

**Can wine tourism remedy poor wine marketing? The case of Beaujolais
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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this article is to analyze the reasons why wine tourism in Beaujolais is weak and to propose some way in which it could be better exploited to benefit the region as a whole, particularly in the light of the negative image of the 'Beaujolais Nouveau'. This is done by way of a triangulated market analysis of the offer of wine tourism in Beaujolais.

Design/methodology/approach: A twofold qualitative approach was adopted, in order to explore a territory which has not previously been researched. The first stage involved participant observation by two researchers independently; the second used students to examine the region in the role of involved wine tourists, and debriefed them on their findings.

Findings: The Beaujolais wine region has a number of the strengths and opportunities one generally associates with successful wine tourism. It also has weaknesses. Crucially, there is a problem associated with wine reputation (and particularly Beaujolais nouveau) which may currently be a major, perhaps insurmountable, impediment to a successful wine tourism offering.

Practical implications: operators and territorial brand managers need to address issues of wine reputation and collective responsibility for wine quality if wine tourism is to succeed.

Key words: Wine tourism; territorial brand; Beaujolais

1. INTRODUCTION

France is the world's top tourist destination, attracting 83 million foreign tourists and, along with Italy, still the top wine-producing country with 41.4 Mhl of wine produced in 2012. There is no doubt that French wine, and French gastronomy have a strong and solid reputation around the world. France has been increasingly facing a severe competition from the New World countries for their wines, but also for their wine tourism offers (Cholette, 2004). Despite being a strong international destination and having a solid reputation for its wines, France seems to have an under-developed wine tourism sector. The Beaujolais region is typical of this French paradox (Frochot, 2000). As will be seen, it has many assets including its location, accessibility, natural environment and culinary heritage. Yet despite its major assets and the current dynamism of certain wine-growers and wine merchants (e.g. Georges Duboeuf and its wine museum) wine tourism remains under-developed. The aim of this article is to analyze the reasons why wine tourism in Beaujolais is so weak and propose some ways in which it could be better exploited to benefit the region as a whole (Ponce, 2009), particularly in the light of the negative image of 'Beaujolais nouveau'. In particular, the aim is to:

- Conduct a market analysis of the offer of wine tourism in Beaujolais;
- Determine some best practices and recommendations for future development.
- Examine the relationship of wine tourism to the reputation of the territorial brand of beaujolais wine.

The research was conducted by intensive participant observation by the researchers, along with an evaluation of the responses of a group of MSc students to the region. This is the first stage in a more detailed project to examine the impediments to and potential for wine tourism in the area, and is thus a work in progress. The academic value of this paper is twofold. First, most wine tourism research has been *post hoc*, examining successful regions – rather than considering the topic in the light of a region where it has not been successful. This research begins to examine a region that has yet to develop a wine tourism offering. Second, it will be proposed that one reason for the lack of success relates to the negative image of the wines; this study therefore examines the tourism component directly in the context of the reputation of the wine produced in that region, and considers how the two interact.

2. CONTEXT

2.1 Beaujolais region and wines

The region of Beaujolais was first cultivated by the Romans who planted the area up the Saône Valley (Jacquemont & Meraud, 1986). From the 7th Century until the Middle Ages, the vineyards belonged to Benedictine monks. In the 10th Century, the region was named after to the village 'Beaujeu' and was ruled by the Lords of Beaujeu until the 15th century when it was then ceded to the Duchy of Burgundy (Prescott, 2010). At first, the wines of Beaujolais were sold primarily to local markets, such as the neighbouring towns (Mâcon and Lyon). It was through the expansion of the railway system in the 19th century that they started to become famous in Paris and beyond (Jacquemont & Meraud, 1986).

Beaujolais was historically linked to Burgundy, but is now administratively linked to Lyon (less than 50 kms south), the second city of France. It is a large wine producing region covering 18,000 hectares of vines planted in a 55 kilometre stretch of land that is between 11 and 15 kilometres wide. It represents only 2.2% of the French vineyards in terms of hectolitres produced. On average one million hectolitres are produced each year, amounting to around 130 million bottles (Interbeaujolais, 2014). Over 98% is red wine made from the grape-variety,

gamay (Prescott, 2010). The Beaujolais wine industry is dominated by 30 négociants who produce nearly 90% of the wine sold outside the region. There are more than 4000 vineyard owners in Beaujolais and the fractional amount that is not sold to négociants is bottled either by the 20 village co-operatives or (a growing amount) is estate bottled. Twelve different appellations and 10 *crus* are produced in this region. There are three classifications of Beaujolais wines:

- Beaujolais AOC: this is the biggest appellation comprising all 96 winemaking villages (about half of all Beaujolais wine is sold under this basic AOC designation);
- Beaujolais Villages AOC: An area of 38 official villages, perceived to produce better wine; 30 villages are allowed to include their name on the label.
- Beaujolais Crus: The ten *crus* of Beaujolais (including famous names such as Moulin-à-Vent, Fleurie and Morgon) are considered to produce the best wines. They are all located in the north and producing only red wine,

Most Beaujolais wines are produced by the winemaking technique of semi-carbonic maceration, which gives fruity wines, for short-term drinking, though wines from the best *crus* may improve over 7-12 years.

2.2 The special case of Beaujolais Nouveau

In the 1980s, Beaujolais wines became very famous through 'Beaujolais Nouveau'. The creative marketing techniques of the négociant Georges Duboeuf ensured that this craze became worldwide, especially in markets like the UK, Japan and the US. Beaujolais Nouveau is released barely two months after the harvest, with very little ageing, and designed to be consumed young. As a result of its success, most wine-growers gave up the production of the more traditional wines of that region and in 2002 45.5 million bottles were sold (Prescott, 2010). It has not declined but in 2012 one third of Beaujolais production was still the nouveau version, amounting to 31.3 million bottles (Haddad, 2013).

Unfortunately, in the 1990s, with worldwide wine production outnumbering wine demand, this craze faded and many wine consumers came to associate Beaujolais wines with slightly sweet-fruited, simple, light-bodied wines lacking intensity. Sales declined dramatically, and in 2001 the equivalent of 12 million bottles of the wine were destroyed due to lack of markets (Ring, 2013). This response is not universal – the wine remains very trendy in Japan (Godart, 2013; Haddad, 2013), but in the occidental world its prestige has waned rapidly – see for example, the comments of the eminent French critic François Mauss (Ring, 2013). Some wine-growers responded by producing more complex wines, often aged longer in oak barrels prior to release – although the region as a whole has responded not by changing the wine style but by investing in more marketing (Godart, 2012). There has also been, in recent years, an increase in the number of terroir-driven estate-bottled wines made from single vineyards or in one of the *Crus*. Beaujolais nouveau explains why this region is famous worldwide and is, at the same time, one of the reasons why wines from this region have the reputation of being cheap, and of mediocre quality. This reputation may explain why wine tourists prefer famous wine regions such as the Cote d'Or or Bordeaux, and are not naturally drawn to the Beaujolais region.

2.3 Successful wine tourism

Wine tourism has traditionally been defined as 'visiting vineyards, wineries, festivals and wine demonstrations to taste grapes/wine and/or to experience the attributes of a wine region being the main reasons for the visit' (Hall, 1996, cited in Hall et al., 2000). Although this previous definition has been used in many studies on wine tourism, Carlsen (2004) indicates that a

unique concept has not yet emerged (Getz & Brown, 2006). There are other perspectives to take into consideration such as that of the wine producers and that of the authorities of the tourist definitions. Thus, wine tourism can also be defined as ‘simultaneously a form of consumer behaviour, a strategy through which the destination develop attractions and images related to wine, and a commercial opportunity for the wineries’ (Getz & Brown, 2006, p.147). There are several activities that wine tourists can enjoy including tasting and buying, learning about vineyards and production and links to natural heritage and experiential (food, sport and recreation) environment (Carlsen, 2004).

The critical success factors for wine tourism have been considered in previous studies, most notably (though not exclusively) Getz and Brown (2006), who suggest that the ‘core product’ is the most significant issue. However, the ‘core product’ comprises a diverse range of factors, including winery staff, accommodation and food, and a range of things to see and do. Additionally their study suggests that destination appeal (including accessibility), the core cultural product, variety and tourism orientation are significant, a conclusion reinforced by Cohen and Ben-Nun (2009). Other studies have also proposed, at least by implication, more specific critical success factors, such as a clear service orientation - including the welcome and staff empathy (O'Neill & Palmer, 2004), or a sense of authenticity (Roberts & Sparks, 2006). Wine quality and reputation, which is particularly relevant to this study, whilst never the most important factor, remain vital (Getz and Brown, 2006). However, all these studies have focused on New World wine-producing countries, and as differences with wine tourism provision and consumption in Europe have been suggested (Charters, 2010) it is hard to say how far these research conclusions would apply in France.

We can also note that wine regions, like wine tourism destinations, operate as a territorial brand (Charters and Spielmann, forthcoming). This makes the process of managing them complex, as it relies not just on one individual enterprise as brand manager, but a collective approach of a number of enterprises. A shared vision, a sense of community and willingness to compromise are thus essential (Charters and Spielmann, forthcoming).

3. PROCESS

This study is a preliminary, exploratory piece of research designed as the first phase in a larger project examining wine tourism in the Beaujolais region. Given the two theoretical components noted above (that it is the examination of an ‘undeveloped’ wine tourism region, and that it should investigate the relationship between a weak territorial wine brand and destination image) the aim is to set the context for future research.

Two exploratory processes have therefore been used. The first is based on participant observation by the researchers independently over a period of more than one year, visiting the region, going to wineries and talking with local wine producers. Field notes of these visits have been kept and analysed by the researchers individually and then jointly, in an attempt to obtain a degree of triangulation of data and analysis. This initial analysis focused on the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities of, and threats to, the region

The second stage in the process involved exposing a group of masters students to the region and its wines, including presentations and wine tastings. The 29 students, comprising five different nationalities, were then panelled about their responses to the region and their own views of its current position as a wine tourism destination. This data was used to support the initial findings of the researchers based on the participant observation. Whilst unusual, the use of third parties as a means of gaining external consumer responses to wine tourism and then

debriefing them is not unknown (Fountain & Charters, 2006).

The result of these two phases was the construction of a structured analysis of wine tourism provision in Beaujolais.

4. ANALYSIS OF WINE TOURISM IN BEAUJOLAIS

4.1 Assets

A number of positive factors for wine tourism in Beaujolais were noted. The location is ideal (close to both Burgundy and Lyon, with a major international airport nearby, as well as a motorway linking Paris to the south of France and used by 70 million motorists each year). Most independent producers have tasting facilities. There are some existing attractions, such as the 'hameau du vin' (wine hamlet) of Georges Duboeuf, as well as other, non-wine attractions for all the family. The region has heritage, with castles and a strong food culture, including *bistrots bourguignons*, underlining the link between local food produce and Beaujolais wines, as well as a number of Michelin-starred restaurants.

It is also true that while the best-known product of the region (Beaujolais nouveau) has a low overall image, nevertheless it is popular in some markets (e.g. Japan) and with young people.

4.2 Drawbacks

It was evident from the first stage of the research (participant observation) that there are few tourists visiting Beaujolais, and that the producers themselves consider that this sector is not well developed. Despite the reputation Beaujolais nouveau has in some markets, as noted above, the overwhelming negative idea about the region as a wine tourism destination was the image it gained from the wine – this was a factor which emerged strongly in our study of the student responses to the region. The question then arises – is it possible to entice tourists to the region despite that image (based on the assets noted above) – and in doing so will that help restore the reputation of the wine or is it necessary to rectify the image that the wine has in order to persuade visitors it is worth coming to the region.

This drawback leads directly to the next group of negatives. There appears to be a failure at local level to think strategically about wine tourism. There is no local research into wine tourists, nor understanding of their needs and expectations; for instance, even basic statistical information about visitors does not exist. This combines with the lack of any strategy to provide them with a comprehensive offer, including little real promotion of the attractions of visiting. Crucially, the local administrative bodies (the Regional Council, Departmental Council, wine industry bodies and the regional Tourism Council) are failing to coordinate their planning and activities – thus, for instance, it was noted that signage was poor. Again, the question is posed – does this failure to think strategically exist because the fundamental issue it would have to address immediately is the style of wine made locally and its reputation? There may be a conflict between the substantial vested interests involved in producing Beaujolais nouveau and those (including many other producers) who wish to develop both wine tourism and a reputation for more 'serious' styles of wine.

4.3 Some Opportunities:

The region does undoubtedly have some opportunities it could use to develop wine tourism. There is now the possibility to work with other external agencies to promote the region, linking

wine tourism further north in Burgundy (offering, for instance, two or three day packages which cross wine region boundaries) and with Lyon international airport to bring foreign tourists into the region, just as many ski fields have. The growth of new markets in Asia and eastern Europe also gives a new group of tourists who can be targeted – and who may be less put-off by the reputation of Beaujolais nouveau.

Crucially, the development of a new appellation - *Coteaux Bourguignons* (Burgundian Hills) – which is available to producers in Beaujolais as well as further north in Burgundy appellations to sell Beaujolais wines. The advantage of using this is that it associates Beaujolais with the more prestigious wines from its neighbouring region to the north, and separates it from the image of Beaujolais nouveau. However, the downside is that for those producers committed to producing traditional (and good to high quality) Beaujolais, adding a further appellation – and one linked to another region rather than one which underlines their heritage – may confuse rather than clarify or enhance their reputation. And how does one sell wine tourism in Beaujolais if the locally-used appellation is one that relates to wines made as far north as Chablis? At this point the relationship of wine image (reputation and identity) with the provision of an effective wine tourism offering becomes confused and uncertain.

5. CONCLUSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Evidently, to be better able to respond to wine tourists' needs in visiting a wine region such as Beaujolais, further research needs to be conducted to determine who the wine tourists are, what their needs, motivations and expectations are and how far current provision responds to their needs. As part of the initial study it seems that the essential offering (what Getz and Brown (2006) might call the core product) is quite attractive. It is more the peripheral factors (signage, links to other activities, and coordination which need to be addressed.

However, before any of these factors can be improved, there is another critical success factor which seems to emerge from this study, and which has not previously been given great prominence (although noted by Getz and Brown (2006) as a dimension of success) and that is reputation. This research suggests that wine reputation is more than just one amongst many equal components of successful wine tourism, rather that it is a precondition for that success on which all the other factors depend. Future research in the field will examine this further and try to understand more clearly the relationship between the reputation of wines from a region and the other factors in having a successful offering.

Managerially, this study reinforces what is already well known – that in better knowing the profile of wine tourists, a region should be able to better respond to their needs and offer a wine tourism experience that would be unique and memorable. However, for tourism and wine tourism professionals and organisers at a regional and/or administrative level there is a more fundamental challenge. It is the norm for these groups not to distinguish qualitatively between various wine producers. In the interests of fairness all are treated alike, and all should have the chance to benefit equally from the influx of visitors. But what happens when some producers produce wine which (either stylistically and/or in terms of wine quality – both typified by Beaujolais nouveau) undermines regional reputation and thus hinders the development of a suitable offering? In this case the territorial brand of a region is weakened. This is significant, because wine tourism has the potential to substantially improve the image and thus the profitability of Beaujolais as a whole. Those who manage the collective (territorial) brand need to think clearly about how reputation is managed.

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