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Wine, history, landscape: origin branding in Western Australia

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Abstract

Purpose – Wine is an integral part of so-called "Old World" nations, amalgamating with the local history and landscape, and providing a powerful "origin branding". To date, however, these dimensions have been discussed to a very limited extent in emerging "New World" wine regions, where the lack of a traditional heritage of wine making presents special challenges in terms of origin branding. The focus of most previous research has been on the viewpoints of consumers, not those of producers. This study seeks to explore these dimensions among small wine growers.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a qualitative approach, 42 interviews with winery operators from several emerging Western Australian wine regions were conducted.

Findings – In the absence of historical wine pioneers and traditions, winery operators in emerging wine-producing regions use alternative means for "origin branding" that emphasise heritage and landscape characteristics centring on the wider "rural idyll". These associations serve to forge a "vintage" identity for their industry, which essentially masks its youth for their region.

Research limitations/implications – In view of the more than 200 small wineries operating in Western Australia the number of respondents in the study may not allow for making generalisations of the state's wine industry.

Practical implications – The current growth in the number of wineries in the regions studied and the increasingly acknowledged quality of their wine product may help towards the establishment of their history and identity, thus contributing to origin branding over time.

Originality/value – The study explores the importance of history and landscape among winery operators in promoting their wineries and their wine products in the context of emerging wine regions, an area for the most part ignored in contemporary research.

Keywords Wines, History, Australia, Emerging markets, Brands

Paper type Case study

Introduction and literature review

The links between history, culture, landscape and wine

The history of wine goes back a very long time, even for thousands of years (Saeidi and Unwin, 2001; Johnson, 1996; McGovern *et al.*, 1996). However, how important is the history or background of an area to a winery business? According to Phillips (2000, p. xiv), "wine is perhaps the most historically charged and culturally symbolic of the foods and beverages with which we regularly have contact".

In many areas of the world, including well-known wine regions such as Bordeaux, La Rioja, and Piedmont vines have been part of the local landscape for generations, even centuries. In these cases, time integrates vines into regions' culture and tradition, progressively becoming "place references" (Banks *et al.*, 2007), whereby the iconic nature of some wines helps identify a wine region or the nation where the wine is produced. In addition, using region of origin in the wine trade has a long history (Beverland, 2006, p. 254). The establishment of Denominations of Origin (DOs),



British Food Journal Vol. 111 No. 11, 2009 pp. 1248-1259 © Emerald Group Publishing Limited 0007-070X DOI 10.1108/00070700911001068 Appellations of Origin (AO), Indications of Geographical Origin (IGOs), or Geographical Indications (GIs) have had several important impacts in regions capitalising on their heritages. These measures have contributed to a much needed improvement in wine making practices, protection for local wines and other products, by identifying a region with a product and thereby raising a region's profile and that of the product in the process (Bramley and Kirsten, 2007; Frias *et al.*, 2003; Loureiro, 2003; World Intellectual Property Organisation, WIPO, 2002; Rangnekar, 2002; Thiedig and Sylvander, 2000; Alavoine-Mornas, 1997). But what of regions that lack a traditional background in wine making? How do they attempt to overcome the absence of established traditions that lend themselves to regional branding?

There is evidence that the historical background in some "new" wine regions is constructed in non-traditional ways to create an identity and at the same time market a region's wines. This is for example the case in some areas in California, where the heavy Italian influence in the pioneering stages of the local wine industry's growth represents the foundation for a theme dubbed "Cal-Ital landscapes" (Helzer, 2001, p. 49). Such theme in turn contributes to "shaping local and regional identity" (Helzer, 2001, p. 49), in the process not only emphasising the historical background of the region, but also linking it to immigrants from a traditional wine producing country, a factor that helps connect place, wine and tradition. Another example of implanted viticulture roots is that of Uruguay, a country where the instrumental century-old influence of Spanish, Italian, French, Swiss, German, and Algerian immigrants is still visible in the development of its currently emerging wine industry (Carrau, 1997).

The case of South Africa, where "the decisive boost to the infant South African wine industry was the advent of a few hundred Huguenot refugees in 1688..." (Demhardt, 2003, p. 114) also identifies outsiders' influence in the establishment of new wine regions. Reminiscent and valuable aspects of such early developments are illustrated in current events: "...the culture and industries around the Cape viticulture has developed into the fourth most important South African tourism attraction" (Demhardt, 2003, p. 114). This event illustrates how the value of one culture, namely, that of wine is further extended to create value of experience and travel.

Some emerging wine regions, such as the Hunter Valley in Australia, Stellenbosch in South Africa, or Napa Valley in California, to name a few, are today synonymous for their newly established wine industries. One of the impacts of this development is that these regions' changing landscape over the years helps accommodate the growth of the wine industry. In other cases the importance of rural "cultural landscape," is discussed in the context of emerging wine producing regions (Leader-Elliott, 2005).

Australia: a case for origin branding

The cultural landscape helps associate the wine product and the region's history, for instance, linking wine with past events, such as the arrival of the region's first settlers or with existing vine-dotted landscape. The case of Barossa Valley in Australia, where wine, food, and the region's German heritage contributes to its growing popularity as a tourist destination, and where wine plays a fundamental role in the region's tourism strategy (Leader-Elliott, 2005) illustrates in some ways elements of place references and the cultural landscape.

Despite having wine regions with vines planted as early as in the 1840s (Banks *et al.*, 2007; Halliday, 1994), Australia's wine history is very recent in many respects. As in

the case of many other "New World" wine regions, the pioneering work of immigrant groups, including French, Germans and Italians represents a fundamental contribution to Australia's wine industry in the early 20th century (Australian Government, 2007). A first development is the progression in the type of wines produced. For instance, by 1956 the sale of fortified wines such as port, sherry and dessert wines represent over 80 per cent of Australian wine sales (Halliday, 1994).

However, from 1965 to the mid-1970s, the national consumption of red wines increases significantly, and from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s it is the turn of white wines, with a dramatic increase in the production and consumption of both red and white wines (Halliday, 1994). The emergence and growth of Australia's wine industry also sees the rise of a new breed of wine producers, much in contrast to vineyards being part of family traditions or rural occupations, a development more common to traditional wine cultures:

weekend winemakers" – mainly city dwellers from all walks of life, but with a disproportionately high number of doctors, lawyers and businessmen among their ranks-who for reasons other than economic established their own vineyards and wineries ... (Halliday, 1994, p. 25-6).

This phenomenon is still apparent today to a certain extent, in the process not only changing the traditional farming culture of grape growing, but also contributing to the posh image of the wine industry in some circles. However, while grape growing may have a different meaning and value for some wine growers, including the "weekend winemakers," Australia's wine industry is making great strides to become a major player in the world's wine market, both in quality and volume. Consequently, Australian brands are to compete with international labels, including those from France and other Old World countries, where traditional associations with wine heritage and landscape predominate.

According to some analysts, finding an alternative means of marketing from the type of origin-branding characteristic of Old World producers is a reality among Australian wine-makers. Central to the success of Australian labels, so it is argued, is the emphasis on wine quality in the *process* of producing wine. According to Banks *et al.* (2007, p. 23), such an approach reflects an important difference in wine production:

... with the French system defining particular environments in terms of their ability to produce quality wines, compared to the New World approach with its emphasis on the wine production process rather than the environment.

A number of studies illustrate that origin branding continues to be a key selling point for wines among consumers (Keown and Casey, 1995; Gil and Sánchez, 1997; Skuras and Vakrou, 2002; Balestrini and Gamble, 2006; Perrouty *et al.*, 2007; Felzensztein *et al.*, 2004; Felzensztein and Dinnie, 2005), and a potentially major factor in attracting wine tourists (Bruwer, 2003; Demhardt, 2003). However, the differences in the emphasis on place-of-origin between New and Old World producers are perhaps prone to being exaggerated. The question is raised: for new wine growing regions that cannot trace an immigrant history that links New World winemaking with an Old World heritage, how, and to what extent, do they create an "origin brand" that establishes their credentials as a wine manufacturer of quality and a choice destination for wine travellers?

This paper presents the findings of a study that seeks to answer these questions through interviews with winery operators in emerging wine producing regions of Western Australia. Little is known about the importance winery operators in the newly developed regions place on their historical background and landscape. This study examines these dimensions as they are critical to determine the extent to which wineries may be using these elements to market their wines, or consider such elements as a vehicle to promote wine tourism and attract quality visitors to their region. The approach of asking winery operators themselves what value they place on history and environment in promoting their wines, is markedly different from the majority of studies that have asked consumers or analysed wine labels as a basis for determining this value.

Methodology

Given the limited amount of information available on emerging Western Australian wine regions, particularly in regards to wineries' approach to their region's history, background and landscape, and how wineries "connect" these fundamental elements with their core product, this study takes an exploratory and qualitative approach, examining these dimensions from small winery operators' perspective. The study is also part of a larger project investigating Western Australian small rural operations, particularly in the regions of Chittering Valley, the Blackwood Valley (Bridgetown), the Great Southern (Albany, Denmark, Mount Barker), Manjimup and Pemberton. These regions are currently making strides to develop some of their industries, including that of wine, as well as their capacity for building tourism.

The study also aims at exploring the challenges businesses face in achieving their goals, operators' motives for being involved in their chosen industry, as well as demographic characteristics of the operations, including their start, size, and relationship with hospitality and tourism, if any.

A purposeful sample of 61 small wineries was selected through a search of websites (www.chitteringvalleywinetrail.com.au/, www.manjimupwa.com/wineries.htm), wine tourism brochures, and researchers' local knowledge. Letters sent to all these operations informing them of the study and its objectives also invited business operators to participate in a face-to-face or telephone interview on their terms prior to the December holidays, or in case of operators' unavailability, in the early weeks of January 2008. A total of 42 operators accepted the invitation to participate in the study, a 68.9 per cent response rate. In all, 36 face-to-face interviews (85.7 per cent) were conducted on-site and six (14.3 per cent) over the telephone. Flexibility was allowed for respondents to choose the day and time where no imminent winery duties were to take place. In only two cases was the length of the interviews approximately five minutes long. In these cases, operators provided a brief synopsis of the historical background of their operations. In a further eight cases the interview time was over 30 minutes long; the average time of all interviews was 20 minutes.

Findings

While the overall findings revolve around the central question of this study regarding the importance for respondents' operations of the area's history/background, several demographic aspects were identified during the interview process. For example, respondents' comments demonstrate that most wineries (85.7 per cent) were family run.

A total of 27 wineries (64.3 per cent) operated for the 20 last years or less, and of these 21 (77.8 per cent) for 15 years or less. One winery has run for as long as 36 years, the oldest operation identified in this study. Further, 34 (81 per cent) operations were open to the public in the form of a tasting room, cellar door, and café or restaurant.

These wineries are typical of the wine industry in Australia. Small wineries by far represent the bulk of the wine industry in Australia, with some reports estimating 2,146 wineries in 2007, 1507 or 70.2 per cent of which produce less than 100 tonnes per year (Winetitles, 2008). Recent wine reports indicate that there are 332 wineries in Western Australia; of these, 306 (92.2 per cent) produce less than 1,000 tonnes of wines, and clearly the majority, 230 (75.1 per cent) produce less than 100 tonnes (Winetitles, 2008). In line with the national breakdown of wineries in terms of production, by far most wineries in Western Australia fit the "small winery" category.

Several wine regions of Western Australia, notably Margaret River, located approximately 300 kilometres south of Perth, and the Swan Valley, approximately 20 kilometres east of Perth, have made headlines for their developed wine industry. More recently, these areas have gained popularity, both nationally and internationally, as tourist attractions, taking advantage of their natural beauty and broad choice of leisure activities to skilfully combine them with their wine industry. The resulting growth of the wine tourism concept also provides opportunities for academic research (see for example, Charters and Fountain, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Yuan *et al.*, 2005; Shanka and Taylor, 2004; Charters and Ali-Knight, 2002; Hall *et al.*, 2000; Macionis and Cambourne, 1998).

As in other Australian states, the history of Western Australia's wine industry is closely tied to the arrival of European immigrants, including English, Italian, and those from the former Yugoslavia, bringing their tradition, passion and know-how to establish local wine industries (Vinodiversity, 2008; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003; Wine Diva, 2008). This is particularly the case of Margaret River and Swan Valley. While today these two regions provide identity and are synonymous of wine tourism, even of cultural landscape in Western Australia, the continuous growth of the wine industry in this state is also demonstrated in other emerging wine regions. These regions, while still under the shadow of the more prominent Margaret River and Swan Valley, are beginning to realise commercial opportunities in the form of producing quality wines and beginning to develop wine tourism. As a consequence, they are confronted with the challenge of marketing their region for both product branding and wine tourism purposes.

Several comments clearly suggested that the historical aspect of the region was critical to some operations' own success in the form of incorporating the area's history into their own marketing strategy:

Yes, it is quite important. There is a story to tell when people come down here. There is a background history to [this area] and how that relates to us. So I supposed it is quite important that [this area] has its own history; it brings more tourists down here. We sell the history on the label.

Oh, huge amount, just look at the label ... Our wines are called in a way following the [mining] history of this area, and it works; it works in selling the wine too. People are interested in that sort of concept.

Interestingly, the comments are not directed to their area's wine history, undoubtedly because grape growing is a relatively new development in the wine regions, but to their area's other historical features, including those related to other key industries. In fact, comments from two different respondents demonstrated that the lack of a "real" wine background in the area was a motive for associating the wine product with other aspects of local history:

For us the area is the youngest wine region of Australia, so the history is really not important to me, but having said that we sell the history of the property, which has a lot of story values to the people of the area; so it is a catch 22 situation.

... here is not a long history of wines in [this area], so it has not been going for a long time, so there is not a huge history ... on the wine side of things. We do try to use the history of the area in our sales in the design we want the place to look like.

One operator associates the historical aspect in the town's architecture, a remnant of its origins, recognising no apparent links between the area's background and pioneering grape growers:

The town has a reputation for being a historic town, though it's not classified as such. But it is an old town and it's got some nice old buildings; this building here is 110-112 years old. So that is an old farm stay, so there is quite a bit of history around. Our town has still got its old fashion look; it's got verandas and so on, and there are some nice old buildings around. So I think that is an attraction that brings people here because the town is soft in its appearance and beautiful because of its age and because of its history and is still got the old buildings so on. So I think that is important. Wine in this valley is very recent . . .

Other producers also recognise the area's historic background as a potential aspect of their marketing strategies that needed to be further emphasised:

That is a step forward that our company is taking as well, it is getting back to history, and linking it with that we are pioneers in this area as well. So that is something that is getting incorporated onto our labels. But basically, it is an experience here in the cellar door that we promote our history direct through here. There is really a farming, it has always been a farming, cattle background. This property was founded as a farming property; there was also a strong horticultural background here.

Probably not so much as we ought to. We certainly do it from here because I think that is what we can portray but I don't think we actually do it outside. I don't think we promote that enough.

The association between wine production and heritage is engrained in the culture of wine consumption, and new wine production regions, even when lacking an established wine heritage, feel compelled to identify some form of local heritage in their marketing strategies (or at least feel that there is marketing potential in doing so). It is clear that the historical background in "new" wine regions of Western Australia, often rooted in livestock agricultural activities, mining and forestry, is often emphasised to create an identity and at the same time market a region's wines in a way that serves as a substitute for the "Old World" character of established wine traditions.

Landscape is another aspect of origin branding that new wine producing regions promote in distinct ways from Old World producers. This is most important when promoting wine tourism:

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... there is not a hugely long history of wine in this area, very new, the last 15 or 25 years. We are very much interested in the landscape in that we promote the local ... what this area has to offer for tourism.

We sell the forests, the trees, the peace and quiet.

Yes, we do sell [the landscape, history] and I think that whole landscape we live in is a huge drawcard for people, and I think that particularly when they come out to our place, the setting of the winery with its garden, the green and the rolling hills and so on. I think that is a huge advantage to us, and we do put it in our brochure, we have it on our website, and when people come to the winery I promote other things about the area I am always most positive about.

People most often want to know where we got the name from, and then I tell them the story about it being Karri forest and being cleared for farming and the lake is drying out as it was cleared, etc. That is probably as much as people want to know ... When they come to a winery they are more interested in the wine and the food.

It is important, it certainly is. There is certainly a fair bit of history in the local timber industry, but it's more the ambience of this area; it's very special; it's the trees, it's the rolling hills, it's the water. It's those things that attract people. We are finding many, many young couples that want to get married in this area because they see it as a very beautiful place and peaceful. We have a lot of people who come back every year because they love to have holidays in this area.

The tourism component becomes apparent in a number of comments emphasising the need for local/rural areas to identify and market themselves to visitors, both nationally as well as internationally:

It is vital, not so much the geography but the geographic indications' (GI) committee only two years ago granted [this area] its own GI. GI is very important; it means a region that is represented and registered worldwide. So when I go overseas to Berlin or Shanghai I talk of my region as much as I talk of my own winery because longevity counts in this industry. The greatest advantage the French have is that they can talk of Bordeaux, they can talk of Burgundy. The Americans can talk of Napa . . . I am an ambassador if you like, not appointed, but it is in my self-interest to pump up the tires of [this area] because a winery without a region is I guess like a ship without a sail.

The role of geographic indication as an iconic element in wine marketing and wine tourism involves emphasising the positive features of the rural idyll while de-emphasising any negative associations:

though the perception outside of [this area] would be that [this area] is a backward place, very old fashioned, nothing much happens here, there is no excitement; it's very laid back, and a lot of people never heard of [this area]. So to make people want to come here we have to think why would people want to come here? They like the trees, they like the peace and quiet, they want good food, they want somewhere good to stay. They want nice wine; until you have a food and wine culture; it's very hard to make people to come to the region. That is my opinion, and I think that is probably true for all wine regions: if you don't have good food or wine culture it is very hard to get wine tourism off the ground.

However, as opposed to traditional wine regions, with a well-rooted wine/food culture, the recent development of the studied wine regions plays a constraining role, and possibly, it will need time and persuasion to become iconic places that can be easily identified among locals and outsiders. Educating visitors, a strategy that could slowly

There are a lot of people who come and ask us "how long have you been here?" I think the wine tourist is becoming more aware: did you grow this? Is this from your area? How long have you been in the area? So, yes, we do talk about the history of the region, but you wait for them to ask. We are trying to get the wineries to choose a logo ...

It is paramount. We make sure that everything, from the name of the valley, the location; every bit of grapes that go into the bottles are from there. . . everything sold here is from here, and we really want to present it as from here, very local and very regional.

Progressively creating an identity and being consistent in terms of quality could be conducive to developing and strengthening the name and brand of a wine region. In this regard, it is suggested that some wine regions are beginning to create a name for themselves:

To a certain extent. I mean, we have the region and all that. The winery nearby they export ... Last time I went to the U.K. I walked into Tesco supermarket right in front of me I see a bottle of [name of winery]. And I have come 12,000 miles ... and on the back label "Product of [region], Western Australia." And as you see, "Product of [region], Western Australia ..."

[A]s a wine region this part is unique and the wines from the region are therefore quality identifiable for connoisseurs.

In promoting an iconic identity for their regions rooted in the rural history and landscape, wine producers are essentially taking the heritage branding of Old World wines and situating it in a uniquely Australian context. In this way, they are providing a localised identity for their product that serves to locate wine-making within a new heritage and landscape that is at once uniquely Australian yet "vintage" in character.

Conclusions, implications and future research

The historical background and the landscape of many wine regions in Old World countries is manifested in their wine tradition and culture that, despite a current phenomenon of decreasing wine consumption (Marques-Vidal and Dias, 2005; Gual and Colom, 1997) continues to be strong, contributing to the area's identity and culture. In the case of so-called "New World" wine regions, the fundamental role immigrants from traditional wine countries played in introducing or developing local wine industries is still present in many respects, both in the wine tradition and landscape. In Western Australia, the legacy of groups of immigrants is also critical in the establishment of the wine industry in areas that, as Margaret River and Swan Valley, have become rural icons, but new regions lacking this pioneer heritage and hence association with Old World heritages have had to come up with innovative ways to promote their own heritage and landscape identity.

This study examined these dimensions from the perspective of a group of small winery operators in several emerging wine regions in Western Australia. The findings do not identify a strong wine culture in terms of history in these regions, despite several respondents being immigrants or direct descendants from families that had migrated to Australia from traditional wine countries. Instead, possibly because of the relatively new nature of the wine regions studied, resulting in lack of the historical element connecting the current industry to the wine tradition initiated from pioneering

immigrant groups, respondents tended to identify other elements as substitutes. For example, participants mentioned the area's farming background, or its physical landscape, for instance, the still relevant timber or farming industries, and associated these with the wine product.

In many cases, such efforts are intended to capitalise on the area's characteristics and create an image and identity for their wines; operators are also educating winery visitors to further this process. The findings indicate that, from the perspective of producers in new wine regions of Western Australia, history and landscape are still regarded as key aspects of wine marketing and destination promotion. Producers overcome the lack of a traditional wine heritage by emphasising other features of their region's heritage, such as mining and timber industries. These sorts of historical constructions forge a "vintage" identity that producers feel to be important for promoting their products.

To what extent such origin branding appeals to consumers and visitors is outside the scope of this study. However, such branding certainly has an impact on the local cultural identity that producers and other community members come to associate with their area. For example, a concerted effort is taking place in the areas studied to establish wine trails that link wineries with other tourism attractions, particularly historical landmarks and landscape features. Additionally, wineries are acting as ambassadors in their regions, educating visitors, helping create a wine culture that "connects" their region with the outside world, advertising and marketing their region in the process. So in the absence of traditional 'Old World' wine heritages, producers in new wine regions are constructing new heritages that link wine-making with other vintage industries and rural landscapes, forging a new local identity that has importance as a cultural marker, not just a marketing device. The result is that an "Old World" flavour is inserted into a "New World" context, thereby invoking an alternative authenticity that marks both a continuity and departure from traditional origin branding.

All these developments have also other implications for wineries, the wine industry, wine consumers, and winery visitors. For example, the current growth in the number of wineries in the regions studied and the increasingly acknowledged quality of their wine product may help towards the establishment of their history and identity, thus contributing to origin branding over time. Within a shorter term, however, the growth of tourism, combined with the existing wine industry, may provide opportunities for the development of wine tourism, a concept that may also become well rooted in the region's history, tradition and business strategy.

These future developments should involve local councils and other government bodies, assisting the wine industry through policies that not only stimulate the potential for tourism growth in areas where wineries are located, but also support wineries in the preservation of local heritage and culture. For example, policies that facilitate the organisation of cultural and educational events, whereby wineries can showcase local traditions and the area's heritage could go a long way, maintaining these valuable aspects alive while raising the profile of a destination.

The manner in which local heritages are promoted and marketed in emerging wine regions like Western Australia could also have implications for other emerging wine areas and countries in the world that, like Australia, Argentina, California, Chile, and Brazil, share a long and rich history and heritage, being established by adventurous European settlers. While still finding an own identity as opposed to European wine growing giants, New World regions are contributing to the development and preservation of rural areas, their traditions, heritage and culture.

The findings and the themes of this study provide several avenues for future research. For example, a larger number of wineries could be investigated to learn the extent to which the region's history and landscape are important to operators in emerging wine regions of Australia or in other parts of the world. Studies could also explore the extent to which the age of emerging wine regions may impact the perceptions of the regions' wine visitors and/or wine consumers. In this regard, a longitudinal study could allow for comparing different stages in an emerging region's history and potentially identify elements that may be applicable in other emerging wine regions seeking to develop and market themselves to the world.

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