

Theoretical aspects of wine tourism. Case study Republic of Moldova

Aspects théoriques de l'œnotourisme. Étude de cas République de Moldova

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ABSTRACT: Wine tourism is one of the modern directions of tourism development, both through the products it offers and through the experience it can offer the tourist in the vineyard field. This type of tourism is increasingly present among the visiting preferences, many of the vineyards developing numerous facilities to serve tourists in search of this type of tourism. Depending on certain geographical conditions (climate, relief, soil) the spreading of these locations is quite limited. Within Europe, the countries of the Mediterranean basin excel wine tourism destinations, but an increasingly important place belongs to the republic of Moldova. The present study wants to analyze the presence of this type of tourism in this country, by analysing a survey conducted into the main specialized locations. The purpose of the conducted investigation is to identify the characteristics of the sample of participating tourists and highlight the degree of satisfaction following the experience. All this can help industry developers create development and promotions strategies tailored to the areas and clientele, as well as tourists in selecting visiting locations.

KEY WORDS: tourism, wine tourism, Republic of Moldova.

RÉSUMÉ : L'œnotourisme fait partie des orientations modernes du développement touristique, tant par les produits qu'il propose que par les expériences qu'il peut offrir au touriste dans le vignoble. Ce type de tourisme est de plus en plus présent parmi les préférences des visiteurs, de nombreux vignobles développant de nombreuses installations pour servir les touristes à la recherche de ce type de tourisme. En fonction de certaines conditions géographiques (climat, relief, sols), la répartition de ces localités est assez limitée. En Europe, les pays du bassin méditerranéen excellent dans les destinations œnotouristiques, mais une place de plus en plus importante appartient à la République de Moldavie. La présente étude veut faire une analyse de la présence de ce type de tourisme dans ce pays, en interprétant une enquête appliquée dans les principales localités de profil. Le but de l'enquête menée est d'identifier les caractéristiques de l'échantillon de touristes participants et de mettre en évidence le degré de satisfaction suite à l'expérience. Tout cela peut aider les promoteurs de profils à créer des stratégies de développement et de promotion adaptées aux territoires et à la clientèle, mais aussi aux touristes de choisir leurs lieux de visite ou encore d'organiser leurs propres circuits thématiques.

MOTS CLÉS : tourisme, œnotourisme, République de Moldavie.

1. Introduction

The global tourism phenomenon has always experienced new forms of manifestation over time, forms derived both from the development of new resources suitable for tourist attractions and from changes in people's mentality and daily lifestyle. Tourists have always been in search of new locations, experiences, or tourist sensations, even if they are solely/only culinary. More often, the gastronomic experience has been essential, enhancing the joy of visiting a new destination. Nowadays, it is probably inconceivable to visit a new destination without aiming to experience the local cuisine (to complete the lived experience and simultaneously support the local economy, Recuero-Virto, Arrospide, 2024) emphasizes this aspect, both in terms of food and traditional local beverages.

Wine tourism fits into this same category, elevating a simple food product and its derivatives to the level of a "total experience." Wine tourism represents a balanced combination of the wine resource as a finished product (fruit, beverage, non/alcoholic), as well as the experience created by the tourist's presence in the area of cultivation, harvesting, and preparation of that product, to which all the traditions of the region are added.

2. Theoretical approach

The fact that this tourism is getting more and more accessible is proven by the large volume of specialty studies (Lajara, Marco, Tudela, Garcia, 2023). A number of approximative 588 articles from different regions of the Earth, written between 1998 and 2021, are demonstrating the amplitude and interest for this type of touristic experience. It is also mentioned the fact that the Mediterranean basin (Spain, France, Italy) holds the supremacy in terms of number of tourists, the attractiveness of the facilities and the specialized infrastructure (Hall, 2000). The countries with tradition in wine production (Italy for example) had a really smooth transition towards this type of tourism, the routes of wine becoming tourist routes, even if this accomplishment came with multiple challenges for the investors (Festa, Metallo, Cuomo, 2020). In the support of these investors is the study of the map of priorities (Gomez, Gonzalez-Diaz, Molina, 2015) in which are presented the strong and weak points for 5 viticultural destinations from Spain. These priorities were generated from the tourists' questionnaire and the results should stay at the basis for designing a tourism development policy for this type of destinations.

Surpassing the strictly geographical spectrum (resource – location – route / development) for having a complex analysis of the factors which create the framework of the existence of the wine tourism at a Global level, Santos, Ramos, Sousa, Valeri (2021) delimitates four of these types of factors: support factors (government, institutions, national and regional strategies), innovation factors (the division of the market, social media, digital and hybrid events), lived experience (visual, emotional, sensory) and the behavior spectrum (reactions, future intentions). Along with winning notoriety among the types of trending tourist destinations, the attention has turned to those business models which are a success in this sector. Guzel, Ehtyiar and Ryan (2021) also propose four factors / directions of development which can assure success in the wine tourism entrepreneurship: the developer, the strategic entrepreneur, the characteristics of the region itself in terms of other tourism resources (the complexity of the tourist attractions which gives value to the touristic area) and, continuity problems.

The geographical positioning of farms, vineyards, or wineries that form the basis of tourist attractions has led to wine tourism being seen as a safety alternative in the face of threats such as terrorism. For example, in France, during past years when public gathering fears were widespread, many tourists canceled planned vacations to Paris or other large cities (Song, Livat, Ye, 2019). For instance, in just about 14 months, a museum in Bordeaux lost no fewer than 5,000 visitors (Gergaud, Livat, Song, 2018).

This aspect can also be extended to the case of the COVID-19 pandemic in the following years (Curtale, Silva, Proietti, Barranco, 2023). One immediate effect was the dispersal of tourist flows into more “isolated” areas, away from urban crowds, in environments that were easier to control and manage from a social safety perspective. As a result, tourist flows were not reduced to zero, and wine tourism demonstrated its benefits from this standpoint as well—personal safety.

Obviously, we are consider here a specific sample of tourists (aged over 18/21, predominantly male, with above-average income, loyal consumers of these specific products), we might say, who appreciate this kind of experience. It follows that only a relatively small number of people value and wish to visit such specialized locations. Therefore, developers consistently aim to encourage loyalty by providing an unique and complete experience. Gomez-Carmona(et all, 2023) shows that, overall, the impressions and experiences of tourists contemplated at wineries in southern Spain are positive, with only a small number of participants reporting that wine tasting negatively impacted their health. Although the aspects evaluated are quite subjective (the taste, colour, production year, bottle design, region of origin, price, the ecological nature of production process, grape variety), it is demonstrated that participants are specialists in this category and have well-contoured expectations.

Related to the direct effects of drinking, practically the main factor of attraction, the effect of alcohol on the tourist is not yet directly analyzed (subjective state and of a personal-confidential nature, capable of being analyzed more by other types of research). The purpose of the studies was focused on the sensory factors and direct stimulus that the wine evokes (for example) on the visitor, how and by what they were incensed, at which stage of the visit. The purpose of this type of research is to help tourism developers who, through survey results, are directed to create interactive experiential scenes, increase experiential value and improve brand loyalty strategies (Gu, Li, Kim, 2024). Among the strategies for brand loyalty and the efficiency of this tourism business (where the necessary resource and infrastructure already exist), SOR (Strategic Orientation Round) is one of them (Carra, Mariani, Radic, Peri, 2016). In this case, the attention is directed, again, to the investors and how they develop the business itself, as well as their ability to combine the other types of tourism resources (natural, cultural) in the area, thus creating a complex tourism product and much more attractive, contributing even more to the development of the local economy. Like any other type of tourism, wine tourism also needs to be constantly refreshed with new and quality products and services. In a quantitative study using research models based on structural equations (Mariano et all, 2024), the results show, if anything, that service quality is the main factor in evaluating such an experience; based on this criterion, a map with the main wine destinations, in order of importance, is also created, so that the tourist can very easily create a themed route.

Therefore, we notice that there is a particular interest in this type of tourism: the definition of theoretical concepts, the research methodology, the analysis of locations both from a geographical point of view and the quality of food services and even accommodation, the components and events of the tourism product, etc. With a flow of more than 40 million visitors in 2023 and a market worth \$46.47 billion, to which is added an estimated CAGR growth rate of 12.9% until 2030 (<https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/wine-tourism-market-report#>)wine

tourism proves that it is in continuous development, with an extremely offering market in terms of locations, products and events around them and with a sample of loyal tourists, with above-average incomes (43% of them visit multiple locations and tasting events per year), but also with high expectations regarding the services received.

The demonstrated extent of the phenomenon also raises the issue of sustainability, of the relationship between visitors, agricultural activities within the farm as well as the tourist activities themselves, and the elements of the natural environment, the landscape, the historical footprint of the communities and the traditions that want to be protected and preserved (Duarte Alonso, Kok, O'Brien, 2020). In this way, both the characteristics of ecotourism and those of agrotourism come together. The aspect of sustainability and biodiversity conservation, from the perspective of visitors, within countries such as Italy and France (Vecchio, Annunziata, Bouzdine-Chameeva, 2024) appears as a priority in their list of preferences, thus also ensuring that what consumed during the visit has a special quality and does not affect health either.

3. General framework of wine tourism in Moldova Republic

The mentioned report (Grand View Research) also refers to the Republic of Moldova as an Eastern-European country that expands the area of interest for this type of tourism, standing out for its wineries with very large locations, as well as through wine varieties with a long history. The quality of these wine varieties and their long genealogy (for centuries) (Arhip, Scutaru, 2019) are now recognized as the main assets of Moldova. In addition to this, tourism in general is on a constant rise, with approx. 160,000 international visitors in 2023, with total receipts of \$317 million and with a contribution to GDP of 2.2% (<https://mc.gov.md/ro/content/moldova-este-topul-preferintelorcalatorilor-dinintreagalume#>); even if it is not a very large percentage, it is increasing (proof of the increase in the number of visitors – the number doubled in January-June 2023 compared to 2022, and obviously an increase in receipts), a sign that tourism is becoming an increasingly important axis of national development, to which the government will have to pay special attention, in the sense of visibility and attracting international tourists, as well as for encouraging and supporting domestic tourism (Cheia, 2022).

Related to the 4 famous wine regions, there are 22 centers in the Republic of Moldova, with approx. 55 locations/wineries (Fig. 1) that can support visiting, tasting, organized tours and activities in vineyards, themed events and festivals. From those 55 locations, according to the analysis, only 11 of them have accommodation options: Cricova Winery, Mileștii Mici Winery, Chateau Purcari, Chateau Vartely, EtCetera Winery, Poiana Winery, Chateau Cojușna, Castel Mimi Boutique Design Hotel 5, Asconi Winery, Mircești Winery, Vinia Traian (Didilica, V., 2024). We can observe some of them are crowded in the central-southern part of the country, due to the existence of the hilly areas suitable for grapevine cultivation, rich in fertile and varied soils, as well as the latitudinal disposition (Table 1); the northern part (with lower average temperatures, fewer sunny days, etc.) no longer allows noble crops to develop on a large scale with high yield.

4. Methods

The present study aims to analyze the visiting experience, preferences and tourists vision related to the development of this type of tourism. The results were obtained through the field survey method, through a questionnaire of 14 questions. 10 of them are intended to obtain information that shows the level of satisfaction and appreciation of tourists towards the tourist potential and

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the quality of services within the wine tourism of the Republic of Moldova. The other 4 questions capture the general characteristics of the sample of tourists who agreed to answer. In order for the results to reflect the reality on the ground, the questionnaire was applied between March and July 2024.

The results were compared with each other and calculated as a percentage of the total responses, for each surveyed item.

5. Results and discussions

150 questionnaires were applied to the main locations (delimited according to the number of visitors, facilities) during the spring-summer 2024 period.

The sample, obtained randomly, revealed a male majority (59%), an expected result for this type of tourism. In addition to the obtained information, highlighting the basic characteristics of the sample surveyed (age, gender, financial situation, educational background), the survey also looked at the level of satisfaction of the tourist experience, the quality of accommodation and food services, the quality of tourist products and of the accessed wineries, prices applied and the information sources most often used, with the aim to help in the tourist promotion directions of these products. The need for making these attractions widely known, is desired, because only 9% from the obtained sample are tourists from outside Moldova (Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine).

The survey highlights the fact that more than 70% of respondents have visited over time many wine locations (Cricova, Castel Mimi, Chateau Purcari, Asconi, Chateau Varteli, Milești and Pivnițele Brănești with several hits, these being considered the best promoted and arranged locations). This fact demonstrates interest and experience, as long as 91.5% believe that the Republic of Moldova must intensively develop a clear perspective in this touristic direction. Since not all existing vineyards in the Republic of Moldova enjoy notoriety, local experts, among those interviewed, were able to make recommendations for other locations that could develop in this tourism sector.

Trust and appreciation of wine products (both tourism product/service and quality wines) from the Republic of Moldova is demonstrated by the fact that 68% of the participants appreciate that they must be present in all markets in Europe, but also Asia, the USA and at the same time Moldova should create conditions to receive as many international tourists as possible. But for this, infrastructure problems (quality of communication paths, accommodation and food base, centers of tourist information, etc.) that still exist here, should be firstly addressed by the country's authorities, as they are also mentioned in the survey: 27% rate it as very poor and 34% as poor, so a majority with a negative evaluation.

The high interest in wine tourism is highlighted by the preference for organized tours and thematic tours (44%), participation in festivals (36%) and even simple exhibitions (20%). This fact is also supported by preferences related to accommodation, where 22% prefer hotel accommodation, 31% in guesthouses, a relatively large percentage (34%) uses accommodation with friends (pointing out to the presence in higher number of local tourists from Moldova that choose to accommodate with friends/relatives); cabins, motels and bungalows are also mentioned (a total of 13%), accommodation types for which Republic of Moldova does not own highly developed infrastructure.



Figure 1 The main wine locations in the Republic (adaptation Didilica, 2024)

Approximately 250 accommodation structures in total (of which approx. 171 is permanently active and shows a permanent increasing trend, Fig. 2), with a capacity of a total of 30 thousand places which serve the entire Moldovan tourist phenomenon; related to infrastructure and organization, 30 professional guides, 350 local guides and approximately 85 travel agencies serve national and

international needs (https://statistica.gov.md/ro/frecventarea-structurilor-de-primire-turistica-colective-cu-functiuni-de-9491_61542.html).

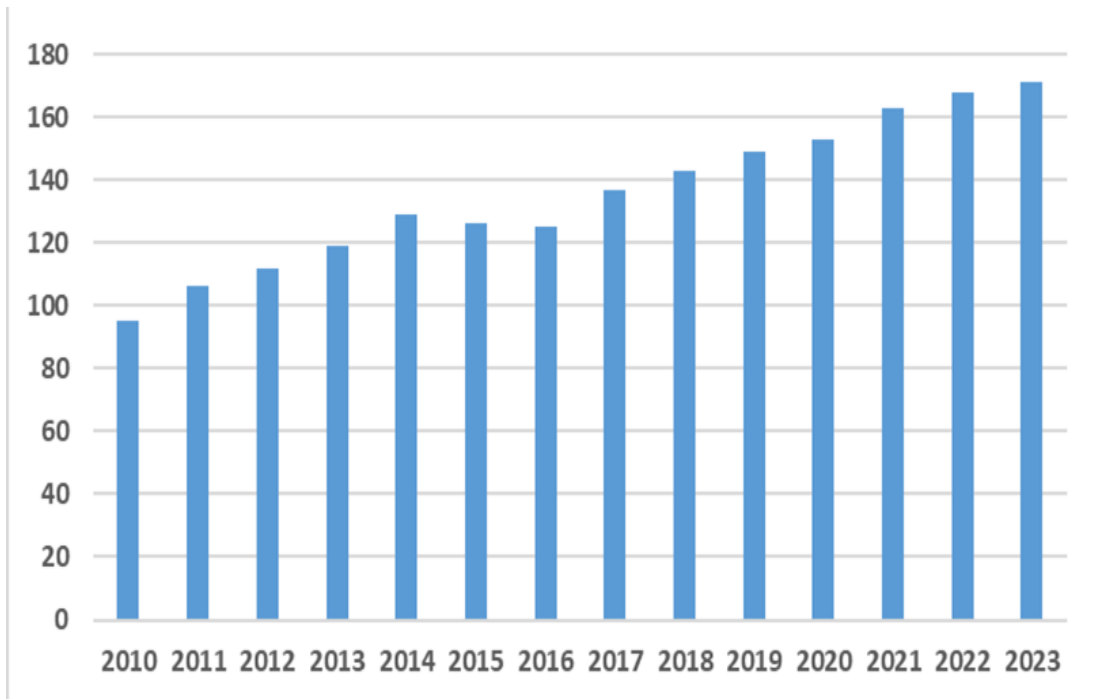


Figure 2 Evolution of number of accommodation units in Republic of Moldova between 2010-2023 (<https://www.unwto.org/tourism-statistics/key-tourism-statistics> - bulk data download).

Tourist's predilection for organized tours creates the possibility of visiting several types of tourist attractions, easy access for foreign tourists and better promotion and development of Moldova. The approximately 140 most important tourist attractions in the Republic of Moldova (counting detailed and from the capital Chisinau, <https://observatorul.md/vedeti-aici-cum-arata-harta-turistica-arepublicii-moldova>), both natural, cultural-religious and historical, offer the possibility of creating diversified and attractive tours.

6. Conclusion

Wine tourism shows a special rise at the global level, involving increased interest from tourists as well as from developers who offer from year to year more and more performing and varied products and services. The actual infrastructure (cellars, accommodation units, food establishments, exhibitions with tasting, etc.) has a special role in lived experience, therefore, the already existing vineyards are transformed into real resorts.

The Republic of Moldova is a country with great potential from this point of view, with a vast track record of vineyards that offer products of international quality, as evidenced by the more than 50 locations spread mainly in the central and southern areas of the country (where, according to the locals others could be added, even further to the North – a questionable aspect, however, from a geographically point of view) and which can offer such touristic products and experiences. Thus,

from only exporting wine products (supplying the market in Western Europe and Russia), Moldova is already a country that hosts wine tours with everything they include (vineyards, wineries, hotels, restaurants, exhibitions, festivals, wine traditions).

The carried out survey, highlights the real interest shown among tourists, mostly men, already well acquainted with the phenomenon, who positively appreciate the locations and the experiences they had when visiting the main locations; tours are the most popular, and the presence of international tourists demonstrates the good reputation this country already has in wine tourism; this type of travel also offers the opportunity to visit several categories of tourist attractions, especially cultural ones, in which the Republic of Moldova excels. In this context, it turns out that farm owners and tourism developers (mostly private) have the vision to increase the value of their businesses, multiplying their possibilities to capitalize on them financially (dual role, product distribution as well as experience tourism).

The results obtained on the evaluation of the country's general infrastructure (quality of roads, number of airports, railway network and quality of public transport), forms a negative factor that affects the entire development of the tourism phenomenon in the Republic of Moldova. It is therefore understood that this direction of development will also have to be a priority for the Moldovan government.

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