

# Exploring the nexus of wine tourism and the tourism experience economy: The case of Valpolicella, Italy

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## Abstract

*This study explores the motivations, experiences, and satisfaction of wine tourists visiting local culture-based wineries in Italy, using the Experience Economy framework. While wine tourism has been widely studied in Italy's major wine regions, smaller wineries, such as those in Valpolicella have received less attention, despite their rich cultural heritage settings. Data from 206 valid responses collected through questionnaires at five Valpolicella wineries reveal that visitors are driven by relaxation, escaping routine, social interaction, and learning about wine. This study identified three dimensions of context-specific wine tourism experiences that are primarily characterised by educational, aesthetic, and immersive elements, showing that higher satisfaction correlates more with educational and aesthetic experiences than with simply escaping from routine. This study thus reframes wine tourism from a transactional activity to a holistic experience system, highlighting the importance of experience design for preserving the uniqueness, competitiveness, and lasting appeal of local culture-based wineries.*

## Keywords

*wine tourism, local culture-based winery, tourist motivation, tourist experience, Valpolicella*

## 1. Introduction

Italy is widely recognised as a premier wine tourism destination, with considerable attention given to major wine regions such as Tuscany and Piedmont, and the promotion of destination-level wine tourism. However, less attention has been paid to how visitors experience smaller, locally embedded cultural wineries within the established wine regions such as Valpolicella.

Although Valpolicella is internationally recognised for its wine heritage, visitor experience research in this area has tended to focus more on the location and structure of the tourist routes within destinations, and wine tourism demand, rather than on how its local culture uses wineries to create experiential value through education, aesthetics, atmosphere, host interaction, and cultural interpretation. Therefore, this study focuses on local culture-based wineries in Valpolicella to examine how visitors' motivations and winery experiences are associated with overall satisfaction.

In this study, "local culture-based wineries" are defined as small- to medium-scale wineries that provide more than just wine tasting and sales. They offer visitors a chance to connect with local cultural heritage, explore winery landscapes, interact with hosts, participate in cultural interpretation, and experience place-specific cultural activities.

Studying these wineries is crucial because wine tourism encompasses more than just drinking wine; it includes learning, appreciating aesthetics, cultural exploration, relaxation, socialising, education, cultural engagement, and enjoying scenic landscapes and atmospheres [Hall et al., 2009; Getz and Brown, 2006; Montella, 2017; Vorobiova et al., 2019]. Never-

theless, how visitors perceive local culture-based wineries and how these experiences relate to travel satisfaction remains an important and under researched area.

To address this gap, this study employs Pine and Gilmore's Experience Economy framework, which outlines four key experience dimensions: entertainment, education, esthetics, and escapism [Pine and Gilmore, 1999]. This framework is particularly important for wine tourism because it considers tourism value to be multifaceted and driven by experiences rather than by products or services alone [Oh et al., 2007; Quadri-Felitti and Fiore, 2012].

This framework guides the study's exploration of three questions: (1) what motivates wine tourists to visit local culture-based wineries; (2) how visitors perceive their winery experiences; and (3) how these experiences are associated with overall satisfaction within the Italian context. Addressing these questions offers insights into visitors' experiences at local wine destinations and provides practical suggestions for winery owners and marketers aiming to support visitor satisfaction and promote sustainable growth in wine tourism.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Wine tourism

Wine tourism generally includes visits to vineyards and wineries, wine festivals, and related events, with wine tasting and the discovery of regional features as the main highlights. A significant milestone in Italy was the 1993 launch of Cantine Aperte by the Movimento del Turismo del Vino. It promoted direct visits to wineries and signalled a shift toward turning wineries into tourism destinations [Colombini, 2015]. These initiatives have made wine tourism a key part of destination marketing and cultural promotion. Over time, its scope has expanded from simple tasting to encompass cultural, educational, and leisure experiences, turning it into an important aspect of

tourism growth and regional identity [Hall et al., 2009; Montella, 2017].

## 2.2 Wine tourist motivation

Research on wine tourism motivation reveals that visitors are influenced by multiple interconnected factors rather than a single reason. Common motivations include wine tasting, learning about wine production, appreciating winescapes, engaging socially, and experiencing local culture [Getz and Brown, 2006; Vorobiova et al., 2019]. In this regard, Charters [2006] suggests that the overall wine tourism experience results from a combination of wine, food, setting, local history, and host interactions.

Psychologically, some studies have described motivation in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic drivers. Intrinsic motives encompass relaxation, escape, hedonism, sensory pleasure, aesthetic appreciation, and learning, while extrinsic motives involve social engagement, local cultural immersion, and interaction with the environment of the wine region [Alant and Bruwer, 2004; Bruwer and Rueger-Muck, 2019; George, 2006; Vorobiova et al., 2019]. Additionally, these studies highlight hedonism, scenery, atmosphere, and opportunities to interact with winemakers as key factors influencing visitor motivations when engaging in wine tourism.

## 2.3 Experience economy of wine tourism

Pine and Gilmore's [1999] Experience Economy framework is useful when seeking to understand visitor experiences in a destination. It has been widely applied in tourism and hospitality research, including studies on rural tourism, food tourism, bed-and-breakfast accommodation, and cruises [Oh et al., 2007; Loureiro, 2014]. The strength of the model lies in its conceptualisation of tourism as a multifaceted experience rather than a single activity or transaction. It identifies four experiential dimensions: education, entertainment, esthetics, and escapism. These dimensions provide a useful basis for explaining how visitors evaluate memorable tourism experiences beyond functional service quality alone [Oh et al., 2007].

Wine tourism aligns closely with this framework because visitors engage with wine products, wineries, people, and the symbolic meanings of wine and wineries at the sites. Instead of focusing on a single activity, they seek holistic experiences that combine gastronomy, culture, nature, and personal connection [Quadri-Felitti and Fiore, 2012]. Winery visits often involve educational, aesthetic, participatory, and escapist elements, such as learning about wine, enjoying the landscape, attending tastings or events, and escaping daily routines [Getz and Brown, 2006; Cohen and Ben-Nun, 2009; Quadri-Felitti and Fiore, 2012].

This study uses the Experience Economy framework to explore how visitors experience local culture-based wineries across education, aesthetics, entertainment, and escapism, and how these dimensions are associated with overall satisfaction. The approach allows for a deeper understanding of how experiential value is created in wine tourism.

Further, our empirical analysis examines how these dimensions manifest in specific winery contexts, where education, aesthetics, entertainment, and escapism overlap.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1 Research method

Using a non-probability convenience sampling method, a survey was conducted from June 2023 to January 2024 in Valpolicella (Figure 1). The target respondents were winery visitors who were participating in wine tourism activities at five selected local culture-based wineries. Eligible participants were adults aged 18 or older. These were approached at the wineries and asked to complete the questionnaire voluntarily. All relevant guidelines of the University Ethics Review Committee for studies on human subjects were followed.



Figure 1: Valpolicella wine map

Source: [www.anotherwineblog.com/archives/19384](http://www.anotherwineblog.com/archives/19384).

A QR code to access the questionnaire was provided in both English and Italian, yielding a total of 245 responses. Incomplete questionnaires, including responses with over 30% missing answers, were excluded. After filtering out incomplete responses, 206 valid responses remained for analysis.

The questionnaire consisted of four sections: socio-demographic characteristics, wine tourist motivation, wine tourism experience, and overall satisfaction. The measurement items were adapted from established scales: sixteen motivation items from Chang and Yuan [2011], thirteen visitor experience items from Oh et al. [2007], and eight satisfaction items from De Rojas and Camarero [2008] and McMullan and O'Neill [2010]. Items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale. The data were analysed using SPSS Statistics version 30. Finally, the wineries were Corte Lenguin, Le Marognole, Cantina Spada, Villa Crine, and La Collina dei Ciliegi.

### 3.2 Research context

The region of Valpolicella combines a historic winemaking tradition with growing tourism interests, offering local wine heritage, scenic rural landscapes, winery experiences, and strong cultural associations. Thus, wine tourism in Valpolicella can be understood as being more than a consumption-oriented activity.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 The characteristics of wine tourists

The participant profile shows that visitors were mainly middle-aged to older adults, relatively well educated, and commonly travelled with partners or friends. The largest age groups were 50-59 years (31.1 %) and 60-69 years (27.2 %), while respondents under 40 accounted for less than 20 %. This suggests that local culture-based winery visits appeal particularly to visitors in later working life and retirement. The gender distribution was almost even, with women representing 51.9 % and men 48.1 % of the sample. The nationality profile indicates Valpolicella has an appeal beyond the domestic market. Although Italians formed the largest single nationality group, nearly 75 % of respondents were international visitors.

### 4.2 Wine tourist motivation

To examine the structure of wine tourism motivation, principal component analysis with Varimax rotation was performed. Four of the items (3, 5, 12, 16) were removed to enhance factor clarity and internal consistency. The final model revealed three reliable motivation dimensions: relaxation, social interaction, and curiosity and wine learning (Cronbach's alpha = 0.795) (Table 1).

All three dimensions had positive mean scores, ranging from 5.3261 to 5.5537, with standard deviations around 0.8, indicating that no single motivation was predominant. Visitors partici-

pate in wine tourism to relax, enjoy the ambience, and take a break from their routine (Motivation 1). Wineries act as social venues where visitors appreciate shared experiences, engage with friends, and exchange ideas with wine producers (Motivation 2). Furthermore, curiosity and a desire to learn (Motivation 3) motivate visitors to explore wines, particularly local varieties and their uniqueness. These results suggest that wine tourism at local culture-based wineries attracts visitors looking for hedonic, social, and educational experiences, not just wine tasting.

### 4.3 Wine tourist experience

Thirteen experience items were analysed using principal component analysis with Varimax rotation. Two items (6, 8) were removed due to weak or ambiguous loadings that would have compromised the clarity of the factor structure. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.804, indicating good sampling adequacy, and internal consistency was acceptable at Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.790$ .

The theoretical framework includes four dimensions: education, entertainment, esthetics, and escapism. However, the actual structure found did not reflect these as originally conceived. Instead, principal component analysis revealed three experience dimensions: (1) immersive escapism and altered reality (Experience 1); (2) education and skill development (Experience 2); and (3) aesthetic and educational appreciation (Experience 3) (Table 2). This suggests that, for visitors to local culture-based wineries in Valpolicella, the four realms of the Experience Economy framework may not be perceived as completely distinct categories. Instead, some dimensions appear to overlap, with aesthetic appreciation and educational experiences closely linked, indicating that visitors' enjoyment of winery settings, landscapes, and atmosphere may be intertwined with learning about wine, local culture, and the place itself.

Table 1: Wine tourist motivations: Rotated Component Matrix

	Component		
	1	2	3
Mot 9 I participated in this wine tourism to escape from my daily routine.	.719	.288	-.005
Mot 11 I participated in this wine tourism to enjoy the event atmosphere.	.666	.035	.087
Mot 2 I participated in this wine tourism to become more familiar with Italian wines.	.659	-.083	.209
Mot 7 I participated in this wine tourism to spend time outdoors.	.605	.210	.116
Mot 8 I participated in this wine tourism to rest and relax.	.572	.344	.198
Mot 14 I participated in this wine tourism to spend time with my friends/family.	-.185	.686	.109
Mot 6 I participated in this wine tourism to interact with winemakers.	.162	.661	.262
Mot 10 I participated in this wine tourism because there were various things to see and do.	.407	.630	-.106
Mot 4 I participated in this wine tourism to purchase local wines.	.190	.600	.225
Mot 15 I participated in this wine tourism to be with people who share similar interests.	.382	.560	-.025
Mot 1 I participated in this wine tourism to taste local wines.	.104	.158	.739
Mot 13 I participated in this wine tourism out of curiosity.	.159	.097	.695

Notes: Extraction Method = Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method = Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.<sup>a</sup> <sup>a</sup> Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

All three dimensions contribute to the overall experience, although their significance varies. Educational and skill development (Experience 2) ( $M = 5.4538$ ) and aesthetic and educational appreciation (Experience 3) ( $M = 5.4782$ ) received higher mean scores, indicating consistently positive assessments. Conversely, immersive escapism and altered reality (Experience 1) showed the lowest mean and the highest variability, suggesting more diverse perceptions among visitors. These findings suggest that visitors place greater value on learning and aesthetic appreciation than on simply escapist aspects. This aligns with previous research emphasising the role of experience dimensions in tourism [Oh et al., 2007] and the preference for integrated, holistic experiences in winery environments [Quadri-Felitti and Fiore, 2012].

**4.4 The relationship between experience and satisfaction in wine tourism**

Correlation analysis revealed that all three experience dimensions were positively related to overall satisfaction, with varying degrees of strength. Educational and skill development (Experience 2) had the strongest link ( $r = 0.507$ ), followed by aesthetic and educational appreciation (Experience 3) ( $r = 0.441$ ). In contrast, immersive escapism and altered reality (Experience 1) showed only a weak positive correlation ( $r = 0.148$ ). These findings indicate that satisfaction in local cultural wine tourism is more strongly associated with learning and aesthetic

appreciation than with purely escapist or immersive experiences.

In Valpolicella, visitors seem to value opportunities to learn about the area’s wine heritage, improve their wine-related knowledge and skills, and enjoy the area’s cultural and sensory qualities. This likely reflects the area’s unique character, in which tourism blends with its historic winemaking tradition, local heritage, and cultural ties to Italian wine history.

**5. Discussion and conclusion**

This study investigated wine tourism at local culture-based wineries in Valpolicella, Italy, applying the Experience Economy framework. Specifically, we explored the link between visitor motivations, their winery experiences, and their overall satisfaction with these local culture-based wineries.

The results suggest that wine tourism should be seen as an experiential and cultural form of tourism, not merely a specialised wine-consumption activity. The findings indicate that visitors’ motivations are diverse, including relaxation, socialising, learning, and an interest in wine. This supports the earlier argument that wine tourists are driven by an affinity for the product, appreciation of landscapes, social engagement, and lifestyle motives. In Valpolicella, visitors pursue meaningful leisure activities that link wine with cultural, regional, and social experiences.

The Experience Economy framework traditionally includes

Table 2: Wine tourist experience: Rotated Component Matrix

	Component		
	1	2	3
Exp 13 I felt as if I were in a different world.	.831	.045	-.058
Exp 11 The experience at the winery let me imagine being someone else.	.779	.186	-.190
Exp 12 I totally forgot about my daily routine.	.764	.078	.135
Exp 10 I felt like I was living in a different time or place.	.709	.178	.076
Exp 9 I really enjoyed watching what others were doing.	.644	.114	.214
Exp 3 It stimulated my curiosity to learn new things about wine.	.081	.804	-.026
Exp 1 The experience related to wine made me more knowledgeable.	.069	.673	.153
Exp 5 The experience enhanced my wine-related skills.	.262	.639	.015
Exp 2 I learnt a lot about wine.	.062	.570	.356
Exp 7 The winery setting was very attractive.	-.085	.158	.810
Exp4_ It was a real learning experience about wine.	.477	.092	.583

Notes: Extraction Method = Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method = Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

Table 3: The correlation between satisfaction and experience

		Experience 1	Experience 2	Experience 3
	Pearson Correlation	.148 *	.507 **	.441 *
Ave Sat	Sig. (2-tailed)	.037	< .001	< .001
	N	201	204	204

Notes: \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

four dimensions: education, entertainment, aesthetics, and escapism. However, the empirical data in this study did not reflect the four dimensions in their original form. This indicates that, for visitors to local culture-based wineries in Valpolicella, they may not be seen as entirely separate categories. Educational and aesthetic experiences showed stronger positive associations with visitor satisfaction, suggesting that the value of local culture-based winery visits lies not only in escaping everyday life or in wine consumption, but also in opportunities to learn, appreciate the winery atmosphere, and connect wine with the surrounding landscape and cultural setting.

This study thus presents multiple theoretical and practical implications for destination management. Theoretically, it shifts the view of wine tourism from a purely transactional activity to a comprehensive experience system. It expands the use of the Experience Economy framework by demonstrating that experiential aspects can vary across destination context and tourism offerings, in local culture-based wineries. Practically, the findings indicate that local culture-based wineries ought to shift from a solely product-focused strategy towards offering more distinctive visitor experiences. This involves bolstering interpretive and educational aspects and improving the aesthetic appeal of tasting rooms, landscapes, visual design, and sensory environments. Given the diversity of visitors, wineries should avoid generic tour-and-tasting formats and instead develop tailored experiences that meet visitors' diverse expectations.

This study has limitations. First, non-probability sampling at five local culture-based wineries in Valpolicella was used, which restricts the generalisability of the results. The sample may not be statistically representative of all wine tourists in the area. But it does offer an exploratory foundation for understanding visitors' motivations, experiences, and satisfaction with local culture-based wineries in the region. Future studies could compare other Italian wine regions to determine whether the patterns found here are part of broader trends in Italian wine tourism. Second, the cross-sectional survey measured visitors' perceptions at a single point in time. Future studies should explore whether satisfaction with local winery experiences encourages repeat visits, loyalty to the destination, or a stronger connection to the wine region.

In conclusion, this study contributes to wine tourism research by shifting attention from wine regions as broad destinations to local culture-based wineries as experiential settings. This study advances wine tourism research by demonstrating that local culture-based wineries serve not only as places for specialised wine tasting but also as cultural venues where experiential value is created through the interplay of product, location, and cultural significance. Using the Experience Economy framework, the study deepens insights into how visits to local culture-based wineries create tourism value and broadens the scope of wine tourism research beyond the traditional focus on major wine regions. Additionally, it highlights the importance of experiences in maintaining the uniqueness, competitiveness,

and sustainability of local culture-based wineries for the tourism sector.

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