumed in festivals is also very long. García Fernández (1999) explains that vines already existed in the

'Canaries' in the 15th century and that a wine trade was established between the archipelago and the United Kingdom. Later events saw disease and a general decline that brought the local winery industry to the brink of extinction; however, after a long period of decline (García Fernández, 1999), the industry recovered. In recent decades, the introduction of quality controls and the development of industry structures have been welcome initiatives to support local wines. An illustration of these developments is the assigning of 'designation of origin' status to wineries that adhere to prescribed quality standards (Godenau, Suárez Sosa, Gil Díaz, & Fernández López, 2000; Sainz, 2002; Martínez-Carrasco, Brugarolas & Martínez-Poveda, 2005). In this regard, the role of regulatory councils is fundamental, as they can monitor the implementation of more efficient production methods (Godenau & Suárez Sosa, 2002). At the same time, the 'informal' side of the wine industry, with its 'guachinches' or casual eateries often located in houses' garages (Jolonch, 2007), a local tradition of no-label, home-made wines sold in combination with local dishes continues. However, the more formal side of the industry, with quality assurance methods and strategies in place is gaining recognition among local grape growers keen to succeed in a very competitive market.

A recent success story, whereby the local Malvasía wines gained accolades at the 2007 International Wine and Spirit Competition (IWSC) in London (Feo, 2007; IWSC, 2007) demonstrates that opportunities exist for the small Canary Island niche market of premium wines. At the present time, however, formalised wine tourism products are largely unavailable. A demonstration of this situation is that only one operating wine trail is already operating on the island of Gran Canaria (La Ruta del Vino, 2007), a second was just developing on La Palma Island in 2007 (Enoturismo La Palma, n.d), and a third was to be started in 2007 in the Tacoronte-Acentejo region of Tenerife (Designation of Origin Tacoronte-Acentejo, 2006). No information was available on potential wine trail development on other islands in 2007. Godenau et al. (2000) also acknowledge that consumption and

knowledge of local designation of origin wines is very limited, and issue that appears to be preventing the local wine industry from capitalising on the many millions of visitors travelling to the islands each year. Clearly, wine tourism could also provide benefits in other regards, including aiding in conservation efforts of the islands' vineyards, particularly in view of rapid urbanisation in many areas where vines are planted, and issue that is currently taking place in many of the islands' rural communities.

Several additional issues add to the existing constraints the islands' vineyards face at the present time. The 2007 harvest, for example, was almost systematically lost due to the weather conditions prior to the harvest weeks (El Día, 2007a, El Día, 2007b); in addition, Spain's wine industry is experiencing saturation (Angulo, Gil, Gracia & Sanchez, 2000), and wine consumption in Spain is decreasing.

While an increasing number of studies focussing on Canary Islands' wine industry is being published, to date very limited information exists on the archipelago's wine tourism industry, particularly from an academic perspective. The objective of this study is to close this knowledge gap and provide information from winery operators' points of views that might help to answer the following questions:

- What is the background / history of the local wineries?
- Are wineries open to the public?
- What, if any, is wineries' relationship with tourism?
- What challenges do wineries face at the present time?

Methodology

An initial consultation of different database searches, including Tacoronte-Acentejo's designation of origin website (www.tacovin.com) identified 61 wineries, 45 on the island of Tenerife and 16 on the island of La Palma. These operations, all of which had already gained designation of origin status, were approached during May 2007 via a letter that presented the objectives of the study and formally invited each winery to participate in the study. While a

total of six of the seven islands of the archipelago currently have wineries with designation of origin, the selection of Tenerife and La Palma obeys to several reasons. First, the Tacoronte-Acentejo provided several positive aspects, including its large number of wineries within a very small geographical area. In addition, this wine region is the oldest as compared to all other islands' wine regions to have gained designation of origin status. These characteristics are thus fundamental in choosing wineries from the Tacoronte-Acentejo region. Second, one of the researchers' knowledge of La Palma Island, and this island's current wine tourism development in the form of establishing a wine trail provided both convenience and an opportunity to explore current developments. Third, the contact established with wineries in only two islands serves as a first step to investigate wine tourism development in the entire Canary Island archipelago using a longitudinal approach. Hence, this exploratory study might aid in the process of following the islands' wine tourism development in a longitudinal manner.

The travel of one of the researchers to the Canary Islands in late May 2007 allowed for a follow up on the letters sent previously. Phone calls were made to each winery to formally invite owners, operators and / or winemakers to a face-to-face interview during June 2007. This time of the year was chosen as it did not clash with major winery related activities such as harvests or pruning. However, work and other commitments prevented several operators from taking part in the study. Overall, from the 61 operations approached, 23 accepted to participate in the study, a 37.7% response rate. The geographical split of participants was 15 wineries from Tenerife and eight from La Palma Island. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were designed to explore the background of the operations, relationship with hospitality in the form of being open to the public through a cellar door, café, restaurant, etc., relationship with tourism, for instance, in the form of hosting formal visits, and challenges operations faced at the time of the interviews. In all cases, operators were called in advance to allow them to

choose a convenient day and time; the researcher then met with operators at the wineries. The time of the interviews ranged between 10 and 20 minutes. At the end of interview process, two of the researchers who are bilingual in Spanish-English translated and transcribed the previously recorded interviews. To assist in the data management and analysis process, the qualitative data software NVivo 7 was used.

Contact established with the autonomous Canary Island government office identified the existence of some 200 mostly micro/family wineries in the archipelago. Thus, it is acknowledged that the rather small number of wineries participating in this study might not be representative of all wineries in the Canary Islands, and for this reason, the findings are taken cautiously as to any generalisations made from them.

Findings and discussion

Background of the wineries

Asked about the background of their operations, varied responses were elicited as to how wineries became established. One respondent for example stated that *"We are very new; the winery was established in 1999 and we sold our first harvest in 2000... The main reason for existence is to find outlets for local producers' grapes."*

However, the central theme among operations appears to be the preservation of tradition with several responses suggesting this motive as a reason for embarking in the wine industry: *"Our winery is tradition in our family; my grandfather was a wine producer. He was very passionate about wine and produced wine in a very traditional way. My father also planted wines, and we (his sons) took over in 1995."* *"We started this business because my father traded wines; he purchased them and re-sold them [middleman]. My older brother studied oenology and from 1997 we were accredited denomination of origin..."* *"This winery has existed for 5 generations."* One respondent stated that *"Our family is the oldest in the Canary Islands; we have produced wines since the 16th century. In fact, in 1615 we exported Malvasía wines. Our*

family was also one of the first that exported Canary wines."

Some wineries combined tradition with education as tools to run their businesses: *"Started in 1997, as a privately / family owned business. Our parents used to produce wine before... We are in the wine industry because we finished a degree in oenology. We want to live from this activity."* *"We are a family business composed of 5 people. One of my sons is oenologist, the other is technical agricultural engineer, and the other one is finishing his chemical engineer career. We created our own history, my wife and my three sons."*

Some of the participants also had formed cooperatives incorporating many micro growers. One of these, currently regulated by the local council had been established for non-economic reasons: *"The main reason for having the winery was the council's intention to preserve the natural landscape through the conservation of a traditional crop."* Non economic reasons were also suggested by a small family winery: *"We started this activity not for business purposes but because we like wine. We could not make money out of this; it is not worth it except in those larger wineries that are known."* Another respondent's comment suggests that the winery business started to fight fake wines in the local market: *"This winery was created in 1986 to protect local wine production against outside wines that were being sold as local."*

A first step towards wine tourism involvement

Asked whether their operations are open to the public or not, it is noticed that some wineries are already on the wine tourism bandwagon: *"we have always been open to the public. We have a tasting room only for groups and a shop will be open next week. In addition, we are preparing a trail for people to walk in and out of the winery. The main reason to be open to the public is for people to know our brand and benefit from word of mouth. Wine tourism has existed for a long time but officially is a new development."*

Wineries are also providing hospitality facilities in an effort to integrate to wine

and tourism: *"We have facilities that include a restaurant, banqueting rooms and tasting room. We have had success so far with it. Word of mouth is particularly successful..."* Other operations are currently looking for ways to build a rapport with tourism, for example, in the form of opening their facilities to visitors: *"Yes, we are open on an appointment basis. These visits often depend on the winery's availability to receive such visitors and also on the winery's activities... Although we have not set up our winery to welcome tourists we do receive them. We have cellar door sales at the winery and on weekends we also have a stand in the local municipal market."* Such rapport is also being made between wineries and outsiders: *"we also have foreign visitors who come visiting the near-by rural trails and stop by to purchase our wines."* Despite the economic incentive, educating visitors might provide future opportunities: *"we have cellar door sales. We like people to visit us; we like to speak to them to create demand [for wine] in them. Here we open to sell and to inform people; we provide a service."* Another comment demonstrates the relevance of education among winery operators: *"We have welcomed visitors for a long time and we try to explain to them the wine making process, bottling, etc. We believe that being open to the public provides an attraction that might help the sale of our wines."* Food offerings might also help to stimulate wine demand: *"We are open to the public with our restaurant serving as a channel to sell our wines."*

A clearly defined strategy also suggests opportunities for the establishment of wine tourism: *"we have a project to offer visitor facilities to assist visitors to know about wine and about oenology on this island. Basically, we want to spread the word about the wine product. Our main objective is to offer a tasting room starting in 2008."* Even among operations currently not open to the public, *"We try to be; in fact, when people call us we welcome them. We have this space to offer tastings. We have a project to build an underground winery; for the moment we need to work on other areas."* Also, some wineries have an intention to 'connect' with tourism: *"If someone*

calls us to arrange a visit, or just visits us we try to fulfil their request."

Challenges Wineries Face

Winery operators voiced a wide range of areas that are currently posing challenges to both wineries and wine tourism development. In some cases, current visitor demographics and lack of infrastructure are barriers limiting wine tourism development: *"Most tourists here are coming to enjoy the sun and drink beer. However, there are others, who are increasingly more and are concerned of the ecology and willing to learn. These tourists travel in rented cars and visit places in small groups. The problem is that you have very few wineries that are well organised to host visitors."* Lack of knowledge of Canary wines poses further challenges: *"Obviously, the quality of the tourism coming to the Canaries is clearly not the best but our wines are not been advertised, and therefore few outsiders know about us."*

Despite the potential for attracting visitors, some wineries are also struggling to develop in a way that matches interest and demand: *"Yes, we are open to visitors; however right now because we are in the process of growing, we have not conditioned the vineyards to accommodate tours, and we do not have one person taking care of this area. Often I do make bookings for smaller bus tours; we have had the local wine club in the last two months."* Another comment further indicates infrastructure limitations: *"We don't have buses or anything like that and because we don't have the facilities we don't think we are fully suited to be open to the public at the moment."*

Despite infrastructure issues, some businesses want to 'get it right' the first time around: *"we are on a trial period (only two days per week at the moment). Some tour-operators are keen to bring people here but we are starting very tentatively, with small groups. To have tour-operators bring lots of people we will have to improve our facilities."*

However, other problems that are beyond wineries' budgets, and / or other forms of control are currently limiting their ability to fully exploit from the numerous opportunities that might be found in some segments of the millions of visitors the islands receive every year: *"Starting from the fact that the laws are punishing the sector more and more, for example, transportation laws banning the carrying of wines [as hand luggage on airplanes], laws against drink-driving [taking points off offenders' driver's license], that in my opinion are necessary but... all these issues are contributing to discouraging the youth from drinking wine."* Competition from outside wines poses further threats to Canary wines: *"Another problem is that our wines here are expensive in comparison to other Spanish 'young' wines."* Another respondent echoed this comment, further suggesting marketing and competition issues: *"We are facing a marketing problem: how to market the wine product. We are facing stiff competition. The means of transportation are so sophisticated nowadays and we can easily get wines from anywhere at very low prices."* One of the main problems related to competition is the uniqueness of the geographic nature of Canary Islands' vineyards, with its hilly terrain that in many cases makes mechanisation impossible: *"The geographic nature of the vine plantations does not allow for mechanisation; here much of the work is manual."* Thus, production costs play against the price competitiveness of Canary wines: *"Our production (islands) is expensive... the cost of grapes is high; we are paying the kilogram of grapes at a high price. What happens then? When we bring the wine to the market we are bringing a more expensive product, while products from other regions are very cheap with a low cost."*

Only one respondent emphasised weather issues as a fundamental challenge for wineries: *"The most difficult aspect at the moment is the unpredictability of the weather. Suddenly, you think that the vi-*

neyard is doing well and that his week is not raining, then you fumigate and the following week it then rains. Every year the weather is different and this is quite obvious, quite obvious."

Conclusion

While the wine product has been a common feature in Canary Island people's lifestyle for centuries, and tourism is the island's main industry, limited information exists on Canary Islands' wine industry and wine tourism from an academic perspective. The main objective of this study was to close knowledge gaps in those areas using in-depth interviews among a small group of winery operators. Such an effort also constituted a first attempt to study the islands' wine and wine tourism industries' development longitudinally.

The findings illustrate a number of very contradicting areas in the entire wine tourism equation. The first issue is that the Canaries attract almost ten million outside visitors every year, mainly from countries other than Spain. However, most of these visitors are currently travelling on a low budget, often with an all-inclusive package. This might result in visitors' lack of interest, or budget, to venture and explore the islands on their own, including exploring the local wineries and wine trails. In addition, a low budget, all-inclusive vacation might also result in consuming cheaper wines at the local hotels. A second issue is that Canary Islands' wines are being internationally recognised for their quality; this is taking place in an extremely competitive market. However, respondents point out that Canary wines are more expensive to produce than many wines produced outside the archipelago mainly due to terrain conditions and resulting need for manual labour. This issue is creating a disadvantageous situation for the successful positioning of the local wines, with impacts on wine tourism consumption and marketing. Finally, current transportation laws limiting travellers' hand luggage and carrying wine

bottles on the airplanes and anti-drink-drive laws that are inhibiting or, as one respondent noted, discouraging wine purchases, consumption, and winery visitation among would-be customers.

Despite the severity of these issues, the potential for a successful development of wine tourism in the Canaries continues to exist. However, it is essential that wineries see benefits of the wine and tourism relationship. While, some operators' involvement might primarily obey to such 'philanthropic' reasons as passion and love for wines, if no economic incentive exists, operators will continue to sell their properties, as it is currently the case. As a result, entire areas where vineyards have formed the landscape for a great many years will be lost forever. In view of these and other developments, the local wine and wine tourism industries deserve much attention from researchers in future studies. In particular, the marketing of wine trails, the relationship between marketing and current mass tourism, the identification of tourist segments favouring local wines, and visitors' views on their wine, winery, and / or wine trail experience are critical areas that, if studied, might provide very useful insights into a relatively young and proud industry.

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