

Wine Tourism as a Catalyst for Territorial Sustainability. A Theoretical Approach Towards Responsible Wine Tourism by 2050

El Enoturismo como Catalizador para la Sostenibilidad Territorial. Una Aproximación Teórica Hacia un Enoturismo Responsable para 2050

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Abstract

This study aims to assess the potential of responsible wine tourism as a catalyst for territorial sustainability by 2050, envisioning a possible and desirable scenario. A mixed methodology was employed. Quantitatively, the global growth of wine tourism was projected over 25 years using the compound annual growth rate formula, based on international market data; concurrently, the evolution of the global area cultivated with *Vitis vinifera* was estimated. Qualitatively, six in-depth interviews were conducted with high-profile international experts in sustainable wine tourism, vineyard or winery management, and wine tourism governance, all with more than fifteen years of professional experience. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using Atlas.ti to identify thematic patterns and convergences. The results were compared with mathematical projections and existing literature. The findings suggest that responsible management, technological innovation, organic viticulture, and collaborative governance will be key factors for wine tourism to contribute positively to rural development and territorial sustainability, provided there is a shared awareness between hosts and visitors about the responsibility to reduce the negative effects of tourism.

Keywords: Wine tourism, regenerative tourism, responsible tourism, wine consumption.

JEL: L83, L66, Q01, A13, Q56

Resumen

Este estudio tiene como objetivo evaluar el potencial del enoturismo responsable como catalizador de la sostenibilidad territorial hacia 2050, vislumbrando un escenario posible y deseable. Se empleó una metodología mixta. En términos cuantitativos, se proyectó el crecimiento global del enoturismo a 25 años mediante la fórmula de crecimiento compuesto anual, utilizando datos del mercado internacional; paralelamente, se estimó la evolución de la superficie mundial cultivada con *Vitis vinifera*. En el ámbito cualitativo, se realizaron seis entrevistas en profundidad a expertos internacionales de alto perfil en enoturismo sostenible, gestión de viñedos o bodegas, y gobernanza del enoturismo, todos con más de quince años de experiencia profesional. Las entrevistas fueron transcritas y analizadas con Atlas.ti para identificar patrones temáticos y convergencias. Los resultados se contrastaron con las proyecciones matemáticas y la literatura existente. Los hallazgos sugieren que la gestión responsable, la innovación tecnológica, la viticultura ecológica y la gobernanza colaborativa serán factores clave para que el enoturismo contribuya positivamente al

desarrollo rural y la sostenibilidad territorial siempre y cuando exista una conciencia compartida entre anfitriones y visitantes sobre la responsabilidad de menguar los efectos negativos de la actividad turística.

Keywords: Wine tourism, regenerative tourism, responsible tourism, wine consumption.

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Palabras clave: Enoturismo, turismo regenerativo, turismo responsable, consumo de vino.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Wine tourism has emerged in recent decades as one of the most dynamic and multifaceted segments within cultural and gastronomic tourism, positioning itself at the intersection of agricultural production, heritage, landscape, and experiential consumption (Sorcaru et al., 2024). Far from being limited to winery visits or vineyards, contemporary wine tourism encompasses a complex system of activities that connects primary production with services, narratives, and symbolic values rooted in the territory. As global tourism markets evolve toward more conscious, experience-driven, and place-based forms of travel, wine tourism has increasingly been recognized for its potential to generate economic diversification, reinforce local identity, and contribute to the long-term sustainability of rural regions (Trigo, 2022; Flood Chavez et al., 2023).

At the same time, the global expansion of wine tourism is taking place within a context characterized by significant structural challenges. Climate change, environmental degradation, changing consumption habits, and demographic shifts in rural areas are changing the conditions in which viticulture and tourism can coexist (Pérez-Romero, 2025; Evans & Roberts, 2024; Segitur, 2023). The global decline in vineyard area, coupled with mounting pressure on water resources, biodiversity, and land use, raises important questions about the sustainability of traditional production methods and the resilience of wine-producing regions (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). In this scenario, tourism cannot merely be considered a supplementary economic activity; it must be strategically aligned with responsible and regenerative management frameworks that balance growth with ecological and social limits (Kastenholz & Nave, 2023).

This article considers wine tourism to be a potential catalyst for territorial sustainability. It emphasizes the capacity of wine tourism to integrate economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions within a shared spatial context. This concept has been reviewed in the literature (Martinez-Falco et al., 2025; Garcia-Rodea, 2022). Projecting the evolution of the sector towards 2050, the study examines the opportunities and risks of its anticipated expansion, emphasizing the need to reconsider governance models, production practices, and visitor experiences. The analysis is based on a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative projections of market growth and vineyard area trends with qualitative insights from in-depth interviews with international wine tourism, viticulture, and destination management experts.

Adopting an integrated perspective, the article makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing academic and professional debates surrounding responsible tourism. It argues that wine tourism should be considered not only as a market-driven phenomenon, but also as a means of promoting resilience, regeneration, and territorial well-being (Turčinović et al., 2025). The governance of wine tourism, given its characteristics, scope, and linkages, enables the catalysation of the territory. The article argues that the future competitiveness of wine tourism destinations will depend less on volume and more on their ability to adopt sustainable practices, foster local participation, and articulate coherent narratives that respect the limits and potential of their territories (Agyeman et al., 2022; Zhang & Sarker, 2024). The study, therefore, seeks to provide a forward-looking framework for understanding wine tourism as a strategic lever for sustainable development in the global wine production value chain (Guedes, 2022; Lubawa, 2026).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Millennia of human evolution have not changed the fact that humans travel for food. Since the beginning, they have sought places where they could gather or hunt enough to satisfy their hunger. Although the need to eat remains the same as it always has been, people still travel for food today, albeit for more sophisticated reasons.

These risky ancestral journeys in search of salt, fruit, or prey to ensure survival have evolved into a growing market known as gastronomic tourism. This market is made up of multiple niches, including wine tourism, which is travel motivated by wine culture and all related activities of interest to travellers. According to the latest global analysis report by Vinetur (2025), this particular segment has a compound annual growth rate of over 10%.

This represents a rapidly developing niche market with a projected global value of approximately US\$332.5 billion over the next decade (IMF, 2025). This growth is expected to include the integration of new destinations into the current wine tourism circuit and more active participation by wineries, vineyards, wine bars, and other businesses and attractions. These businesses have found tourism to be a complementary addition to their original mission and a unifying factor for wine-producing regions. They enrich the range of experiences offered and often strengthen rural tourism (Agudo Gutiérrez, 2010). Responsible evolution satisfies the host community and is reflected in visitor satisfaction (Depetris-Chauvin & Meidell, 2025).

Like any other human activity, tourism has consequences. Its unique characteristics involve the coexistence of cultures in unfamiliar spaces, as well as universal criteria for that coexistence. This requires great sensitivity in management in order to make tourism a force for progress, not only among participants, but also for the general benefit of the territory in which it takes place. This is evidenced by Geisenheim University in its Annual Global Wine Tourism Report (2025).

The aforementioned reports indicate greater growth in the New and Ancestral Worlds. The New World regions are those that developed winemaking after Europeans arrived in America and introduced *Vitis vinifera* and viticulture to the continent. This activity spread to other regions on other continents due to commercial and political events. In contrast, Old World wines originate from regions surrounding the Black Sea, the Near East, and the Mediterranean Sea, as well as regions conquered by the Roman Empire. China has proposed a third category to be added to the Old and New World wine region classification (Johnson & Robinson, 2019): the Ancestral Region. Although the region's incorporation into the international tourist circuit is recent, evidence of wine production in Asia dates back more than 8,500 years (Li et al., 2018; Cavalieri et al., 2003), and the region has maintained a steady flow of domestic tourists for several decades.

Most of the world's wine-growing regions are naturally located between the 30th and 50th parallels in both hemispheres, and the land is predominantly rural. Wine tourism is such a recent activity that the first definitions emerged when New World wineries and vineyards began opening to visitors in the late 1990s. The earliest references are in English (Hall et al., 2000). Winegrowing in the Old World is an everyday activity that is part of its culinary tradition. Many people are directly or indirectly involved in winemaking, marketing, and consumption. Therefore, there is less interest in organizing visits and guided tours of vineyards and wineries for domestic tourists. Conversely, wine production in the New World and the Far East is new and interesting to many; participating in related activities can bring prestige.

Anglo-Saxon academic research (Sánchez et al., 2017; Hall et al., 2000) sparked international interest by opening up a prolific line of study on wine tourism from different perspectives, including business, ecology, the social sciences, and politics. As a result, destinations that could benefit from this visibility began conducting research. The term "enoturismo" (winetourism) was coined in Spanish and registered in 2005 in La Rioja by the Aldeanueva de Ebro City Council at the Spanish Patent and Trademark Office. The Aldeanueva de Ebro City Council's exclusive use of the term prevented its use in promotional and academic documents. After some disagreements, however, the trademark exclusivity was not renewed, which boosted its popularity and use. Ultimately, the term was incorporated into the Royal Spanish Academy dictionary in 2014 (Figuerola, 2009). Nevertheless, tourism ultimately depends on the territory. A potential inconsistency emerges in this regard: despite the successful planting of vines in emerging regions, there is a global trend toward a decline in the area under cultivation of *Vitis vinifera*. According to the International Organization of Vine and Wine (OIV), this decline is currently estimated at around 0.6% annually over the last four

years.

According to experts, the loss of vineyards is due to multiple factors. Climate change is one of the most impactful factors, but economic and social factors have also been identified. The sharp decline in the area under cultivation prompted John Barker, Director General of the OIV, to call for international cooperation among producing countries at a press conference in early 2025. The goal is to promote research into new management strategies and reverse the trend (OIV, 2025).

According to academic literature, climate change poses several challenges to vineyards. For example, even a 2°C increase could impact up to 56% of crops, whereas a 4°C increase could impact up to 85% (Morales-Castilla et al., 2020). Climate change also introduces new phytosanitary challenges, including diseases and pests (Ruiz et al., 2018). These changes call into question the suitability of existing strains and highlight the need to adapt to new conditions and seek innovative alternatives by investing in research.

Social changes also threaten the survival of vineyards, wineries, and related businesses. The goal is to maximize land profitability, which is impacted by rural-to-urban migration in search of better opportunities and changing consumer preferences among younger generations. Facts show that global wine production declined in 2024 to its lowest level since 1961 (EFE, 2025). Despite an increasing body of literature, limited research integrates long-term quantitative projections with territorial sustainability frameworks in wine tourism.

Identifying which oenological and tourism practices contribute most efficiently to the transformation of the territory helps plan public policies and management actions that facilitate development and the active participation of visitors.

It is important to distinguish between three related but distinct concepts: sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, and regenerative tourism. Although they are similar, they have different scopes and levels of engagement and responsibility for hosts and visitors. Sustainable tourism focuses on achieving long-term balance between economic, social, and environmental impacts by minimizing negative impacts. It is primarily managed through policies, laws, and regulations from the host community's perspective, leaving little or no participatory responsibility to visitors. However, the concept has not evolved to adapt to tourists' profiles or their awareness of the impact of their stays (Butler, 1999; Bramwell & Lane, 2012; Cerquetti et al., 2022).

Responsible tourism is a contemporary concept with roots in the ethical implications of visitors' actions at a destination and their consequences (Boyd, 1999; Fennell, 2008).

In the words of Haywood (1988), responsible and responsive tourism is a commitment model in which all host and visitor stakeholders seek to reduce the negative impact of tourism. Tourists assume responsibility by adjusting their behaviour and consumption to avoid harming ecological, economic, and social environments, thereby demonstrating genuine ethical awareness (Mondal & Samaddar, 2022; Wan et al., 2025) and generating a catalytic effect in the region.

Finally, regenerative tourism is a conscious response to the shared need to mitigate the unintended consequences of tourism (Spenceley et al., 2010; García-Maroto et al., 2026). This model proposes that visitors' presence and actions generate benefits for the host community (Chauhan, 2025) and foster restoration and regeneration (Hutchins, 2019). While this is the ideal state, achieving it is a gradual process motivated by knowledge, recognition, and appreciation of the destination's development.

Responsible tourism, therefore, represents a middle ground between preventing harm and seeking to derive benefits from tourism activities; consequently, its proper management in the tourism sector is essential to achieving regional sustainability, as a minimum standard of operation.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to understand the theoretical possibility of adopting responsible management models in wine tourism and to glimpse what actions should be prioritized so that it truly functions as a catalyst for territorial sustainability, it is necessary to take into account the conditions and needs of existing wineries and vineyards, as well as the challenges to be faced in the near future; It may seem like a utopian exercise, since we will not know about predictive assertiveness for another 25 years, but the analysis of the results will serve as a guideline for defining a vision that aims to achieve optimal conditions for the remainder of the first half of the 21st century, that is, to make wine tourism a

catalyst for territorial sustainability, proposing a possible scenario and calculating its potential consequences.

Predicting what wine tourism will be like in 2050 is an almost impossible task. Many factors influence its development, ranging from uncontrollable aspects such as climate change to market factors such as changing consumer trends, and even political and educational factors. When we know that the only constant is change, and that change has never been so rapid, the best thing to do is to create an ideal vision and assess how viable this evolutionary path may be for the international wine tourism system, bearing in mind that this is part of gastronomic tourism, which is classified as cultural tourism.

Therefore, a mixed methodology was chosen. In quantitative terms, the growth trend of wine production and winemaking at the international level was projected and quantified in economic terms. A parallel exercise was also carried out by calculating the number of hectares devoted to the cultivation of *Vitis vinifera*, using the exponential compound growth formula, as this is suitable for modelling sectors with constant or near-constant annual growth. This exercise provides data consistent with the assumption that the trend will continue, which could be accurate if no setbacks arise. It therefore establishes an ideal parameter, albeit with uncertain probability.

In terms of qualitative research, six in-depth interviews were conducted with international professionals involved in sustainable wine tourism or experts in vineyard or winery management open to the public with an international outlook and at least 15 years of experience, as well as leaders of international wine tourism associations, a highly specialized professional profile in a narrow niche, significantly reduces the dispersion of perspectives typically found in more heterogeneous samples giving a long-term vision rather than the generalization of results. The nationalities of the participants include China, Spain, Argentina, Russia, Mexico, and France, with the aim of having a global vision of wine tourism; prioritizing the profile of the participants over the number of interviews, Africa was the only continent not considered, despite having mature wine-producing regions. The reason not to include it was that we were unable to contact candidates who met the desired profile.

Six were selected: two of them are really into quality of life, both for hosts and visitors; two are experts with an eco-friendly vision to reduce or get rid of the environmental impact of tourism; and the last two are tourism economy pros.

Three interviews were conducted via Zoom and three in person, taking advantage of the participants' attendance at the II GWTO Global Summit on Responsible Wine Tourism, held in Yantai, China, from July 2 to 5, 2025. Results were transcribed and analysed using Atlas.ti software to ensure greater analytical rigor. This AI-assisted tool allows for the coding of arguments to identify patterns, common themes, and isolated ideas. Once processed, these qualitative results were integrated with the mathematical projections obtained from the quantitative data and compared with existing literature.

Among the questions included in the interview guide that generated the most significant responses were the following:

1.- From a long-term strategic perspective, how do you assess the relationship between the projected growth of global wine tourism and the simultaneous decline in vineyard surface area, and what implications might this imbalance have for the sustainability of wine tourism destinations by 2050?

2.- In your opinion, how might ecological practices—such as organic or biodynamic viticulture—reshape the development and positioning of wine tourism experiences, particularly in relation to the environmental expectations of emerging generations of visitors?

3.- Considering the increasing effects of climate change on viticulture, how do you foresee the potential relocation or redefinition of wine regions and designations of origin, and what consequences could these transformations have for the territorial identity, integrity and governance of wine tourism destinations?

4.- From a socio-territorial perspective to what extent can wine tourism contribute to rural development, employment generation, and the strengthening of cultural identity in wine-producing regions, and what conditions are necessary for these benefits to materialize sustainably?

5.- Looking toward the next 25 years, what economic and managerial strategies do you consider most relevant for ensuring that wine tourism remains a complementary activity that strengthens, rather than compromises, the primary function of vineyards and wineries?

4. RESULTS

From a quantitative perspective, a 25-year projection of worldwide wine tourism growth was calculated using the exponential compound growth formula, the formula assumes that the rate of change will remain constant throughout the projection horizon. The market for this niche was estimated at US\$51.63 billion in 2024 and has experienced a compound annual growth rate of just over 10%, projected over the next 25 years. These figures come from the Vinetur report *Wine Tourism in the Local Economy: Global Analysis 2024*, which consolidates and compares regional reports. Based on this calculation, the value of wine tourism could reach US\$559.19 billion by 2050.

To complement this projection, the same method and formula were used to estimate the surface area of vineyards in 2050, based on the current number of hectares cultivated with *Vitis vinifera* worldwide, considering that for wine tourism, the territory is even more relevant than the wine itself.

According to the most recent data from the OIV (2024), which reports 7.1 million hectares under cultivation, and considering the observed decline of 0.6% over four consecutive years, it is estimated that 6,071,617 hectares currently in production could be lost if no corrective actions are taken.

From a qualitative perspective, all interviewees emphasized the urgency of adopting more responsible practices as an unquestionable pathway toward sustainable tourism. From an ecological standpoint, interviewees agreed that biodynamic farming will gain popularity. Although certifications in this area are not yet highly valued by vineyard managers, younger generations are expected to increasingly prefer visiting environmentally responsible vineyards.

Participants also indicated that wine quality improves significantly when vines and grapes are cultivated without agrochemicals, resulting not only in healthier wines but also in reduced environmental impact. Visitors perceive such vineyards as safer and healthier places to visit.

Two interviewees pointed out that grape cultivation can restore land that has been left unused, either because of water stress or unsuitable topography for other crops, thereby opening new opportunities for wine tourism development. Most participants identified climate change as a major challenge that will likely force the relocation or redefinition of regions with designations of origin. This process may require identifying new promising areas for viticulture and developing low-impact tourism activities coordinated among all stakeholders within a governance framework.

Experts identified several ecological challenges, including increasing water stress, the emergence of new pests and diseases associated with climate change, and the need to identify suitable new wine-growing areas. They also stressed the importance of respecting carrying capacity, particularly in the case of festivals and mass events, emphasizing that the primary activity of wineries must always be prioritized and that the territory must be respected. Wine tourism has the unique characteristic of integrating primary, secondary, and tertiary economic sectors within the same territorial space.

From a social perspective, most participants highlighted the importance of wine tourism as an alternative source of employment that complements vine cultivation and winemaking. Another recurring theme was the opportunity to promote wine culture among the general population so that it becomes a symbol of regional pride and identity, thereby safeguarding both the tangible and intangible heritage associated with wine production.

Experts also emphasized the importance of education, professional training, and workforce development. Beyond improving the quality of life for families directly involved in wine production, the opportunity to integrate into the tourism sector may help discourage migration from rural areas to urban centres. Some interviewees stressed the importance of respecting production processes. In particular, they noted the need to clearly differentiate the primary function of vineyards and wineries from wine tourism activities. Wine tourism should remain a complementary attraction, as visits at certain times of the production cycle may interfere with quality control and hygiene requirements. One participant even suggested suspending tourist visits during certain weeks of the year, while keeping retail spaces open.

Another recurring idea was that understanding the careful and patient work required to produce wine allows visitors to appreciate its true value, regardless of price. Wine tourism thus encourages respect for the product and for the professionals involved in its production.

Participants also emphasized the importance of developing authentic narratives that communicate the story of the territory, the vineyard, and the entrepreneur. This requires investment in anthropological, archaeological, social, and tourism research in order to highlight the tangible and

intangible attractions of the destination.

which can be interpreted as the duty of the visitor to acknowledge the consequence of their stay in the vineyard or winery and to strive, in joint responsibility with the hosts, to minimize the negative impact and, if possible, to promote the regeneration of resources, turning the tourist into an ally for achieving sustainability.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

According to the interviewed experts, wine tourism can be understood as a strategic axis for the regeneration and development of rural areas where grape cultivation is viable. Viticulture is often more profitable than other crops and typically requires relatively little water. When combined with winemaking, viticulture creates employment opportunities, diversifies local economies, and strengthens territorial identity.

Responsible management of these activities is essential to ensure wine tourism becomes regenerative. This may entail reclaiming unproductive land and fostering conditions that enable vulnerable populations to remain in rural areas, thereby alleviating migration pressures.

Education and professional training are key elements of this process. They improve the quality of life for host communities and enable them to integrate into the value chain, either directly or indirectly. Therefore, professionalization across all stages of wine production and tourism management must be prioritized.

The first step toward achieving this objective is developing a shared vision. Collaborative governance involves the participation of all stakeholders and balances different needs across short-, medium-, and long-term horizons.

Coordinated efforts and preparation at multiple levels are required to address current challenges, particularly those related to climate change, changing consumption patterns, and the growing demand for personalized tourism experiences.

This also demands continuous research and innovation in agricultural practices, tourism management, and market analysis. It requires the creation of observatories and data-generation systems that can support adaptive strategies.

Responsible wine tourism is possible and necessary. It requires the participation of all stakeholders, a shared vision, recognition of territorial limits and opportunities, and a collective commitment to making wine tourism a catalyst for territorial sustainability.

This study presents a possible scenario: an initial, theoretical approach aimed at establishing guidelines to promote responsible wine tourism. Therefore, the convergence of findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive. Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the qualitative findings are based on a relatively small group of experts, which limits the generalizability of the results. Additionally, projections of wine tourism growth and vineyard surface area depend on compound growth assumptions derived from current data that could change due to economic, environmental, or policy factors. Future research could incorporate empirical data from visitors and broaden the geographic diversity of participants to further validate and refine the identified trends.

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