

# **UK WINE PRODUCERS AND THEIR ATTITUDE TO WINE TOURISM**

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## *Abstract*

Wine has been produced in the UK since Roman times but after the Middle Ages this form of agriculture went into a long decline until the late 1930s. In fact the practice of viticulture as a commercial venture is thought only to have re-commenced in 1951 (Skelton, 2001). The start of the decline in production is often linked with the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536 but contributing factors may well have been economic, a labour force depleted by plague, or climatic, the British climate becoming wetter and summers cooler, from some time in the fourteenth century.

Matters of climate have always been crucial to UK wine production and in recent years it may well have been assisted by the phenomenon of global warming. The increase in volume and improvements in quality over the last two decades can also be attributed to the adoption of new grape varieties, such as Bacchus and Reichensteiner, which ripen successfully in the British climate. Earlier efforts to produce wine from the classic Continental varieties, such as the Pinot Noir, had shown that they were not well-suited to the UK. The productive area under vines has been rising (by 28% between 1989 and 1999) and English wine is fast developing a reputation for the quality of some of its bottle-fermented sparkling wines (Skelton, 2001). These are performing well in international competitions and perhaps here, at last, UK producers have found a niche as the soil in parts of South East England is similar to that in Champagne and the latitudes of the two regions are quite close.

UK wine production is still small (it is estimated to equal roughly one tenth of our Australian wine imports) and the activity is polarised between quite large commercial operations (about 20) and a larger number of small, often "hobbyist", growers. Nonetheless, given likely future climatic conditions, there is no reason why it should not represent a growing proportion of agricultural activity. This would make sense because while British agriculture is generally depressed the demand for wine continues to grow.

This research project is intended to study the links between viticulture and wine tourism, which can be loosely defined as tourist visits to vineyards. Research in the USA (Dodd, 1995) and in the Rioja region of Spain (Gilbert, 1992) has suggested that tourism can be beneficial to wine producers both in terms of marketing, building brand awareness, and of economics, injecting cash into the region. Initial discussions with figures in the UK wine sector have indicated that the British have been slow to see the potential benefits of wine tourism. The willingness of producers to co-operate in joint marketing activities does not appear to be high while neither central nor local government tourist authorities seem to want to take a lead in this area.

The study has been focussed on wine producers and a postal survey has been the chosen data collection method. The principal objects of interest have been to examine the producers' attitudes to wine tourism on their vineyards, to see whether these are positive or negative, and to see what, if any, marketing activities (including joint marketing activities) they undertake to promote wine tourism. In order to find a suitable sampling frame the membership list of the United Kingdom Vineyards Association (UKVA) was selected. The UKVA co-operated in the study and endorsed it to their members, which number includes the vast majority of UK vineyards. The population was 440 and, to date, 49 useable questionnaires have been returned, a response rate of 11%. It has been suggested by a leading figure in UK wine marketing that this relatively low response rate reflects the low level of tourism activity in the sector but other studies of wine producers by mail have also experienced quite low response rates (Sellitto, 2004). Depending on the timing of the surveys it is hope to compare the results of this study with those of similar studies in Australia and New Zealand.