

Initiatives towards wine tourism development in Greece

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Abstract

For many years, wine has been highly associated with tourism, as in several cases it has become a motive for visiting a wine region. Realizing the multiple benefits that can be achieved via such linkages, many wine regions both in Europe and in the New World countries have encouraged the creation of synergies between the wine and the tourism industry. This mutual cooperation falls under the rubric of a growing form of leisure in wine regions, namely wine tourism. Gradually, over the last decades, wine tourism has been firmly established, not only in traditional wine producing countries, but in emerging ones as well, with great success. As far as Greece is concerned, although winemaking has a long history that dates back to the ancient times, wine tourism is still a recent phenomenon. Within this context, we endeavour in this paper to add to the limited data of the newly established wine tourism concept in Greece. In terms of tourism, the most important initiatives towards the promotion of the wine regions have a regional character. In particular, the study provides a review of the gradual evolution of wine tourism across several wine regions, which has been almost completely driven by the development of wine routes. Finally, data regarding the structure and the characteristics of the wine tourism market are also incorporated.

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1 Introduction

Since the times of ancient Greece and Rome, wine has served as a motivation for traveling, while during the Grand Tour, visits to vineyards have constituted a part of an organized trip (Hall et al. 2000). However, it was only recently that both the wine and the tourism industry have developed strong interactions that led to the creation of a growing form of leisure in wine regions, namely wine tourism, or viticultural tourism. From an academic perspective, this form of special interest tourism (O' Neill & Palmer 2004; Yuan & Jang 2008) is emerging as a growing area of interest (Marzo-Navvaro and Pedraia- Iglesias 2009); however it has not so far been universally defined.

One of the most common definitions of this term emphasizes on the consumers' perspective and refers to the "*... visitation to vineyards, wineries, wine festivals and wine shows for which grape wine tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of a grape wine region are the prime motivating factors for visitors*" (Hall (1996) and Macionis (1996), in Hall et al. 2000:3). Mitchell (2006) makes a distinction between wine tourism in a broad sense and winery visitation. According to Getz and Brown (2006), the concept of wine tourism can be examined from three major angles: as a form of consumer behaviour, as a strategy by which destinations develop and market wine-related attractions and imagery, and as a marketing opportunity for wineries to educate and sell their products directly to consumers. Correia (2006) underlines the territorial dimension of this activity, giving the following definition: "*... the development of the tourism and productive value of a territory around its traditions, culture, activities and landscape, associated with wine producing*".

Given the aforementioned approaches, what is important to be stressed is the need for wine tourism destinations to develop a commercial strategy (Marzo-Navvaro and Iglesias 2009) which involves the participation of wine and tourism stakeholders, along with other cultural institutions, and the local community. To this end, the concept of wine routes is considered to have a significant contribution to the overall wine tourism developmental strategy of a region (Gatti and Incerti 1997). Quoting Frochot (2000), a wine route consists of "*a designed itinerary (or several) through the wine region, which is thematically signposted as well as being marketed and interpreted via a free leaflet and map, which notes the different vineyards and wine-makers and provides information on sites of historical and other interest*". Wine routes give the chance to travellers to visit wineries and vineyards, museums or wine tasting centres and to purchase wines, taste the local gastronomy, and find accommodation as well (Gatti and Incerti 1997).

Realizing the multiple benefits that can be generated via such actions, both

“Old World” European wine regions and “New World” wine regions have successfully developed wine tourism, largely in the form of wine roads or wine routes (Cambourne et al. 2000) As far as Europe is concerned, many of the latter have been established with the assistance of the European Weinstrassen (European Council of Wine Roads), which is based in Bordeaux and includes more than 60 wine regions (Hall and Macionis 1998).

Within this context, this paper aims to examine the case of Greece, where wine tourism is a relatively recent phenomenon and has been almost completely driven by the development of wine routes. In particular, the study provides a review of the gradual evolution of wine tourism across several wine regions and adds to the limited data regarding the structure and the characteristics of the Greek wine tourism market. Apart from the review of literature, much of the information has been gained through interviews with representatives of the Greek wine tourism associations.

2 Tourism and history of winemaking in Greece

Greece has traditionally been a popular tourism destination, with the typical “sea, sun and sand” elements dominating the international visitors’ motivations. Thus, for many decades the Greek tourism product was considered to be typically “Mediterranean”, concentrated on the islands as well as along the coastal strip, highly seasonal and dependent mainly on organized mass tourism (Anastassopoulos et al. 2009). In recent years, several alternative forms of tourism have been developed, in an effort to extend the holiday season as well as to utilize the tourism resources in the countryside.

In 2009, tourism contributed nearly 35bn to the Greek economy, which represented 16.2% of GDP (World Travel & Tourism Council, Travel and Tourism Economic Impact 2009). In terms of international arrivals, Greece is the world’s number fifteen tourist destination, holding 1.7% of the world’s share market. Particularly, in 2007 the country received 17.52 millions of tourists (an increase of 9,23% in comparison to 2006, while in 2008 there was a 1% decrease. Regarding generated income, Greece ranked 12th using as a criterion tourism earnings in 2008 (UNWTO 2009). According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, the industry was reckoned to employ both directly and indirectly about 900,000 people in 2009, or about 1/5 of the workforce (www.wttc.org). However, the Greek tourism product is highly seasonal, since 52% of the total international arrivals are concentrated during the months July, August and September.

The United Kingdom, Germany, France, the Netherlands and Italy are the main source markets for international visitors. Recently, an increasing demand has

been recorded for the Greek tourism product in countries of central-east Europe and especially those of the Former Soviet Union. It is important to be stressed that, during the period 2000-2006, tourist arrivals from Russia had an annual growth of 17% (I.T.E.P. 2008). In terms of their profile, foreign tourists in Greece are mainly young (<40), of middle and low income and social class, have high educational level (91%), travel in average with 1.8 people while usually one out of three is under-age. The average length of stay is a little more than 10 days (I.T.E.P. 2009).

Greece has a long tradition of wine making and, as several archaeological finds indicate, wine has had an important contribution to the Greek culture for over 4000 years (Vlachvei and Notta 2009). Many references related to wine have been made by Greek poets and writers during the ancient times. The first VQPRD (*Vin de Qualité Produit Dans Une Région Déterminée*) wines were produced in Greece. During the Ottoman occupation, despite the fact that wine making continued, particularly in many monasteries, there was a compromise in terms of quality (Hall and Mitchell 2000). Heavy taxation along with an extensive destruction caused by Turkish troops constituted the main obstacles for the development of the wine sector. During the first half of the 20th century, wine production in Greece was restricted within the limits of Retsina and bulk wine, while the country was the major supplier of anonymous wine to Europe and particularly to France (Boutaris non-dated).

In 1969, in an endeavour to be admitted to the European Union, Greece revised its wine-legislation and created a national framework for the approval of wines, giving birth to a resurgence of the wine sector (Boutaris, non-dated; Hall and Mitchell 2000). Since 1988, with the introduction of the regulation that approved the use of the term “regional wine”, wine production in Greece has witnessed revival and there was a shift to the production of quality products (Boutaris non-dated).

3 The wine sector and wine tourism in Greece

Today the wine sector is considered to be one of the most profitable industries in the country's economy (Konstandinidis et al. 2008). According to the Greek National Statistical Service, the wine industry accounted for 20.4% to Greek beverage gross production value, while the contribution of the wine sector to beverage value added reached 19% (NSSG 2000-2008). At the moment, there are nearly 650 wineries and 70,000 hectares of vines (out of the total geographical area of 3,600,000 hectares in the European Union). 40% of the vine-dressers are 65 years old and over, while only 20% of them are under the age of 40 (Kourenta and

Moulkiotis 2008). In 2006/07, Greek wineries produced 3.9 million hundred litres (Vlachvei and Notta 2009), representing only 2% of the total wine production in the European Union (Kourenta and Moulkiotis 2008).

The assortment of vineyards, the great variety of quality origins and the several production methods have resulted in a large differentiation of wines produced by each enterprise. According to the Greek Ministry of Rural Development and Food, there are twenty Greek PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) wines and eight PGI (Protected Designation of Indication) (Vlachvei and Notta 2009). The largest portion of the total production (80%) is represented by table wines, “Appellation of Origin of Superior Quality” (OPAP) comprises 10% of the total production, while table wines with a geographical indication account for another 10%. Finally, Greece exports more than 350.000 hundred litres mainly in Europe (90%) and imports around 250.000 hundred litres almost exclusively (97%) from countries of the European Union (Kourenta and Moulkiotis 2008).

Apart from the long history in wine making, Greece is exceptionally rich in native varieties and has therefore a strong comparative advantage in terms of wine production. At the moment, there are several wine producing regions that serve as destinations, both in the mainland (Macedonia, Thraki, Thessalia, Epirus, Central Greece, Peloponnese) and in the islands (Crete, Limnos, Rhodes, Samos, Santorini, Kefalonia, Lefkada, Zakynthos). However, due to the particular geomorphology of the country, Greek wineries are dispersed and in many cases some distance apart. Thus, wine tourism development is more difficult to succeed, in comparison to other regions (e.g. Napa Valley or Burgundy) (Wright 1996: 68) and it is, in fact, a relative new phenomenon.

The goals of wine tourism development in Greece were twofold: to offer supplemental income to wineries and to fulfil the need of city dwellers to escape by exploring the wine regions. Quoting Lagos et al. (2009), as far as Greece is concerned, wine tourism refers to “*all small scale activities developed in rural areas, supported by locals involved in wine growing, independently if their main income sources lies within the viticulture or not*”. It is of utmost importance to be stressed that initiatives towards the establishment of wine tourism had a regional character and were mainly expressed via collective actions (Iakovidou et al. 2007). Although there have been some sporadic efforts of winemakers in regions that were already famous mass tourism destinations, the first and best organized was recorded in Northern Greece.

Specifically, in 1993 a non-profit, non-stock corporation was created by the joint efforts of the 15 members of the Macedonian vineyard, carrying the name “Wine Producers Association of the Macedonian Vineyard”. In 2002, wineries in Epirus and Thrace joined the association, which was renamed the “Wine Produc-

ers Association of the Northern Greece Vineyard”. In 2008, the network grew to include apart from wineries, several other associated companies (Karafolas 2007). Today, the Association consists of 38 wine producers and 128 co-operating members, 50 of which are restaurants, 55 hotels, 19 sell local products and 4 offer outdoor activities businesses.

The main objectives of the network are concisely the following (Wine Roads of Northern Greece 2010):

- Building up the image of the regional wines
- Offering visitors an all-round wine tourism proposal around the vineyards
- Supporting the cultural heritage of Greece
- Participating in the formulation of general rules governing the relations between growers, wine-makers and wine merchants

To this aim, several activities have been undertaken, the most important being the “Wine Roads of Northern Greece”, which were outlined in 1997 and include eight different routes, namely: 1) the route of the Olympian Gods, 2) the route of Epirus, 3) the route of the Lakes, 4) the route of Naoussa, 5) the route of Pella – Goumenissa, 6) the route of Thessaloniki, 7) the route of Halkidiki and 8) the route of Dionysus. Along with a host of local cultural activities, it offers visitors to the Northern Greek vineyard facilities for a leisure experience related to wine.

Along with a host of local cultural activities, they offer facilities for a leisure experience related to wine. Other actions of the Association include signposting, creating folklore museums focused on the Greek wine tradition, publishing books and organizing cultural events. Furthermore, they participate in wine exhibitions both in Greece and abroad in collaboration with other wine associations (Karafolas 2007; Wine roads of Northern Greece 2010).

Given its success, several other wine regions followed the example of the “Wine Producers Association of the Northern Greece Vineyard” and established their own networks. Thus, the “Wine Grower Association of the Peloponnese” was created in 1998 and consists of 40 wine producers, whose objectives and activities are similar to the ones of the Association of Northern Greece. They have also formed the “Wine Roads of the Peloponnese, which include 9 routes, which cross over the regions of Geraneia, Corinthia, Argolida, Arcadia, Achaia, Kefallonia, Ilea, Messinia and Laconia. In 1999, the wine makers of the Attican region followed suit and created the “Attican Vineyards Wine Producers Association”, proposing an itinerary which comprises 16 wineries.

More recently, in 2006, the wine producers in the island of Crete undertook initiative towards the promotion of their wine region, by starting a non profit organization that includes 24 wineries of the Herakleion district. Although the network of Herakleion is in its infancy, as the unique wine route offered is still a pilot one, it receives a high number of visitors. Particularly, according to the director of the Association, it is estimated that the wineries in Herakleion receive 120,000 visitors annually. In 2009, this initiative caused the creation of a second wine tourism network in West Crete, covering the wine regions of Chania and Rethymno districts and including 11 wineries. To date, they have not established any particular wine road; however it is one of their key priorities. The two associations highly cooperate in order to give an identity to Cretan wines.

Similarly, in 2008, 24 wine makers in the mainland established the “Wine Producers Association of the Central Greece Vineyard” aiming at the promotion of wines of Central Greece, giving a particular emphasis to the tourism dimension. They developed seven wine roads, namely: the Wine road of Meteora, of Thessaly, of the Atalanti Valley, of Elikona, of Kithairona, of Ritsona, and the one of Dirfi. Finally, a last joint effort was recorded in the beginning of 2009, when 21 wineries of the Aegean islands constituted an Association carried the trade name “Aegean Wineries”. Apart from this regional initiative, 13 wine makers in Santorini Island have also been organized and in 2007, with the support of the local authorities, they engaged in redacting the wine tourism guide of the island (Wine tourism Guide of Santorini 2010).

As wine tourism in Greece is still a relatively new tourism sector, there is lack of official data regarding the market characteristics at a national level. Furthermore, while in the mainland (Northern, Central and Southern Greece) wine tourism seems to apply mainly to domestic travellers (70% of the total), international tourists dominate the islands. According to Triantafyllou (2005), specific famous tourism destinations and particularly the islands of Rhodes and Santorini received the largest majority of the winery visitors (67%), followed by the Peloponnese region. Another study (Alebaki & Iakovidou 2006) explored the socio-economic and psychographic characteristics of visitors to the Wine Roads of Northern Greece. According to the results, the latter can be classified into four distinct groups: 1) the “wine lovers”, who are usually highly educated, have high income and their prime motivations for participating in wine tourism activities are: visiting the winery, meeting the winemaker and learning more about wine and wine making, 2) the “neophytes”, who are mainly low- income students with a special interest in wine and visiting the winery is their major incentive, 3) the “occasional wine tourists”, who are not interested in learning about wine, but are attracted by the local gastronomy and 4) The “hangers-on”, who are not interested in wine or wine

making, are not wine consumers in general and for them, a vineyard or a winery is just another tourist attraction.

4 Conclusions

The aim of this study was to review the evidence from the wine tourism development in the case of Greece. The main conclusion derived from this work concerns the fact that Greek wine tourism has almost exclusively been encouraged via regional initiatives, serving as a means of stimulating rural areas and establishing the wine regions as a destination. To date, there are seven associations that aim to promote the image of Greek wines along with the preservation of the local culture. In most of the cases common activities that have been developed either horizontally or vertically, have enhanced a sense of cooperation, despite the fact that synergies seem to be stronger between wineries. It is of vital importance to be stressed, that notwithstanding the number of significant steps toward the promotion of wine regions, this emerging form of tourism still has a considerable growth potential, providing the large number of different quality wines produced as well as the wide range of tourism activities and attractions that the country possesses.

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