

The emphasis on people and place in the identity and marketing of two premium Australian wineries

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Abstract:

Purpose - To explore the emphasis on people and place in the identity and marketing of two wine producers in The Grampians region of Australia.

Design/methodology/approach - The research employs ethnographic case studies of two premium wine producers to explore the emphasis on people and place in winery communications material. Based largely on website and marketing material, the paper first describes how the producers emphasise people and place, then discusses reasons for doing so and the implications of this emphasis.

Findings - A number of reasons are suggested to explain why these producers emphasise the people and place in their communications: producer identity and values, geographical isolation, providing a context for the wines, enhancing authenticity and connecting with consumers in a culturally relevant manner.

Keywords: Australia, Grampians, wine producers, terroir

INTRODUCTION

In the increasingly corporate and global world of wine production it is all too easy for consumers to lose sight of where their wine comes from and who makes it. Against a backdrop of call centres with stock and massive brands selling blended wine from South Eastern Australia, some smaller wineries are actively emphasising the place – the vineyard and winery where the wine is produced – and their people – the owners and staff – in communications with consumers. On wine labels and descriptions, on the website and in press releases, references to the people and place behind the bottle of wine highlight “*the traditional role of wine in human life, its way of connecting people to the land and to one another*” {McGee, 2007 #273}. In doing so, producers are asserting the importance of people, place, history and culture in the production of a wine. This concept is not new and is akin to the French notion of *terroir*. There is much debate about the term *terroir* and its definition {Charters, 2006 #193}, its appropriation by New World wine countries {Barham, 2003 #253}, and its significance for different groups {Spielmann, 2012 #251}. In academia, the wine industry and in the mainstream media, the word *terroir* is employed with varying definitions, however the aim of this paper is not to debate the “*incongruent interpretations of terroir*” {Spielmann, 2012 #251}, rather to investigate the emphasis on people and place in developing winery identity and marketing. The research uses case studies of two wineries in The Grampians region of Victoria, Australia to explore the concept.

1. METHODOLOGY

This paper is part a larger anthropological research project investigating how wine producers perceive their winery and how the winery’s identity and image are developed in Australia and France. Despite significant research on wine consumption in business and marketing, and the establishment of wine as a field of anthropological study, there is still very little research on wine producers and their identity. Ulin’s research (1996) investigating power relations between large and small Bordeaux wine producers, and Beverland’s (2009) research on brand authenticity from a consumer marketing perspective provide interesting insights into wine producers and suggest the need for further research on wine producers from a social perspective.

In this paper, case studies of two Australian wine producers are presented to explore how and why wine producers emphasise people and place in marketing and communications material. The two cases were deliberately selected for contrasting situations {Yin, 2009 #221}, providing different perspectives from the region: a family-owned, ‘old’ wine producer (established during or prior to the mid nineteenth century), and a company-owned, ‘new’ wine producer (established during or after the rejuvenation of the Australian wine industry in the 1960s). A small number of cases presents a good basis for analytical generalisation, leading to hypotheses that may be tested later through explanatory research {Eisenhardt, 1989 #219}. It is particularly appropriate where little research exists in the field, as is the case with anthropological research on wine {Black, 2013 #267}, particularly on wine producers.

The research employed an ethnographical grounded theory approach {Pettigrew, 2000 #276} to data collection and interpretation. The data was collected from 2009 to 2015, and included published material (online and print) and media coverage, interviews, observations, and informally gathered information from a variety of sources. From interview transcripts, field notes and documents, a thick ethnographical description {Geertz, 1975 #277} of each case was created. Following this ethnographical interpretation of the data, the data was coded following the grounded theory method of constant comparison {Bryant, 2007 #279} to produce analytical categories and suggest a theoretical interpretation of the data.

2. CASE STUDIES

Both case studies are situated in The Grampians region of Victoria, approximately 200km west of Melbourne in the south east of Australia. The region is geographically isolated from major cities and is sparsely populated, with around two dozen wineries dotted throughout a predominantly agricultural area. The Grampians is not a wine tourism destination in itself however wineries do attract some cellar door visitors as a secondary activity. As cellar door and local sales are a small percentage of the wineries' business, marketing and communications are critical for generating sales and developing a reputation. The two wineries selected for the case studies are producers of premium and super-premium wines (above AUD\$12 wholesale, pre-tax per bottle {Anderson, 2011 #278}), have a prestigious reputation in Australia and in export markets, and produce two of Australia's most respected and highly priced red wines.

2.1. Case Study #1: Mount Langi Ghiran

Mount Langi Ghiran is famed for the *Langi Shiraz*, and also produces a range of Shiraz, Cabernet, Pinot Gris, Riesling, and Sparkling Shiraz, the latter a speciality of The Grampians region. It is owned by the Rathbone Wine Group whose portfolio includes premium wine brands Yering Station, Yarra Bank, Parker Coonawarra Estate and Xanadu Wines. Mount Langi Ghiran takes its name from the granite peaks of a mountain rising from the flat plains of western Victoria, aligning the wines instantly with the place where they are made. The use of the Aboriginal name, meaning "home of the black cockatoo", evokes the timelessness and permanence of this impressive geographical landmark, subtly appropriating its ancient history to support just forty years of winemaking. Other references to place are overt, such as the history page of the website, where the reader is told explicitly that "*the vineyard ... encapsulates an extraordinary sense of place.*" {Mount Langi Ghiran, 2015 #269}

The connection to place is enhanced through the naming of the wines: all Mount Langi Ghiran wines named after a geographical feature or vineyard. The Billi Billi range after the Billy Billy Creek; the Cliff Edge range after the dramatic granite cliff face behind the winery; several wines identified by particular vineyard parcels – "Old Block" Shiraz, and "Double Vineyard" Shiraz; and the flagship wine, simply called "Langi Shiraz". Mount Langi Ghiran's emphasis clearly centres on the place. Naming wines after the unchanging landscape creates a permanence for the brand's identity that is independent of changes in personnel or

company ownership. Only one wine is named in honour of a person, winemaker Trevor Mast, who was responsible for establishing Langi's reputation. As head winemaker at Mount Langi Ghiran from 1978 until his retirement in 2006, the association is firmly cemented in the history of the winery.

Descriptions of individual wines are also centred on place, as the opening phrase of the Cliff Edge Shiraz illustrates: *"The wine showcases distinct Grampians regional character..."* In some instances the descriptions go into fine detail. A very tight combination of place and people is presented in the story of the Mount Langi Ghiran Double Vineyard Shiraz {Mount Langi Ghiran, 2015 #275}:

"This wine is made from two vineyards 1162km apart. While the focus of our winemaking has always been our estate at Mount Langi Ghiran, a discussion arose between Langi winemaker Dan Buckle and Peppertree winemaker Jim Chatto as to the virtue of single vineyard verses multi regional blends. Dan and Jim each sent one another barrel samples and each picked the barrel they wanted for their blend. The Langi blend comes from our Langi block, while the Hunter component comes from an 80 year old Tallwanta old vineyard. The double vineyard blend combines the floral perfume and spice of the Grampians, with the structure and savouriness of the Hunter Valley."

While Mount Langi Ghiran's wine descriptions do not often explicitly mention the individual people involved, the frequent use of the personal pronouns 'I' and 'we', and the mode of delivery of information via videos and in person (winemaker dinners, events, etc.) are arguably as powerful in creating a sense of the individuals behind the wine. The videos on the website add detail and stories to the concise written information. They are all centred on an individual – the winemaker or viticulturalist in the vineyard, cellar or lab – in simple webcam style, sending a potent message to the viewer that the place and people are the essence of the brand. The videos have the feel of a "sneak peek" into the winery, rather than slick marketing, and this simplicity adds more personal, human qualities to the winery's image.

The focus on people and place is then picked up by the media, as this newspaper article {Lewis, 2013 #250} demonstrates:

"At the 2012 Sydney Wine Show a red from the slopes of an isolated granite mountain at an altitude of 350 metres-plus above sea level and with a mean January temperature of a mere 18.1 degrees won the trophies for the best wine of the show, the best red and the best shiraz varietal. It was a brilliant performance by the then-unreleased Mount Langi Ghiran 2010 Cliff Edge Shiraz from a vineyard established 50 years ago in western Victoria's Grampians Region... The wine was made by former chief winemaker Dan Buckle and assistant winemaker Kate Petering, who has now taken over the Langi Ghiran top job."

The article goes on to talk exclusively about the people behind the wine – the stories of former and current winemakers, founders and owners. The message has been successfully communicated that the quality of this wine is thanks to the place and people that make it.

2.2. Case Study #2: Best's Great Western

Best's Great Western is a family owned winery. Planted in 1867, it is one of Australia's oldest continuously producing wineries, boasting some of the oldest vines in the world. Highly regarded for its Shiraz, Best's also produces a wide range of varietal wines and blends, including a red and a white wine produced from the nursery block which includes 39 different varieties, some still unclassified.

Two families are central to Best's identity. From an historical perspective, the founders of the vineyard, Henry Best and his family, begin the story with a tale of innovation and persistence. The contemporary story belongs to the Thompson family whose involvement in the Great Western wine industry goes back more than 140 years. The stories of both families figure prominently on the website and in promotional material. The emphasis on the legacy of past owners and winemakers, and the current owners and winemaker is realized by telling the personal and individual stories of these key people. The thread of people and place can be traced through the different features of the winery's image, from a fundamental naming perspective to the more subtle ways in which their stories are told.

The name *Best's Great Western* unequivocally attaches the winery geographically to a place – the town of Great Western – and to an individual – founder Mr Henry Best. The apostrophe leaves no doubt that the winery was created by an individual and that the connection is important. A sense of familiarity with the actual person is created by referring to him by his first name in published material, for example when quoting from '*Henry's journal*'. The familiar tone is found throughout Best's communication, epitomised in the in-house publication "*Best's and the story of Great Western Shiraz*" written in first person from the perspective of general manager, Ben Thomson. It reads as a personal story – "*When my dad Viv started making Bin 0 decades ago...*" {Best's Great Western, 2015 #270} – with many references to members of the Thomson family.

Best's wine names emphasise place with a large proportion of individual wines and collections referencing the geography. The Concongella Collection is named after the Concongella Creek that winds its way past Best's vineyards. Wines in this collection include the Nursery Block Dry Red, Concongella White, White Gravels Hill Shiraz, all referring to specific places in the vineyard. Linking the people and the place, wines from the 'House Block' note a particular parcel of vines and allude to an everyday human involvement through the use of the word 'house'. The human element is developed further in the form of wines named after the current owners. The Thomson Family Shiraz sits at the head of the Icon Range, while the EVT 51 Riesling celebrates Best's patriarch Viv Thomson (his initials) and the 51 vintages he has worked there. Even the collaborative Champagne, made with French producer Huguenot-Tassin, highlights the involvement of Edouard Huguenot, manager of the family-owned house.

People and place each have their own importance in the labelling of the winery and the wines, however when both identities are employed together their potency is magnified. This

is immediately evident in the wine descriptions that Best's has created for PR and marketing. The Concongella Range references the local creek in the name and connects it with key people stating that "*Henry Best planted his first vines close to a water source in 1866, the Concongella Creek*" and that "*the Thomson Family decided to name a collection of wines after the area in which the wine is produced from, also drawing inspiration from the soil structure at Great Western.*" {Best's, 2015 #280} In two sentences, the history, people and place have all been put into context. Again with the flagship wine, people and place are linked and emphasised: the Thomson Family Shiraz "*was created in 1993, to celebrate the centenary of the Thomson family's settling in the area of Great Western. A special single vineyard wine, it was made from the 15 rows of the original 1868 Shiraz vines, planted by Henry Best, and once referred to as 'Hermitage' in Henry's daily journal.*" {Best's, 2015 #281}. Best's website is also peppered with videos centred around a key person from the winery explaining an element of wine production.

3. DISCUSSION

Having established that Best's Great Western and Mount Langi Ghiran emphasise the people and place involved in the production of their wine, this section discusses possible reasons for taking that approach. It explores why, in winery communications, so much emphasis is put on the stories of the people and place when wine is apparently a beverage produced and consumed for its organoleptic properties. This question will be addressed from an anthropological perspective exploring producer identity and actions.

These two wineries are quite small in size in the context of the Australian wine industry where 80% of wine production is owned by 20 companies {Media, 2015 #271}. Their point of difference from the big companies is that they are small operations with a very precise geographical location. The individual people and specific place that make each winery are unique and cannot be replicated, and this forms an integral part of their identity. In interviews and observations, both wineries were quick to make the distinction between their operation and the big companies. This distinction follows through in the way they present their stories to the public. In an increasingly globalised and competitive marketplace, a unique story centred on a specific geographical place is particularly helpful in building brand equity {Beverland, 2009 #247}, therefore the reinforcement of a small-scale winery identity by producers may also influence the way consumers view the brand. While big companies making multiregional blends may reap the benefits of scale, one advantage for smaller premium producers is their combination of passionate individuals and connection to a place.

The place for both the wine producers in this study is a rural region of western Victoria. This poses the question of whether the emphasis on people and place is particularly important for geographically isolated wine regions. The act of telling the story of the people and place responsible for producing the wine may be an effort to connect with a consumer who is unlikely to visit. While wine regions closer to Melbourne, such as the Yarra Valley and the Mornington Peninsula, have large numbers of visitors, the remoteness of The Grampians means few consumers experience the winery first hand. Telling the story through published

material creates a virtual experience of the place and the people. Although it is a virtual interaction with the winery, this consumer experience can create a connection and loyalty to the brand {Schmitt, 2009 #254}. For a predominantly urban population, the wine experience, real and virtual, is becoming more significant as a means to connect with their rural roots and traditional values {Demossier, 2010 #179}. Both producers aim to express the vineyard in the wine and it follows that they would wish to explain this to consumers, thereby sending the wine into the world with some of its production context.

Brands that encourage consumers to create their own stories and meaning are perceived as more authentic {Beverland, 2009 #247} and the quest for authenticity no doubt underpins the emphasis on people and place. Mount Langi Ghiran and Best's emphasis on people and place clearly illustrate the first of Beverland's seven 'habits' of authentic brands: storytelling, appearing as artisanal amateurs, sticking to your roots, and loving the doing. Both Best's and Mount Langi are creating an image in line with Beverland's {Beverland, 2009 #247} research findings that *"fine wine consumers judge products seemingly untainted by commercial concerns as more authentic than mass-market products. Lack of commercial interest may be demonstrated by overt statements of ... commitments to place ... and the passion of winemakers for their products."* The content and method of delivery used by Best's and Mount Langi Ghiran to tell their stories reinforce the notion of authenticity for consumers and in doing so, may enhance the perception of quality and thus prices for their wines {Spielmann, 2012 #251}.

The association of the people and place of production of a wine with its characteristics is very much the concept of the *terroir*. However, it is interesting to note that neither Mount Langi Ghiran nor Best's employ the word in their communications. In the case of Best's, a farming family from an isolated area, one could argue that the term is culturally irrelevant. While they are aware of the term and understand its meaning, they are not necessarily comfortable with the word or feel the need to use it. Their identity as wine growers is based on producing quality wines that respect their place of origin, and Best's winery and brand identity is an extension of these values.ⁱ The identity of Mount Langi Ghiran is somewhat different as it is owned by a business group, has a more polished image and appears to be more conscious of consumer perceptions.ⁱⁱ An awareness that different users of the word *terroir* have different understandings of its meaning could be a reason for avoiding it, or perhaps they simply prefer to avoid using a word that is clearly French. For both wineries the choice not to use the word *terroir* seems to be a conscious one, grounding the brands in Australian soil and culture.

ⁱ From interviews, informal conversations and observations at Best's Great Western, 2010-2015.

ⁱⁱ From interviews, informal conversations and observations at Mount Langi Ghiran, 2010-2015.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In exploring these two case studies, it is clear that both wineries emphasise people and place in their communication with the media and consumers. The emphasis on people and place helps to create a unique and authentic image for the winery and represents the values of the wine producers. Arguably, this approach is in part a “means of protecting, preserving and promoting artisan practices and regional identities” {Trubek, 2008 #268} and suggests that a *terroir*-esque concept is being used by these two producers even if the word itself is not culturally relevant. This preliminary exploration of the emphasis on people and place by two wineries in The Grampians could be investigated further through more case studies in the region, comparisons with other regions to investigate the influence of geographical isolation and tourism, and comparisons with other New and Old World wine producing regions.

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