A Cluster of Delights: A Case Study of the Wine Farm as Agritourism Destination

Robin Mark Back  
University of Massachusetts Amherst  
rback@som.umass.edu

Linda L. Lowry, Ph.D.  
University of Massachusetts Amherst  
llowry@isenberg.umass.edu

Abstract

The wine tourism literature has traditionally focused on how to increase tasting room sales, or to understand visitors as wine buyers in order to better promote product sales. More recent articles have looked at the experiential nature of wine tourism, and how the four realms of the experience economy model, being entertainment, educational, aesthetics and escapist, may be relevant to the wine tourism experience. It has been found that wine tourists desire more from their experience than just the tasting and purchase of wine. They also desire culinary offerings, cultural and recreational attractions and activities, retail choices, and an enjoyable rural landscape. Authenticity has been another topic of tourism research, especially as a motivation of the rural or agri-tourist, which includes the wine tourist. In today’s fast paced, high-tech world, many people seek to engage in more authentic or ‘real’ experiences.

Many wine regions cater to the desire by wine tourists for an authentic experience that is more than wine tasting and purchasing, with a number of wineries offering a range of products and experiences beyond the traditional wine tourism experience. Some regions are more hindered by zoning permissions than others, in terms of what types of attraction or activity may or may not be permitted on wine farms. However, even when desired attractions or activities are unavailable on the wine farms themselves, they are often available within the immediate area and form part of the tourism ‘wine route’. Cluster theory has been used to demonstrate the benefits of the ‘clustering’ of firms within single product industries, including the wine industry where there is often a natural regional clustering due to specific terroir requirements. Less attention has been paid to the role of clusters in developing a region.

This paper uses a case study in the wine industry in South Africa, to examine how one family owned company has created a highly successful ‘micro-cluster’ of both company owned and independent complementary businesses spread across its three adjacent farms. Wine, beer, grappa, cheese, bread and chocolate are produced and available for tasting and purchase on the properties. Together with several eateries, a delicatessen, locally produced art, and wedding and conference facilities, this highly authentic, rural, agritourism ‘micro-cluster’ has become a major tourist destination in its own right, attracting in excess of 300,000 visitors per year. This study shows how ‘micro-clustering’ on wine farms, to which little attention has previously been paid in the literature, can become a major revenue stream for wineries and their related businesses.