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Wine Tourism: A New Emerging Segment in Albania

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Abstract: *In the last four decades, tourism has received greater attention from researchers in several sciences. Wine regions can attract tourists who, in their turn, will be a source of revenue for the wine producers in that region. Though considered to be a niche segment, the interest in wine tourism research has grown because the wine sector is not just about producing a beverage; it's a multifaceted industry with significant economic, cultural, and social importance both in wine-producing regions and on a global scale. It contributes to job creation, international trade, tourism, and the preservation of cultural heritage, making it a vital sector for many countries around the world.*

Overall, wine tourism has the potential to be a catalyst for regional development by attracting visitors, creating jobs, spurring investments, and supporting local businesses. As a result, many regions around the world actively promote and invest in wine tourism as a means of enhancing their economic and cultural vitality.

Albania is new to the wine sector, so this paper aims to provide some useful insights related to the possibilities that wine tasting, wine tours, or wine-related events present to local businesses and for the creation of destination image.

1. INTRODUCTION

Wine tourism represents a major segment of culture tourism, and it is widely believed to be an effective driver of local development. Today's tourists are looking for forms of tourism that bring unique experiences and they are paying tourism operators to help them find the best experience within a limited period. The typical tourist of the twenty-first century seeks emotional stimulus and would fundamentally like to purchase feelings and not products (Opaschowski, 2001). These alternative tourist activities, which include sports, wine, culture, painting, adventure, opera, etc., can be categorised as special-interest tourism (Mckercher & Chan, 2005; Trauer, 2006).

There is a symbiotic relationship between wine and tourism. People travel to the so-called tourist destinations to visit some attractions. As attractions provide activities and experiences, they constitute a reason for visiting a specific destination. Many wine-producing regions are trying to become new tourist destinations. For the tourism industry, wine is an important component of the appeal of a particular destination, and it can even be the major motivation for visitors (Hall et al., 2009).

Thus, wine tourism has the potential to provide wine regions with a competitive advantage, and to generate profitable business for wineries, wine-related products and various services. It is therefore necessary for wine tourism to develop a customer-oriented commercial strategy, with the participation of all stakeholders such as wine firms and institutions, cultural institutions, and social entities, as well as the residents who earn a living, directly or indirectly, from the wine industry.

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The very nature of wine tourism principally involves the indulging of the senses in the wine product itself and its immediate aesthetic surroundings, and therefore an experiential view of the consumption of wine tourism seems justified (Dodd & Gustafson, 1997). The consumption of wine tourism occurs in the rural countryside where agriculture is normally practised, including vineyards, landscapes, tasting rooms, tourist facilities, etc., in other words, the 'winescape' (Johnson & Bruwer, 2007a).

Wine production and consumption have a long history in Albania, deeply rooted in its cultural heritage starting with the Illyrians and beyond. Albania has favourable climatic conditions and a rich tradition of wine production, as such it has the opportunity to position itself as an important element in the wine industry, not only in the Balkans and Europe but also beyond.

Despite these obvious advantages, the Albanian wine market remains relatively undeveloped and unexplored. The main objective of this paper is to contribute to the emerging wine tourism research and investigate the potential of wine tasting as a new market in Albania. Is it a growing market? Is it an industry that offers opportunities? What does it require to develop further and what does it offer to those who want to become part of this industry?

Answering these questions will provide valuable knowledge to entrepreneurs, investors, policymakers and other actors interested in taking advantage of the opportunities offered by wine tasting in Albania. Moreover, this paper will be a good motivation and a new window in increasing awareness of the heritage of wine production in Albania, and why not also give its help in the general image and branding of the country in the world community of wines.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Wine tourism has the potential to provide wine regions with a competitive advantage, and to generate profitable business for wineries, other products related to wine, and various services. It has been proved that the wine tourism industry is known as a recognized cluster within the regional development context. It is directly related to attracting new investments as well as increasing economic development investments due to the current number of wineries and cellar doors and the increasing number of new ones (Sanders, 2004). Wine tourism plays an important role in the economic development of the rural zones that are wine producers, given that it positively affects the generation of employment, the growth of business, and corporate investments (King & Morris, 1997)

Getz (2000) argues that wine tourism is a "form of consumer behaviour, a strategy by which destinations are developing and selling the image of wine-growing region and also a marketing opportunity for producers to sell products directly to the consumer". Wine tourism consists of an activity directly related to wine which provides a dynamic and versatile experience that integrates wine culture and heritage to create emotions, sensations, attachment and sensory impressions throughout the visit, allowing the wine tourist to become an advocate of that particular cellar, brand or wine region (Santos et al., 2019, p. 683). Winemakers manipulate particular geological, hydrological, and climatic characteristics and related microclimatic effects that significantly influence the quality of the grapes highlight wine characteristics and produce a fermented masterpiece.

The wine industry has experienced significant globalization, with the emergence of new wine markets, including China, India and other parts of Asia, contributing to the increase in wine consumption worldwide.

The world vineyard surface area is estimated to be 7.3 mha in 2022, only -0.4% marginally lower compared to 2021. World wine consumption and exports have suffered severely in 2022 due to the war in Ukraine and the associated energy crisis, and together with the global supply chain disruptions, have led to a spike in costs in production and distribution, increasing the average price by +15% compared to 2021 and a global wine exports value estimated at 37.6 bn EUR, even though the global wine exports amount to 107 mhl, 5% lower compared to 2021 and a world wine consumption, estimated at 232 mhl, with a decrease of 2 mhl compared to 2021 (OIV, 2023).

Wine regions can attract tourists who, in their turn, will be a source of revenue for the wine producers in that region. Wine is becoming an enticing element for tourism, given that it increases the tourist flow to production areas, creates an image of a quality tourist destination, and serves to develop a production area (Szivas, 1999). Certainly, new employment opportunities can be created in the tourism and wine industry (Hall et al., 2009).

Wine tourism offers a multi-faceted experience that combines cultural, historical, and gastronomic elements with the enjoyment of high-quality wines. It has become increasingly popular as people seek immersive and educational experiences related to food and beverages. In addition to wine tastings, wine tourism typically includes visits to various establishments related to winemaking including visits to wine museums, cellar tours, harvest events, wine festivals, etc. As Madeira et al. (2019) argued, the wine tourism experience typically consists of the simultaneous modelling interplay of wine, staff, cellar door, entertainment, education and aesthetics.

The "new" tourist is more experienced and therefore more demanding, expects to receive additional value, strives for individuality, is more flexible at short notice, is economically independent and is more price sensitive (Pikkemaat et al., 2009). The wineries' visitors are rarely interested simply in wine tasting but seek a total tourism experience (Getz et al., 2008). This includes activities closely related to tourism, like exploring the rural landscape and natural environment, local hospitality and gastronomy, communicating with local people, participating in cultural traditional festivals and with wine like meeting the winemakers and learning about wine (Alant & Bruwer, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2009). According to Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2012), wine tourists seek other kinds of wine-related activities such as dining, shopping, and recreational and cultural outlets, and these components should be additional parts of the wine tourism supply chain.

Wine tourism experiences are the reason ***why*** for wine tourism and wine destination selections. Wine experiences and winescapes also contribute to the image, appeal, and attractiveness of wine destinations (Bruwer et al., 2016). Wine tourism experience plays a crucial role in wine companies achieving a set of strategic and competitive advantages and opportunities for continuous growth, development and consolidation of wine tourism vacations and wine trips that occur, especially in wine tourism products and destinations (Duarte Alonso et al., 2014; Santos et al., 2021).

In marketing wine tourism, it is the specific experiential benefits that must be stressed, and carefully targeted. Bruwer (2003) identified ten specific visitor motivations for visiting a wine route and among the primary reasons are wine purchasing, wine tasting/sampling, country setting/vineyards and winery tour.

Wineries are the core attraction (Getz, 2000), but cannot stand alone (Getz & Brown, 2006). Pikkemaat et al. (2009) suggest that the initial interest (wine) is not on top of the experience driving factors. Instead, the aesthetic components, such as landscape and information about wine are success factors of high relevance in staging experiences. These results underline the existing potential to create experiences in wine tourism by creating an ideal atmosphere, guiding tourists and theming wine and wine production. Croce and Perri (2010) advocate a sustainable and profitable relationship among wineries, local suppliers and the local community. Factors such as the friendliness of winery staff, service provision, courteousness, knowledge, professional attitudes and believability are considered important by tourists (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2003) because the service provided by the winery was found to be the most enjoyable aspect of a visit to a winery (Hall & Mitchell, 2002).

Even though wine tourism is an emerging field of research in the tourism literature, most of the studies have captured the wineries' perspective (Mitchell et al., 2009; Tassiopoulos et al., 2004) or have occurred at the cellar door, neglecting the potential consumer at home (Getz & Brown, 2006) so there is no definitive profile of wine tourist. Winery visitors are much more highly educated and have higher household incomes (Dodd, 1995) so it can be expected that high-yield wine tourists will not be on cheap package deals (Dodd & Bigotte, 1997). Mitchell and Hall (2001a, p. 69) state "most authors suggest that winery visitors are typically middle-aged, highly educated, professional or managerial, with above average income". Whereas Charters and Ali-Knight (2002) identified four segments of wine tourists: the Wine Lover, (the 'highly interested'), the Wine Interested (those who self-classify as 'interested'), and Wine Novice (those with limited interest) and the 'Hanger On', (who goes to the winery with no apparent interest in wine, but as part of a group which has decided to visit).

3. METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this paper is to contribute to the emerging wine tourism research and investigate the potential of wine tasting as a new market in Albania. This paper adopts secondary research as a research method. Data were collected through reports, bulletins, and an extensive literature review available on Google, Google Scholar and the websites of institutions, organizations and other entities engaged somehow in the wine tourism industry.

4. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Related to the times of winemaking, Albania belongs to the old world of wine-producing countries and has one of the oldest wine-making traditions which dates back at least 3000 years ago to the Bronze Age Illyrians. Its geographical position enables a favourable climate and the fertile soil of the mountainous areas of the country is well suited to viticulture.

Albania has a long tradition of wine production dating back to ancient times. The first wine made by the Illyrians was made from honey and it was strong but very sweet (Aristotle 832 a,22 as cited in Shpuza, 2007). The Illyrians, an ancient civilization in the region, were known for growing grapes and making wine. The Illyrians' knowledge of winemaking techniques and the use of clay vessels/amphoras influenced early winemaking practices in the region.

The Turkish invasion and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire caused the wine evolution process to slow down a bit. The Muslim faith did not favour the use of the drink, therefore in all the countries conquered by the Ottoman occupation, this drink was prohibited, and heavy taxes were imposed on its producers, pushing many farmers to stop making wine.

During the communist regime, some wineries were built, but most of their production was aimed at export. Nowadays, large quantities of wine are produced by a few wineries, which have had traditions and have used the arsenal and technology of the past, such as the "Skenderbeu" Winery in Durres, the "Rilindja" Winery in Korce, Winery "Luani" in Berat, the Librazhdi canteen, the Gjirokastra canteen and some smaller ones. A large part of the amount of wine is made in newly created private wineries in different cities of Albania. Besides the investments in facilities and wineries, they are investing in human capital. By attending adequate education in Western Europe universities they bring a new breeze and approach to the wine industry. They have brought the Western experience and adopted it in the Albanian context. Some of them have opened a restaurant on their farms and offer the customer fresh vegetables, meat and wine from their wineries. Also, the customers can visit the winery or ask for a tour (available upon previous request).

The most important regions for wine production are Berat, Elbasan, Vlora, Fieri, Lezha, Durres, and Kavaja. The areas with the best reputation for quality wines are Berati, Përmeti and Lezha. Berat is the most important region for wine production in Albania where most wineries are located. Lezha is an area with several wineries, and it is closely related to the "Kallmet" grape variety, the main area to produce which is located in this region and is highly valued by Albanian consumers. Albanian territory can be divided into six wine-production regions: Zadrima, Sukthi, Narta, Myzeqeja, Korça and Përmeti. The main varieties of Albanian autochthonous grapes for red wine are Shesh i Zi, Kallmet, Vlosh, Serinë, Debina e Zeze, while among the white wines we rank Shesh i Bardhë, Debina e Bardhë, Pulës, Therepelë, etc., appreciated for their fruity aroma and flowers.

Most wine tourists are surprised by the flavours, nuances, and quality of the wine they encounter in local wineries. The history of winemaking in Albania dates back thousands of years, with a rich history and a recent resurgence in quality and production.

During the communist regime, Albania was closed to foreigners, but in 1990, after the fall of the regime, the country was looking for foreign investors and tourists. The number of tourists grew slowly, until 2018-2019, the years marked by steady growth. In 2021 the country experienced an increase in incoming tourism, followed by a boom in 2023. According to the Albanian Ministry of Tourism (2023c), 9,53 million foreign tourists visited Albania until November 2023. Compared to the period January-November 2022 there is an increase of 33%.

According to the latest report published by the Albanian Ministry of Tourism, the number of tourists entering Albania in the period January - October 2023 was 8,986,199, approximately 2,200,000 more than the same period in 2022. 99% of foreign visitors who have entered Albania have stated that their purpose of travel is for vacations, visiting relatives and health reasons (Ministry of Tourism, 2023b).

Regarding the average daily expenditure for the first 6 months of 2023 for non-resident foreign nationals visiting Albania for business purposes, the average daily expenditure is 121.5 Euros, which is 20 Euros more compared to the same category a year ago. While foreign citizens who stayed in Albania for personal reasons spent a daily average of 68 euros per day. The increase is 3 Euro per day more than the daily average spent for personal reasons, in the same period of the previous year (Ministry of Tourism, 2023a). The net income from travel/tourism in these first 6 months has increased compared to the previous year. Net income has increased 82% compared to 2022 (Ministry of Tourism, 2023a).

Regarding the average length of stay for non-residents, the figures show that foreign visitors coming for personal purposes during the first six-month period of 2023 have an average of 5.5 nights of stay. While the non-residents who declared the purpose of their visit to Albania for business reasons had an average of 4.5 nights. Overnight stays for personal reasons are the same as the previous year, while overnight stays for business reasons have decreased by 0.5 nights compared to the average overnight stays of the same period a year ago (Ministry of Tourism, 2023a).

All these statistics suggest that there are a lot of opportunities for different businesses in Albania, especially those involved in accommodation and gastronomy. Following the global trends, inbound travel agencies, are offering wine tours as part of other travel activities or as the main activity.

Telfer (2001) examines the Niagara wine route by qualitative in-depth interviews conducted at 25 local wineries. The author finds that strategic collaborations between wineries, food industries and tour operators located in the region as well as aggressive marketing policies were crucial for additional on-site wine and related merchandise sales. A successful wine route exerts a twofold effect on farms: on the one hand, existing activities become more profitable simply because the area and its products get more appealing to consumers (*localization effect*); on the other hand, it opens up new opportunities for their business (*synergy effect*) (Brunori & Rossi, 2000 as cited in Brandano et al., 2020). Following this rationale, the Albanian Government in collaboration with international organizations has invested in creating and improving the wine tourism infrastructure by initiating, implementing and founding projects, supporting agricultural farms, organizing contests and awarding best practices/wines/approaches.

The Regional Development Agency (RDA2) with the support of the Ministry of Tourism has created the agrotourism project "Wine and Olive Road". The purpose of this project is to highlight quality wineries producing extra virgin olive oil and wine, and to promote them as destinations for tourists to visit. Many of the wineries and farms included in this project are already part of these tours, sometimes separate and individual and sometimes organized by tourist agencies (Agjensia për Zhvillimin Rajonal 2 & Ministria e Turizmit dhe Mjedisit, 2023).

In the Western Balkans, Albania occupies the fourth place related to the vineyard surface area, but as can be seen in Table 2, there is a slight decrease in Albania's vineyard surface area, along with Romania, Croatia and Bosna and Herzegovina. As OIV (2023) reports the world vineyard surface area is only -0.4% marginally lower compared to 2021. Also in 2022, there is a slight decrease of 1% in world wine production compared to 2021 which is estimated at 258 mhl.

Table 1. Vineyard surface area in the Balkans

Year	**2021**		**2022**	
Country	**world ranking**	**vineyard surface area**	**world ranking**	**vineyard surface area**
Croatia	37th	22804	30th	22142
Serbia	39th	20113	31st	20113
North Macedonia	36th	25559	N/A	N/A
Albania	53rd	11339	37th	11322
Bosna and Herzegovina	62nd	4873	40th	3387
Montenegro	70th	2825	N/A	N/A

Source: OIV, 2023

Though wine tourism is an attractive segment, it would be difficult to appeal to the desired tourist as they have a myriad of alternatives within the country neighbour to Albania, and to a larger extent countries within the Western Balkans. Differentiating the offer by providing more value and adapting the marketing communication according to the desired segment is imperative.

Table 2. Production/consumption/imports/exports in Western Balkans

Country	Production value 1000 hl	World ranking as producer	Consumption value 1000 hl	World ranking as a consumer	Import value 1000 hl	World ranking as importer	Exports value 1000 hl	World ranking as exporter
North Macedonia	936	21st	265	58th	2	159th	685	22nd
Croatia	765	25th	1003	32nd	276	41st	43	48th
Serbia	705	27th	829	37th	232	45th	102	34th
Albania	295	41st	291	54th	55	84th	N/A	N/A
Montenegro	70	54th	37	98th	30	98th	61	41st
Bosna and Herzegovina	69	55th	119	71st	84	68th	32	51st

Source: OIV, 2023

According to OIV (2023), the Republic of North Macedonia is the largest wine producer and exporter in the WB, followed by Croatia, Serbia and Albania in fourth place. The country with the largest consumption and importing value is Croatia.

Law nr.86_2022 regulates the registration of a wine with specifications: a) appellations of origin; b) geographical indicators; c) protected designations of origin; and d) protected geographical indications. Albania can enlarge its vineyard surface area and invest more in infrastructure and exports, both will help in creating a favourable image.

5. CONCLUSION

Wine tourism represents a major segment of culture tourism, and it is widely believed to be an effective driver of local development. All Balkan countries are wine producers and engage in wine tourism activities. In order to attract tourists, Albanian wineries should differentiate their offer and create more value for local and international tourists. Beyond the logistical challenges of growing the industry, Albania wine must also place itself into the wider world of wine. In marketing wine tourism, it is the specific experiential benefits that must be stressed, and carefully targeted. Wineries are the core attraction (Getz, 2000), but cannot stand alone (Getz & Brown, 2006).

In Albania, government entities, have proven relevant stakeholders as partnerships in the whole wine tourism sector, specifically in the cocreation and promotion of events and festivals and solving the lack of infrastructures and resources, facilitating information between business and marketing strategies or staff formation.

Government entities are organizing events that aim to promote and attract the attention of potential tourists to Albania, such as sports marathons, artistic festivals, concerts, fairs, meetings etc. They are building the infrastructure to support the wine and winery owners.

There are 43 wineries in Albania that are part of the wine road and offer different wine tour experiences. Wine routes are a fundamental engine for linking wine tourism, activities and traditions, working as a privileged tool to disseminate and promote regional tourism (Getz, 2000).

The wine route – either as a spontaneous partnership or as a policy-induced joint initiative among winegrowers, rural tourism businesses and public bodies or both – has emerged as the most relevant vehicle for linking wine and tourism, combining both the tangible and intangible dimensions of the wine tourist experience (Brandano et al., 2020).

Tourism agents play an important role in the growth of the segment and are crucial partners in the value-delivering chain. Tourism agents are provided with data for successfully developing wine tourism. Besides elements that can be controlled by the provider, they have data related to elements that cannot be controlled by them such as a tourist's interest in wine. This makes it necessary to develop communication strategies that increase interest in the wine product and related activities.

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