

# **Characteristics of Successful Virtual Wine Tastings: The Participants' Perspective**

**Terry M. Lease**

*Department of Wine and Viticulture, California Polytechnic State University*

**Tricia H. Conover**

*Wine Wonderings (Substack), GrapeStone Concepts*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the complete shut down of many winery tasting rooms in the United States, including in the major wine regions of California, beginning in mid-March 2020. Almost overnight, wineries lost one of the major channels for direct to consumer (DTC) sales, the winery tasting room. Even when wineries were allowed to start reopening tasting rooms, they faced significant restrictions on the number of people they could host in the tasting room and the conditions under which they could host visitors. Moreover, travel restrictions and consumer concern about traveling during the pandemic significantly reduced the number of tourists and other visitors to wine regions, further eroding a winery's ability to use its tasting room to generate DTC sales.

Many wineries, and other some wine retailers, began to use virtual tastings to do their best to re-create a tasting room experience from a distance. Wineries used different formats: from large-scale public events to private tastings, from highly produced broadcast experiences to a "down home" informal online gathering, and were different on many other dimensions.

This paper investigates the different virtual tasting formats from the participants' perspective to explore which aspects are most appealing and engaging to the customers who choose to join a virtual tasting.

## **PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW**

Numerous studies have investigated different aspects of the winery tasting room, including how the tasting room experience can help create satisfied and loyal customers. For examples, see Fountain et al. (2008), Haverila et al. (2020), Nowak and Newton (2006), and Shapiro et al. (2014). To the best of our knowledge, no academic papers exploring virtual tastings using internet streaming technology have been published to date.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

The main question the authors are investigating is what aspects of the virtual tasting experience the participants find most appealing and engaging that would help the virtual tasting experience to supplement or replace the in-person tasting room experience.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The authors will conduct an online survey using a Best/Worst methodology to identify the most/least important factors influencing the participants' perception of the virtual wine tasting

experience. They will apply latent class analysis to identify the different participant-type groups and what they find important in a virtual wine tasting.

### **PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

To be determined. The authors will conduct the survey in late January through mid-February 2021, and conduct the data analysis in the spring.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Informal conversations with wineries indicate that a number of wineries believe the virtual tastings have been a financial and customer relations success, helping them survive the effects of the pandemic in a much better position than they expected when they were forced to close in the spring of 2020, and many of them plan to continue to conduct virtual wine tastings even after winery tasting room visits start to return to a normal level. The authors intend for this paper to provide wineries with guidance, based on empirical support, for designing and implementing a virtual tasting experience that will be most appealing and engaging for their specific target market.

### **REFERENCES**

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