

The Development of Wine tourism in Lesser-known Wine Regions: The Case of Jura

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Abstract:

Purpose - The aim of this study is a preliminary examination of the provision of wine tourism in a relatively unknown wine region, with a view to examining its potential both as an economic driver within the region and in relationship to the reputation of the wines produced in the region.

Design/methodology/approach - The research considered the Jura region of France, examining the experience of visitors in the region (expert and non-expert) in a mystery shopping context. The research thus begins by examining consumer perspectives of the attractions of the region. At a theoretical level the findings were considered within the context of the winescape and of cultural systems.

Findings - The emerging themes were classified into three content areas – rural atmosphere, hospitality, and distinctive wine style. Each theme was considered to be assets of the region; however, there were also a series of weaknesses which limited the effectiveness of wine tourism in Jura.

Practical implication – We recommend that for the development of wine tourism strategies Jura must focus on the combination of its unique wine styles and local food and wine pairing, as well as on the natural beauty of its landscape – the wine in isolation is insufficient. Authenticity and distinctiveness are underlined by the overall winescape context.

Keywords: Wine tourism; Jura, winescape, cultural systems

1. INTRODUCTION

The Jura wine region, located between Burgundy and Switzerland, lies in the mountain range of the same name. It has spectacular landscape with numerous waterfalls and rivers which lead to the 'Reculée de Baume', a breathtaking step-head valley. Other key attractions include the 'Salines de Salins' - historic salt mines. Salt extraction in the region stopped in 1962 and the old workings - a UNESCO world heritage site - are now open to the public.

Jura is the smallest wine region of France, yet one of the most complicated ones. Situated in Eastern France, it has close to 1,850 hectares of grapes, lying 80 km directly east of Burgundy's Côte d'Or. As in Burgundy, the soil is largely based on clay-limestone. Beside pinot noir and chardonnay, a number of indigenous grape varieties - such as savignin, poulsard and trousseau – grow here (Lorch, 2014). A sweet 'vin de paille' made by grapes which are dried on straw mats is a local speciality. However, it is 'vin jaune' ('yellow wine') that Jura is most renowned. Vin jaune is made by a similar process as sherry and is distinctive with oxidative and yeast characters (Lorch, 2014). Every year, up to 60,000 tourists visit to attend the biggest French wine festival 'La Percée du Vin Jaune' (Gaillard, 2011), tasting the new release of vin jaune which has matured for at least 6 years and 3 months in barrels. The festival is held annually in a different village of the region (Lorch, 2014).

The reputation of Jura is growing in some parts of the world - as one journalist commented recently on Jura's wines, 'suddenly, they're super-trendy and everyone seems to be talking about them' (Moore, 2014). Yet because the Jura region is lesser known as a French wine region and as a tourist attraction, tourism in general (and wine tourism in particular) is underdeveloped. To the researchers' knowledge, no formal assessment has been conducted to evaluate what constitutes the region's attractions for tourists, nor is other similar research in the pipeline. Therefore, strategies for tourism development have not been developed either. Yet, the region can offer a number of historic places, unique food and wine, and ample opportunities for outdoor activities.

The interesting example which Jura presents is the relationship between an evolving reputation for wine and tourism to the place of origin of the wine, as well as how that reputation can be used to promote tourism. The current research has been undertaken with the purpose of conducting an assessment of the Jura's tourist offerings, with an ultimate goal of defining a unique selling proposition of the region, and exploring the destination offer in relationship to the reputation of the wines. This study is a preliminary exploration of that phenomenon. The study takes a two-step qualitative approach in presenting propositions for further research rather than definitive conclusions.

2. CONTEXT

Given the exploratory nature of this study, requiring an open-ended investigation into the structure and perceptions of wine tourism in the region, a precise theoretical framework was not felt appropriate for the study. However, two recent conceptual backgrounds are considered useful to provide a context for the approach taken here: winescape and cultural systems.

The concept of winescape is rooted in 'servicescape' theory (Bitner, 1992), which contends that the physical environment in which a service response is experienced affects the perception of service quality and satisfaction with the experience. Winescape, however, is a broader, more theoretically based concept, and links not just to the environment constructed by humans, but also to the natural world. Peters (1997) refers to the winescape as "the attributes of a grape wine region" (p. 4). Alebaki and Iakovidou (2011) argue that winescape relates the "whole region and its attributes" (p. 123). The winescape makes it possible for tourists to indulge in experiences in an aesthetically pleasing environment, of both a natural and physical nature (Bruwer and Lesschaeve, 2012). As Bruwer and Lesschaeve (2012) have noted, the natural environment is often acknowledged by visitors, but has rarely been the focus of wine tourism research. Additionally, the constructed environment can also be a fundamental component of how tourists respond to their experience; this has been acknowledged for the domaine itself (Charters, Fountain and Fish, 2009) but is also important for the wider built environment – the servicescape of industrial buildings, villages and other tourist attractions made by humans. Bruwer and Lesschaeve (2012) have consequently included these factors in their three 'destination features' dimensions of the winescape.

Another complementary way of looking at the context of wine tourism is through cultural systems (Bonnemaïson et al., 2005). This approach sees the wine landscape as a cultural ensemble – thus the impact of landscape and the built environment on the structures of tourism (where visits occur, links or separation between domaines and vineyards) as well as the socio-historical evolution of provision and the offer – cooperation between actors (Mitchell, Charters & Albrecht, 2012). Thus, actors have 'knowledge' of the world they inhabit and their beliefs about it (expressed by symbols and myths) as they attempt to negotiate a relationship between culture and the geographical space they live in and the landscape becomes a cultural ensemble (Mitchell, Charters and Albrecht, 2012).

3. METHOD

3.1. Procedures

The researchers applied inductive reasoning and utilized a combination of observational and focus group research methods using mystery shopping techniques. Mystery shopping is a form of concealed observation in which researchers take on the role of customers or potential customers in order to monitor the processes and procedures involved in service delivery (Wilson, 1998). Finn and Kayandé (1999) noted that it is difficult to use customer surveys to investigate service provision. Instead, they advocated for mystery shopping to evaluate service quality and experiences. In this case, a two-step research design was employed.

For the first stage of data collection, a mystery shopping approach was used to obtain information on tourism experiences in the Jura region. Initially, three researchers conducted mystery shopping visits to three villages in Jura. One researcher conducted an individual visit and two researchers visited the region together. Upon return from the region, the researchers independently recorded the findings in the form of open-ended comments.

The researchers' visits, however, yielded only a partial perspective - individual and small group experiences, and coloured by the fact that these were experts. For a more

comprehensive assessment, a larger group who were not expert informants, was necessary. Previous wine tourism research (e.g., Kolyesnikova and Dodd, 2008) reported differences in attitudes and purchasing behaviour at cellar doors between smaller and larger groups of visitors. Therefore, a group of eight students was recruited to visit the region. The students travelled by bus and participated in all activities as a group. The students were later debriefed on their experiences. They provided their feedback by participating in a focus group, which constituted the second stage of data collection. The focus group was conducted as an open discussion about services and various aspects of their experience in Jura. Overall, the research participants in this study visited seven wineries. Focus group discussions were based on visits to these wineries, along with other attractions in the region.

The two-step approach was considered the most advantageous method for collecting a concentrated set of opinions on the topic as it incorporates the diverse approach. Consequently, a combination of qualitative data collection methods brings a phenomenological emphasis on consumers' experience, prioritising subjective and affective components of the visitor experience at cellar doors (Charters, Fountain, and Fish, 2009).

3.2. Data Analysis

The resulting data - obtained from the researchers' notes and the focus groups transcripts - were analysed using comparative pattern thematic analysis, which involves identifying recurring regularities in data, then sorting them into categories to link the underlying meanings (Baxter, 1991). The three researchers initially worked independently but followed a prescribed, sequential process suggested by Krueger and Casey (2009) in order to conduct comparable data analyses. The overarching ideas were formulated into themes. The themes were then discussed and revised. An overall process of reflection and further discussion offered a high level of investigator triangulation (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989).

4. FINDINGS

The emerging themes were classified into three content areas – *rural atmosphere*, *hospitality*, and *distinctive wine style*. The description of the themes is expanded upon below. Exemplary verbatim quotations (either typical ideas repeatedly emerging in the focus group/ researchers' notes or especially illuminating ones) are included to highlight the points being made.

4.1. Rural Atmosphere

Findings from this research suggest that the primary factor for the tourists in the Jura region is the natural beauty and its geographical setting – one of the winescape's dimension. In fact, Bruwer and Lesschaeve (2012) named generally it the most important dimension of winescape. In the current study, participants firmly viewed the natural beauty of the region as an element that contributes to its authentic setting. It was noted repeatedly that the quaint small towns such as Arbois and Chateau-Châlon have a rural, authentic atmosphere. Participants mentioned that walking through the streets of Arbois gave them the impression that the time has stopped. There was a feeling that nothing seemed to have changed since the last century.

All participants commented on the beauty of the villages and the landscape. The landscape across the vineyards in the village of Pupillin, near Arbois, was definitely perceived as breathtaking. One participant remarked, "*we took a beautiful walk, the landscape was amazing*". This rural atmosphere with a beautiful landscape was definitely seen as an asset to the region.

Interestingly, the researchers also noticed that the notion of 'authentic beauty' may have an ambivalent meaning. While praising the authentic atmosphere of the region, some participants noted that the villages looked relatively deprived. One comment was, "*It is definitely not 'Disneywine' like Beaune in Côte d'Or.*" Another participant said, "*When we arrived in the first small village, I felt it was almost like a twilight zone. There is no one in the shops, no one in the houses...It felt strange... Almost like a film set*". Thus, it seems that authenticity is popular and some unpolished beauty sustains the sense of the authentic. However, if the place looks too poor or rough, it loses its charm and must remain authentic yet attractive.

4.2. Hospitality

As Pine and Gilmore (1998) pointed out, it is of utmost importance to create memorable travel experiences. Meeting the locals is one of the key ways of creating a memorable experience (Orsolini and Boksberger, 2009). The students met two local people – a grower/winemaker and a Bed and Breakfast owner. One student commented on the welcome that they received from the local people, "*the experience was very personal*". In terms of wine tourism experiences, meeting the winemaker adds value to and contributes to a more enriching winery experience (Cambourne and Macionis, 2000).

Indeed, the personalized experience of meeting a winemaker truly enhanced the students' perceptions of the region. The winemaker himself received the students, sat with them for over two hours for a free tasting, and described each wine in detail. Different food item accompanied each wine. The food was typical for the Jura region - sausages, bread, and different types of cheese. The presence of regional food added to the entire experience. At the Bed and Breakfast, the owner cooked a traditional meal from Jura accompanied by local wines.

Hospitality was also enhanced by the educational element of the visit. One student made a remark, "*They gave us pamphlets in English that we could read and follow the description of the wines. It was nice to have something visual*". But it was the warm welcome and hospitality that participants mostly commented on: "*These people took us in their businesses and into their homes, they cooked for us*". Local people were perceived as "*most hospitable*".

Hospitality also carried over into the entertaining and sociable atmosphere of the experience. The day that the students shared in Jura was memorable because it gave them an opportunity to socialize with their friends. The students noted that it is due to the hospitality that they received, they felt more relaxed and got to know each other better. One student remarked on the 'fun' aspect of the experience. "*I remember a lot of laughing that day*". The students' experiences were entertaining, educational and social.

The three researchers had similar experiences. In the wine cellars that they visited in Arbois, they received a very friendly welcome. The first visit took place in Henri Maire - a famous winegrower. It is through the advertisement campaign of Henri Maire in the 1950's that the wines from Jura became famous in France through the 'vin fou' ('mad wine') campaign.

The researchers noted that perhaps due to the language barrier, the welcome was a little hesitant at first at various places they visited. But once the staff overcame the initial barrier they became very friendly and hospitable. For non-Francophone visitors here language is definitely a problem; virtually nobody speaks English. Nevertheless, despite poor English, the cellar door personnel, the office of tourism staff, and other service providers were helpful, friendly and welcoming. The cellar visits were all free, which fits the rural village atmosphere of Arbois, but may also lead to more obligation to buy (Kolyesnikova and Dodd, 2009).

4.3. Distinctive Wine Style

Wine has been a key element of the hospitality industry for decades. In a hospitality setting, wine tends to complement culinary experiences (Aune, 2002) and contributes to socializing, relaxation and learning (Dodd, 1995). Wineries play an important role not only as a place of producing wines but also as a place of consumption attracting visitors to taste and purchase wine (Leiper and Carlsen, 1998).

The Jura wines are usually perceived as a bit mysterious and not easily approachable. To get to grips with the Jura wines requires a steep learning curve, as one will encounter unusual flavours. One student commented, "*Jura wines are unique. It is an acquired taste. But when you taste them with food, they taste delicious.*" It seems that a general perception is that matching food and wine is a must with the Jura wines. Another student remarked, "*Combination of vin jaune and comté cheese was the best*". Another one thought the wines were really strange: "*Weird flavour, but I chose two that I liked best and bought them for my parents*". This distinctive wine style is an asset for a region which is starting to attract wine enthusiasts from different parts of the world who seek variety.

5. IMPLICATIONS

It is a recommendation of this research that for the development of wine tourism strategies Jura needs to focus on its unique wine styles and local food and wine pairing, as well as on the natural beauty of its landscape. As this research shows, the wine style is exclusive, thus interesting. Food is another important component of the attractiveness of the Jura region. Comté, morteau sausages and morels are typical for this region and attract gastronomes.

There is an atmosphere of small rural towns with a genuine authenticity in the small villages like Arbois or Pupillin. At the same time, there is also an air of economic fragility, which underscores the potential significance of a growing wine tourism offer for the region. Overall, the service is very friendly, but most people (even at the tourist office) speak limited English. As a student remarked on "*you need a translator. You need to be accompanied by locals*". Either languages skills need to be developed or the tourist offer needs to focus overwhelmingly on domestic and neighbouring Francophone markets.

There is a need to offer organized food and wine tours to make the place more accessible for tourists. One student phrased it in this way: "*I wonder though...A random tourist would be lost here. Without the organized trip, I don't think I'd know about Jura*". Likewise, another student commented on difficulty of getting information about the region, "*They need some kind of central place where they would provide information, how to navigate the area? What to do there?*". Accessibility requires a focus on local tourism hubs (e.g. Besançon) and larger cities (Lyon) as well as the neighbouring Swiss market in order to attract visitors.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The relevance of the winescape as a means of understanding consumer responses to the wine tourism offer in Jura is evident. The informants we interested not only in wine, perhaps not even primarily in wine, but also in the built environment and the landscape – as well as the food which comes from that landscape. This is not just about stating the obvious and well-known links between wine, food and heritage for wine tourists (Carlsen, 2006), but the sense of a unique built and natural environment and distinctive villages reflecting the quirky nature of the wines, which in turn seem to match (culturally rather than just organoleptically) the idiosyncratic foods of the area. These also relate to the cultural systems of the area and the producers' role on what they offer (Mitchell et al., 2012), which includes vineyard management, a sense of their own hospitality (especially the indissolubility of the food-wine axis) but also their isolation and hesitance with (for example) developing language skills. However, to develop and refine the exploratory findings of this study further research (quantitative, expanding on the criteria noted by the informants of the study) and qualitative (looking especially at the organisation and delivery of the offer) should be undertaken.

At a practical level, we suggest wine tourism is only one element of an attractive tourism offer. Food and wine tourism should be clearly promoted in combination with the other assets of the region, such as authenticity and beautiful landscape which presents ample opportunities for outdoor activities. Jura has the potential to become a key food and wine destination in the future and an expansion of food and wine tour agencies would spur the development of food and wine tourism.

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