



Original Contribution

SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES IN WINE TOURISM FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF ORYAHOVITSA WINERY IN STARA ZAGORA REGION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this survey is to work out a successful model for wine tourism based on already established practices and experience, for example the Oryahovitsa Winery, and to assess the options for its application in other regions throughout the country. This article focuses on several successful practices in Europe and worldwide.

It is evident that Bulgaria is a country which has original grapevine varieties and a wide variety of wines and liquors. It can offer on the wine tourism market tourist packages, which look quite traditional at first sight, but in fact, are absolutely distinguishable for the uniqueness of the local wine making methods used in them and the refined and exceptional passion, with which the Bulgarians make their drinks. Offering of such packages on the tourist market is in line with the priorities for the development of tourism of the State Agency for Tourism.

The results from this survey confirm the thesis that wine tourism has its future in Bulgaria. This is a niche that has not yet been fully exploited and we should make use of it still more aggressively.

Key words: tourism, wine tourism, local economics

INTRODUCTION

Food and drinks are among the most common reasons for tourist travels. Wine tourism is one of the fastest developing industries worldwide. What is actually wine tourism? If tourism in general offers conditions, goods and services to attract travelers, wine tourism offers all this supplemented by the strong attraction to wine.

This tourism is oriented not only to cellars selling wine but also to tourism as a whole and to all industrial branches in the wine producing regions. It includes sightseeing tours, gift shopping, visits to national parks, etc.

Some scientific researches show that wine tourism was first started in some vine-growing and wine-making European countries such as France, Italy, Spain, etc. and a bit later they were joined by Australia and the USA, which have shown a very rapid development in it. However, there are some differences and peculiarities in the way wine tourism is practiced in Europe and America. While in the

USA and Australia it emphasizes on visits to modern cellars and stories of the latest technology used in modern wine-making and of the wine styles, France and Italy offers these tourists more romantic atmosphere. Tourists can go deep into the history, traditions and legends related to wine-making and more attention is paid to the real pleasure and fun and not so much to information.(1)

In 2004 Y. Alexieva and St. Stamov defined wine tourism in Bulgaria as a specific type which gives tourists the opportunity to get familiar with the vineyards and vine growing methods and habits such as vine clipping and grapes harvesting in the regions being visited, and also with the history, traditions and wine making methods of wineries (cellars, small or big wine factories). Tourists get to know different wines and stronger spirits by tasting them as well as by taking part in holidays, rituals and festivals dedicated to wine and usually combined with rich folklore programs and animations.(2)

The purpose of this survey is to identify a more successful model of wine tourism based on well-established practices and experience, and

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to determine its feasibility in different regions in Bulgaria.

SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES IN WINE TOURISM IN EUROPE AND WORLDWIDE

Centuries ago people used to travel round the country and one of their joys was to have a glass of wine in inns located near the roads. In medieval times when villagers used to go to the towns and buy the things they needed, the wine makers tried their best and persuaded them to taste their wines while the visitors were strolling across their grape vineyards located just in front of the town walls.

Most of the vineyards are surrounded by attractive and beautiful nature, which when combined with the cultural heritage there create favorable conditions for the development of tourism as far as such tourism can satisfy the needs of the people for relaxation and knowledge.

Wine tourism is simply an alternative for satisfying the yearnings of people for adventure and romance. Wine tasting during seminars and visits to wineries are already offered in many districts and regions. This type of tourism, however, will only work provided that there is an efficient coordination and good cooperation between the travel agencies and the wine-making companies. What is more, it will be a success if we have a good infrastructure at hand.

In Europe and worldwide many districts and regions take advantage of the popularity, wine and wine routes have, and release on the market their own products. For example, Italy offers 98 wine routes and it is Number 1 on the list of the most famous European wine producers. Second come Slovenia with 20 routes, Austria with 17, etc.

The Italian experience is based on a well functioning system involving a wide range of establishments in different fields and featuring some management principles introduced for quality assurance and wine route maintenance. Most of the establishments relying on private initiatives of the "Movimento Turismo del Vino" type, which identified the financial potential of wine long ago, help with the rapid development of tourism in this region. In fact, it is the hospitality, the unconventional methods and the unique souvenirs that make these states competitive on the huge European market.(3)

The well-established trademarks ensure that a prospect today turns into a dedicated customer in the future. The customer will always relate such trademarks with expectations for assured quality.(4) For example, in 1935 several large districts in France legalized their identity introducing a system called "Names of controlled origin". Burgundy, Bordeaux, Elzas and Champaign were among the first ones. Jill Benistan (5) thinks that the wine-makers in Burgundy these days have to options to choose from, namely, they should either change their rules and adapt them to the world market while giving priority to the sort wines, the brand wines and the wines coming from specific regions, or keep improving their skills in wine making as well as in the ways wines are created, and also in the traditional aging of wines in oak casks, in bottling them after 18 months of aging, in producing wines subject to long years of aging or ones which are made for immediate consumption, their aim being to satisfy the needs of the wine fans at a given price.(6)

The experience so far shows that tourism gives the municipalities an opportunity to promote their regions using their unique cultural and natural assets and meanwhile to create jobs and bring some diversification in the regional economy. Tourism, just like any other industry, requires some planning for the achievement of sustainable cooperation between the different communities, which in turn will ensure its viability. Similarly to any other economic impacts, the benefits of tourism have their impact on the social and the surrounding environments, which should allow for their management at local level through cooperation and preliminary planning. In the last decade the wine industry has seen a considerable growth. Development of the tourism connected with it has also seen some growth, especially in the Mediterranean countries. Wine tourism has been defined as tourism, in which wine tasting is viewed as just one of the reasons for a trip or as one of the options to be considered while planning a route. Wine tourism, therefore, should be viewed as a sector, which might contribute towards the overall growth of tourism in a given region by attracting more visitors, on one hand, and by extending of their stay, on the other. The development of wine tourism in line with the development of the other industries might help make the local economy more viable, especially with regard to the small and medium-size businesses. Referring to the

experience of the Mediterranean countries, we can see that the policy of the developing the wine-making industry might be used as a model for the development of other industries as well, especially those having to do with agriculture, and also as a model for the joint development of different industries at a time.

Wine routes should never be viewed as independent and self-sufficing initiatives. Wine tour packages should always be designed the way any other tour packages are designed. They should include any activities and services required to completely satisfy the tourists' demands, starting from the decision-making of such a tour and finishing with the safe getting back home. Although wine is the most important component, it is never enough for a wine tour to take place. The local communities, relying on their local culture, should always take all necessary steps to establish a brand name on the market as part of making a brand name policy of the region.(7)

All surveys carried out so far on wine tourism and their attempts to make an in-depth analysis of it show that wine-making and tourism are completely opposite as industries. Therefore, the most important questions which need to be answered by these surveys within this context should be found based on pragmatics and using strategic means.

However, the development of each industry has not only advantages but drawbacks as well. Supply which is aimed at satisfying the huge variety of consumer preferences and the continuously increasing number of consumers imposes continuous quality improvement, aggressive price policies both at a national and international level. In the mean time the search for new ways of development and new unique ideas should never stop. This is often imposed by the fact that consumer tastes change which results in the loss of customers in certain wine categories and wine brands. The world economic and political factors have also their influence quite frequently. (8)

THE WINE TOURISM IN BULGARIA

As for Bulgaria, the country has its potential to do and develop wine tourism. The main prerequisites for it are its traditions in grape-vine growing and wine-making, the existence of wine cellars, the production of good wines and the numerous holidays and rituals dedicated to wine. Some of the obstacles for its development are the lack of understanding and goodwill for its organizing, the limited number

of tourists which in turn makes the people running cellars feel careless and disinterested when receiving guests, the low profit because of the small number of visitors, the downgraded equipment used in the wine factories, the lack of wine tasting halls, the lack of efficient and straight-to-the point promotion campaigns, lack of people, trained and appointed especially to deal with wine tourism.(9)

Wine tourism in Bulgaria is still an unexploited resource. Statistics shows that Bulgaria holds 2 percent of the world wine market and yet it ranks among the 15 largest wine producers worldwide. Nonetheless, very few people know that we are a wine producing country. Resulting from this lack of information the share of Bulgarian wines consumed in Germany is 1.3 percent, having in mind that the number of the German holiday-makers in Bulgaria is relatively small compared to the other West European countries. The Bulgaria wine export has seen a continuous decrease over the years of its transition to market economy. Information provided by the Bulgarian National Vine and Wine Chamber shows that until 1989 we used to export 169 to 180 mln liters of wine per year and nowadays this export has shrunk below 60 mln liters. Data provided to this effect by the Ministry of agriculture and forests show that the wineries produce ca. 130 mln liters of wine per year of which ca. 60 mln liters are exported. However, the unsold quantities resulting from this poor export cannot be reduced by internal consumption since the private wine-makers produce ca. 200 mln liters of wine per year most of which they distribute through intra-company sales. Related to that, Bulgaria might become famous as a wine producer and exporter through the development of wine tourism using the experience of some Bulgarian wineries which have already been practicing it. In this respect, the management body of the Tourist Department at the Ministry of economy has realized the great significance of wine tourism for promotion of our wines abroad. A tourist exchange was held in March 2003 and the participants come up with a decision that 6 tours to Bulgarian wineries should be included in the special guidebooks of the large European tour operators. (10)

In July 2004 a National Strategy for the development of viticulture and wine-production in the Republic of Bulgaria (2005 – 2025) was adopted. One of the measures for

development of this branch is the development and promotion of wine tourism. The specific measures outlined there are the capitalization of the wine tourism opportunities through its stimulation for increased profitability of the wineries and through joint advertising campaigns run together with the tour operator companies to promote wine tourism, supported by suitable infrastructure and adequately organized complexes for tasting and recreation. (11)

In 2007 representatives of the business, the municipalities and the branch organizations in our country launched the implementation of a project for the creation of a wine cluster aimed at developing wine tourism in the country. The cluster comprises nine routes on the territory of the entire country. The cluster concept was developed jointly by representatives of the Vine and Wine Chamber, the municipalities and the businesses concerned. A team of the State Tourism Agency offered technical assistance in determining the tourist sites to be included in the routes. The objective is the development of tourism and the attracting of foreign middle-class or upper-class tourists. (12)

WINE TOURS IN ORYAHOVITSA WINERY IN STARA ZAGORA REGION

One of the pioneers in organizing wine tours in the country is Domain-Menada, Stara Zagora, which for several years now has been part of Belvedere Bulgaria. Belvedere Bulgaria is a company with a long-term vision for the development of the liquor and wine industry in Bulgaria and its strategy involves planting of its own vineyards, process upgrading and promotion of its own brand names. Belvedere Capital Management (Belvedere Bulgaria) is a young successful and popular Bulgarian company, 88% owned by Belvedere S.A., France and 12% by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. It is a holding comprising three wineries and two trade companies: Domain Menada, Sakar Wine House, Oryahovitsa Cellar, Vinimpex EAD, Belvedere Distribution. (13)

Belvedere Bulgaria EOOD was established in 1992 as an affiliate of the French Belvedere Group Holding. It owns some of the biggest wine producers in Bulgaria such as Domain Menada Wineries in Stara Zagora and Sakar Wine House in Lyubimets.

Domain Menada wine cellar is a successor of the first vine-growing and wine-making co-

operative farm called Loza, which was founded in Stara Zagora in 1901. Later in the 1920s another vine-growing and wine-making co-operative farm called Sila was founded in the village of Oryahovitsa and today's Oryahovitsa wine cellar originates from it. In the autumn of 2002 both wine cellars became part of the French holding. Sakar Wine House was founded in the middle of the 20th century by taking over Vinprom liquor factory in Haskovo, established as early as 1947. In the spring it also became part of Belvedere Group. (14)

The total vineyard area in Stara Zagora region is about 14 000 decares and most of them are within a range of 5 to 10 km from both wine cellars in Stara Zagora. These vineyards are located on the territory of the villages of Oryahovitsa, Dalboki, Hrishteni, Bratya Kunchevi, Podslon – mainly in the foothills on the south slopes of Sarnena Sredna Gora Mountain. There is a unique air current in this area which prevents cold spells during the winter months and therefore plants can rarely be destroyed by frost. In addition to climate, the leached maroon forest soils available here are extremely suitable for the cabernet and merlot grape varieties.

Grapes reach optimal ripeness (21-23o of sugar at 8-10 grams per liter of acidity) most often during the last week of September and the first week of October.

The pride of the wine producers in Stara Zagora region is the classical wine cellar of the mixed underground and aboveground type in the village of Oryahovitsa, where some of the best local wines age in 64 oak barrels of 8 tons each. (15)

Oryahovitsa Winery is located in the central part of South Bulgaria, Stara Zagora region. The cellar was founded in 1938 and is of the classical semi-aboveground type, built on natural hills, which provide relatively constant temperature for wine maturing throughout the year. The processing capacity of this winery is 3000 tons of grapes per annum. The cellar houses barrels made of Bulgarian Strandzha oak with an average storage capacity of 8 000 liters, as well as of white Canadian oak with a storage capacity of 220 liters. Nowadays Oryahovitsa is one of the few cellars of that type to be found in Bulgaria, which makes it an interesting tourist attraction as well.

Every year it is visited by 1000 to 3000 people. The profit from wine tours ranges between 1 and 5 % of the company profit. According to the staff, the cellar is a success with regard to

wine tours not only because of its good wines, but also because of its attractiveness and authenticity. Moreover, the cellar is located close to the main road from Sofia to Burgas with just a 1-2 km detour.

There are two types of wine tours available, for experts and for amateurs. Foreign experts are offered a larger number of wines, selected by the wine chef for the purpose of obtaining their competent appraisal. Amateurs are usually offered to taste 2-3 types of wines of different varieties, which are specific of the region.

According to the local enologists the wines in this region feature well pronounced fruit flavors, color richness and soft harmonious body.

A region's trade mark is one of the most popular Bulgarian wines – Tcherga. Experts in the branch think that the success of this wine is rooted in its name. The enologist who created the Tcherga wine is Snezhana Mutafchiyska and its designer is Stefan Gyonev. The typical Bulgarian appearance of its label is the first thing that impresses even before tasting. Special attention is paid to its packing– small rugs are put inside the wine boxes, which is an additional attraction for the foreign tourists.

Tcherga is a blend of 3 varieties – Cabernet, Merlot and Rubin. The enologist's idea about this wine was that it should be as „multi-colored” as is the rug itself. On tasting it one can recognize a rich variety of flavors such as wild berries and blackberries in combination with vanilla tinge obtained from its maturing in French oak barrels. The taste is velvet and soft with a long lasting aftertaste. The wine has a number of international awards: Merit – FHA Wine & Spirits Asia Challenge Singapore 2004, Tcherga vintage 2002; Silver medal – MUNDUS Vini 2004 Germany, Tcherga vintage 2002; Prize pack – Balkan Food & Drink 2004, Tcherga Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon & Rubin 2002; Bronze medal – International Wine Challenge, London 2007, Tcherga Red 2004; Golden medal and Grand – Vinaria 2006, Tcherga 2003; Golden medal and Grand – Vinaria 2006, Tcherga 2005.

In December 2002 Belvedere Bulgaria along with Stara Zagora Municipality organized the Winter-2002 Wine Festival. The biggest attraction of the festival was an 8-ton barrel of wine provided by the wine cellar in Oryahovitsa especially for this occasion. Pavilions were put up around it, with sizzling barbecues and horo dances offered to the people. (16)

In conclusion it should be pointed out that the success of a winery is related to several key elements and these are the provision of a good infrastructure and a location close to the national road network.

A special tasting room with all amenities needed for wine tourism. The style of the winery is in itself interesting for the visitor.

The staff is well trained not only for presenting the various wines, but they are also extremely communicative.

The trade mark established on the market is in itself a guarantee for the high quality service offered during the wine tour.

Local enologists stick to the saying that one can only enjoy success in the wine and tourist business if they are aware of the fact that the road to it passes through authenticity. Guarantee for each success is the uniqueness and not the imitation. At the same time it is a good idea in such a business to rely on the national traditions in wine- making. On a local level this is enhanced by the fact that viticulture and wine production in Stara Zagora region have been known since ancient times. A proof of this are some stone slabs with the image of the God Dionysius carved on them, pictures of vines and glasses of red wine on mosaics and numerous oinochoe (wine jugs), all these discovered during archaeological excavations.(17)

Regardless of the success, a weak point in the company policy is the fact that the funds allocated for the advertisement of wine tours are insufficient. There are no appropriate guide signs provided. All in all, there is just an advertisement of the cellar in the official websites of the company. The funds allocated for staff training are also insufficient.

CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATION

In conclusion it should be pointed out that wine tourism is complicated and varied, and it involves many different commercial approaches and many industry-related services. On a local and regional level wine tourism engages tour operators, business people that are not directly involved in tourism, local and regional tourist organizations, local government institutions, a number of non-government organizations, etc. Their joint work should be aimed at attracting more visitors and meeting their expectations and needs, which in turn will result in obtaining of economic and other benefits for whole society.

In order to achieve a sustainable development of wine tourism in this region, a preliminary situation analysis should be made based on the existing social and cultural factors, the demographic factor, the economic conditions, the latest know-how influences, the political aspects as well as on all relevant laws and regulations, and governmental recommendations and it should take into account the effect of advertising and that of the mass media.

At the same time, the preparation of a competitor analysis helps viewing the advantages of a given region with regard to other competitors from a different perspective. The preliminary research has to be focused on the product offered by the competitors. It is a good idea to analyze the experience, skills and plans as well as the financial and the human resources of the competitors. The future strategy for the region should be developed based on it.

Analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of our competitors, all the available information, the distribution channels and the facilitating strategies, one can clearly make out the strong points of the products offered by a region and its advantages with regard to its competitors. The most important thing about a marketing plan is that it should be successful. Its real competitive merits have to be sought in three directions:

1. the offered products should be evaluated positively by the clients
2. the offered products should be well-differentiated and easy-to grasp
3. the offered products should be suitable for promotion.(18)

Bulgaria is a country of original wine grape varieties and a wide range of wines and liquors. It can offer on the wine tourism market tourist packages, which look quite traditional at first sight, but in fact, are absolutely distinguishable for the uniqueness of the local wine making methods used in them and the refined and exceptional passion, with which the Bulgarians make their drinks.

Moreover, vine growing and wine making have been known across the Bulgarian lands since ancient times. Numerous archaeological data and written sources show that the Thracians – the oldest dwellers on the Balkan peninsula – have been vine growers and wine producers of astonishing talents. The renowned Roman writer Pliny the Elder thinks that we owe vine cultivation and wine production to the Thracian Eumolpe. The ancient geographer

Strabon announces that grapevine was first planted by the Thracians and he also describes their method of planting grapevines. Homer mentions Thracian wine in his “Iliad”, describing there how wine was transported on ships to the Troy. (19)

It is worth mentioning that according to the approved Programme for National Advertising of Bulgaria for 2008, the State Tourism Agency (STA) organizes the participation of this country at the international tourist exposition FITUR`08 /International Tourism Trade Fair/ in Madrid, where it is presented under the motto «Bulgaria – a land of rich cultural and historic heritage». An image advertisement of the country is exposed, along with the advertisement of products, focused on cultural and wine tourism. (20)

Wine tours to Oryahovitsa cellar are an example of the good practices in the field of wine tourism. They can be borrowed by other cellars which have good opportunities for developing such tourism.

The financial investments required to start this business are not so great, but ultimately one can expect good profits and successful promotion of any local wine brand.

Offering of such packages on the tourist market corresponds to the priorities for development of tourism announced by the State Tourism Agency.

And last, but not least, this will strengthen even more successfully the position of Bulgaria on the international tourist market as a country that offers to its prospective visitors modern and up-to-date attractions.

Wine tourism has its future in our country. This is a niche that has not been fully exploited yet and we have to make use of it still more aggressively.

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