

Book: *Wine tourism in the New and Old World: Innovation, management and sustainability.*

Exploring the intersection between Geographical Indications and Sustainable Wine Tourism: the case of le Colline del Prosecco di Conegliano e Valdobbiadene

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Abstract

Prosecco represents one of the most successful Geographical Indications (GIs) worldwide: its sales have continuously been growing regardless of shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine. While the Prosecco wine is widely known and consumed, supporting local development of its territories, there is still much untapped potential in terms of sustainable wine tourism development. In particular, since 2019 *Le Colline del Prosecco di Conegliano e Valdobbiadene* obtained the UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL) recognition as a Cultural Landscape, opening new opportunities in terms of synergies between wine and cultural tourism. Therefore, this chapter aims at addressing the intersection between UNESCO WHL and the Prosecco GI, by focusing on UNESCO's potential as a leverage for sustainable wine tourism development.

Introduction

Successful wine regions are increasingly diversifying their economies by creating experiences around wine that can support sustainable tourism development (Santos et al., 2019). Literature on wine tourism has developed since the mid-90s and generally focused on “old world” European wine producing countries focusing more on wine as a product versus “new world” wine producing countries, which tend to provide more varied wine tourism experiences (Carvalho et al., 2021). However, it appears that also “old world” countries are increasingly leveraging wine and related landscapes to attract cultural tourists. This is particularly true in wine regions that acquired the UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL) status as Cultural Landscapes, such as Champagne, Langhe-Roero and Monferrato, or Prosecco. Indeed, UNESCO recognition focuses on landscape, offering the opportunity to strengthen place-product associations for the interested territories. Therefore, this chapter addresses the intersection between UNESCO WHL and the Prosecco Geographical Indication (GI), by focusing on UNESCO’s potential as leverage for wine tourism development.

Literature review

According to Getz and Brown (2006, p.147) “wine tourism is, simultaneously, a form of consumer behaviour, a strategy by which destinations develop and market wine-related attractions and imagery, and a marketing opportunity for wineries to educate, and to sell their products, directly to consumers”. If wine represents a motivation to attract tourists to certain regions, places inscribed to the UNESCO WHL have a further element strengthening the destination’s profile due to UNESCO’s prestigious brand name (Sigala, 2019).

Indeed, a “winescape” – a concept that summarizes natural and cultural elements of the wine regions typical landscape (Carvalho et al., 2021) – that further obtains UNESCO WHL recognition as a Cultural Landscape, can attract both “wine interested” tourists, as well as cultural tourists with diverse levels of interest and involvement in wine.

There are different perspectives concerning the UNESCO impact on tourism development. In an extensive literature review, Patuelli (2013) maintains that extant studies converge towards four outcomes: positive effects; positive but relatively limited effects; insignificant effects on tourism but relevant effects in terms of heritage protection; negative effects. Accordingly, it appears that results are strongly influenced by the contexts in which research was carried out. Moreover, literature signals differences in the effects of UNESCO recognition in terms of attracting international or domestic tourists (Yang et al., 2019), as international tourists might be more likely to select destinations relying on indicators such as UNESCO WHL.

Successful local products such as wine, or relevant cultural tourism attractions such as the sites distinguished by the UNESCO recognition might be a crucial leverage to bring tourists to a place. However, having potential attractive resources is not enough for a place to become a tourist destination. Indeed, the existence of infrastructures aimed at incoming visitors proved to be pivotal for the deployment of effective strategies centred on tourist services and hospitality (Russo & van der Borg, 2002). Moving from this literature, this study focuses on the Valdobbiadene Conegliano Prosecco DOCG area to determine strengths and weaknesses of this territory in terms of its capacity to manage wine tourism development.

Background

In 2009, the Prosecco GI production area was expanded to include different provinces in Veneto and in the neighbouring region of Friuli Venezia Giulia. The expansion created two types of Prosecco brands (DOCG and DOC). These changes contributed to make Prosecco a global commercial success with a steady growth in production which in 2022 exceeded 750 million bottles (Rinaldi et al., 2022). In 2019 the 'Prosecco Hills of Conegliano and Valdobbiadene' site - encompassing the DOCG area - was inscribed in the World Heritage List as a cultural landscape linked to a distinctive wine-making tradition. In the area, the work of winegrowers contributed to creating a unique scenery. The Site encompasses the area that ranges from the municipality of Valdobbiadene to the municipality of Vittorio Veneto descending towards Conegliano, and includes a significant portion of the GI winegrowing landscape where the Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore GI is produced.

The benefits of the UNESCO recognition on tourism development became immediately visible. Cultural tourism represents a growing trend, especially among World Heritage Sites. Until the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, in fact, there was a steady increase of tourism in the area. In 2021, tourist arrivals grew +66,3% compared to 2020, even though they are still - 23,5% compared to 2019 (Distretto del Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco DOCG, 2022). Despite the setback caused by the pandemic, interviewees agree that the trend of visitors in the last five years is very positive. In fact, 67% of wineries declare that they have recorded overall growth. Regarding the wine tourism offer, 89% of the 170 wineries in the Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco DOCG District have a direct shop and 81% have a tasting room. The share of companies offering catering and accommodation services is respectively 7% and 12%.

Method

A qualitative research design underpinned our study of the case: the collection of qualitative evidence from a variety of primary and secondary sources was structured and interpreted through the methods and practices recommended by Gioia et al. (2013). The Gioia method is a qualitative research method that involves a rigorous and systematic approach to analyse data emerging from textual sources such as interviews, focus groups, and documents. This method is particularly useful to analyse complex and multidimensional data, and it is used to capture relevant and recurrent concepts over the interview in an inductive way. Data collection and subsequent analysis allowed us to develop an in-depth understanding of the dynamics underlying tourism management and hospitality approaches in the selected area before and after the UNESCO recognition.

Data collection relied eminently on interviews to representatives of eight wineries and two institutional actors in the area (to anonymize our data we refer to simple labels as winery 1 or institutional actor 1), as well as secondary sources represented by Consortia reports, websites, newspaper articles and archival records. The interviewees occupied different positions in their organisations, ensuring a multiplicity of perspectives with regard to tourism development in the area, the opportunities it opened, as well as the actions to be deployed to consolidate flows and to make wine tourism a sustainable level of economic and social development. We interviewed the director of the Consortium for the Protection of Prosecco of Conegliano Valdobbiadene and the site manager of the "Association for the Heritage of the

Prosecco Hills of Conegliano and Valdobbiadene". As far as the firms are concerned, we interviewed informants acting as winemakers, public relations management, and hospitality managers of local wineries.

Each interview was recorded with the consent of each subject, and later transcribed verbatim and analysed following the steps of the well-known Gioia Method.

Findings and discussion

Prosecco wine global success had a visible impact on the rural landscape of the region, which was at risk of depopulation and abandonment in the first half of the 20th century. Later, the area was revived thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit of local winemakers in the aftermath of the Second World War (Gobbato, 2009). The local wine, a white, sparkling, and accessible one, encountered rapidly the favour of national and international consumers, determining the gradual consolidation of dedicated agriculture and wine production. As a result, the area was transformed: vineyards climbing the irregular hills of the site are a testimony of how human practices and labour can interact with nature, creating sites that are environmentally unique and culturally rich.

The UNESCO recognition formalized the status of a distinctive site, laying the ground for the development of a thriving tourism sector, and triggering an increase in visitor numbers. The impact is not only quantitative though: the Hills seem to attract flows of qualified tourists when it comes to motivations, behaviour, and interests towards the area.

Different type of tourists

It is widely acknowledged that wine tourism accounts for an important part of the tourist flows in Veneto. Our interviews pointed out that tourism on the Hills has evolved thanks to the growing international success of Prosecco, as well as the strong connection between the beauty of the landscape and the quality of this famous sparkling wine.

Indeed, an informant mentioned an increase of foreign tourists in the Hills: *"Many international tourists have visited our hills during the last years. In my opinion this is related to UNESCO recognition"* (Winery 5). Another one indicated that the tourists themselves appear different than usual ones that used to arrive in the area just to buy wine. *"What we see now is a different type of tourism that was not there before, and I think this has to do with UNESCO"* (Winery 4).

Another interviewee stressed the curiosity of the incoming visitors and their willingness to explore in depth the characteristics of the different sub-areas encompassing the Hills and the distinctive characteristics of local wineries: *"a curious tourist visiting the territory to acquire knowledge of the area and the differences among wineries and territories"* (Winery 7)

In the last few years tourists came from several countries, with an increase of flows originating from distant countries, while in the recent past international presences were eminently those from neighbouring European states. Secondary data confirmed the growth of tourism in the area, as reported in the Background section. Tourists' expectations, in turn, appear to be quite sophisticated: experiences sought are not elementary in nature, such as consuming wine in cellars and learning about different wines and brands' characteristics. Rather, they converge towards asking for articulated accounts on, and visits of, production processes, in-depth views on the evolution of production cultures and local material cultures, and detailed

reconstructions of the history of wineries, to grasp the social fabric underlying the evolution of the agro-industrial structure of the area.

Moreover, tourists prefer to visit and travel around, to enjoy the landscape. Finally, tourist demand is no longer only seasonal and concentrated in spring and summer: it extends the period of offering, with a positive impact for many restaurants and accommodation companies.

Whether the reason is only the UNESCO recognition or mainly depends on Prosecco wine is not easy to determine, as both drivers emerged from our interviews. Indeed, some interviewees believed that Prosecco was the main motivation tourism had increased:

"I don't think that tourism increase was due to UNESCO. Prosecco represents a strong attraction, and wine tourism itineraries started over fifteen years ago - contributing to a constant tourism growth" (Winery 2).

Others believe that UNESCO contributed to bringing a different type of tourism in the area, particularly in terms of international audience.

"We have experienced in the last years (2019 and then again post COVID19) tourists coming from different countries that we did not see before, such as Japanese, Indians, Israelis and so on. I think this might be an effect of UNESCO recognition". (Winery 8).

This supports Yang et al. (2019) findings: UNESCO recognition contributes to tourism development, enhancing the awareness of certain places in foreign Countries.

UNESCO recognition: a collective effort to embrace the challenge

The UNESCO recognition influences the sense of belonging in a community by sharing values and norms and respecting the responsibility of every individual in contributing to the common good. Interviews highlighted that it *"enhances the territorial identity"* (Winery 1) and *"it helps to avoid losing our uniqueness"* (Winery 5). Moreover, residents and the territory benefited from this situation, as some interviewees stated: *"new jobs are created, different skills are required"* (Winery 1). This is consistent with previous studies, where the recognition seems to have positive externalities in terms of creation of new employment and inducing a positive economic impact on the local economy (Caust and Vecco, 2017).

This is a huge impact for such a small destination, where the culture is mostly related to winemaking rather than tourism management and promotion. In fact, one of the main themes that emerged from interviews was the 'positive' interference of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism development. Some wineries stated:

"I have always said that if there was no Covid, we probably would not have been ready to receive the tourist flow we are seeing in recent years" (Winery 7).

When the area earned the recognition, it was not ready to receive the new increased flow of tourists. "Luckily" the pandemic stopped the travelling activities and the community started

to improve the tourism offer, but the growth of tourist arrivals unveiled weaknesses in terms of the area's capacity to accommodate and welcome them.

This appears to be not only an infrastructure-related problem, but it also represents a cultural problem.

As far as the first one is concerned, interviews highlighted that accommodation facilities are not sufficient, new ones had to be created and existing ones improved: accommodation capacity showed a limited preparation for the sector with respect to, for example, the possibility of staying overnight in the wineries. Even so the situation is still not ideal, as the offer does not meet the accommodation requests. *“UNESCO brought a rapid increase of tourist arrivals in the area, and we do not have accommodation facilities with large capacity”* (Winery 3).

Moreover, the reception staff is not well trained: new competences and skills are required because the employees are not ready to welcome national and international tourists, or able to satisfy visitors through a catering service and high-level services and information. Another big issue is viability: roads are narrow, the road network is complex, and places of interest are not well indicated.

As far as the second one is concerned, a first element that emerges from the interviews is that the local community and wine producers were not accustomed to large numbers of visitors in the area, and this has influenced how local actors perceive tourists. Wineries 5 and 6 pointed out that some clashes between locals and tourists emerged when tourists visit vineyards:

“Some wine producers believe that their vineyards are theirs and that nobody should enter them. But locals should realize that tourists arrive here because they want to visit our place”. (Winery 6)

On the other hand, the feeling is not consistent among all interviewees. Some of them believe that while the local community should be more welcoming towards tourists, the latter should be respectful. The relationship between residents and tourists in the Prosecco region can vary. While some residents may embrace and benefit from tourism showing a positive attitude, others may feel a sense of intrusion (or disruption) to their daily lives. This attrition is common in many touristic sites that require efforts to balance the needs of both residents and tourists in order to foster a harmonious relationship. This poses challenges as in the case of overtourism: we refer again to destinations that are facing difficulties due to the rapid growth in tourist arrivals globally.

“Tourists should know that entering private vineyards requires respect, because winegrowers cannot afford to have tourists invading or damaging them. We need to build a trustful relationship between them” (Institutional Actor 1).

This quote emphasises the importance of managing the transition from a wine-based economy to an enogastronomic tourism economy. The urgency to develop a “culture of hospitality” is acknowledged by interviewees.

“Until now this territory has flourished through wine and vineyards, while from now on we should focus on sustainable tourism development” (Institutional actor 1).

At the same time, there are concerns about the commoditization of products and local practices, as it appears crucial to preserve the place's authenticity.

"We need to be careful because what is great about this area anyway is that the wineries and facilities are all family-run" (Winery 7).

This issue is well known in the extant literature, and it appears to affect not only places that obtained the UNESCO recognition, but it concerns many wider cultural heritage tourism contexts (Zhang and Yin, 2020). When tourism flows have a vast impact on the territory and its economy, the risk of losing a place's authenticity is high.

Tourism management and governance

A final important issue concerns the role of institutions managing the UNESCO site in maintaining a fine balance, so that the interests of residents, tourists and the production system are protected, while concurrently sustainable tourism is developed.

In this case, the promotion of the Prosecco DOCG is linked to the promotion of the Prosecco Hills as a destination, and some informants pointed out that too many small institutions are involved, without a clear orchestration. The main problems emerging from our interviews can be summarized in the following three issues.

First, there are too many institutions that try to manage the Prosecco Hills area. They need to work together, to coordinate flows, activities, and the image of the area, but fragmentation among responsible bodies does not help. Second, a clear and simple accusation towards the communication management as to why there is no information about the UNESCO recognition in the main hubs of the territory (Conegliano and Valdobbiadene), and, finally, why this information is not linked to the DOCG.

"People arrive in the Conegliano or Valdobbiadene main squares and they still don't find any information about the GI" (Winery 7).

Institutional bodies play a crucial part in managing the Prosecco region. Local governments, tourism boards, and other relevant institutions have the responsibility of implementing policies and regulations and might also facilitate communication to ensure the long-term well-being of the community. However, tourism management still relies on Pro Loco voluntary workers (Pro Loco are small associations of local culture and tourism) rather than on skilled professionals with a clear vision to pursue. This is evident for example in the lack of basic communication tools, such as GI references. In general, the situation swings between a lack of communication concerning the UNESCO recognition, and the simultaneous involvement of too many institutions clashing one against the other and not generating synergies.

Not all the wineries have a negative attitude about the promotion of Prosecco (wine and hills): some praise the way in which the Consortium is working and how institutions support the UNESCO site as well. On the contrary, others blame the (missing) role of coordination, but highlight that *"UNESCO forces us to grow in a positive way"* (Winery 1), mentioning a network among wineries created thanks to the recognition. This has generated the willingness to team up, creating strong relationships to improve the territory's economy, also to avoid the risk of losing the UNESCO recognition. Thus, common divergences and controversies among the

different actors involved in GIs systems (Rinallo and Pitardi, 2019) can be smoothed because the value of the recognition makes the Prosecco GI even more important.

In order to address these critical issues, a number of initiatives have been planned.

The success of the Prosecco area relies also on the engagement of youngsters, consequently it is crucial to raise awareness about the meaning of being members of the World Heritage List. Accordingly, educational activities focusing on heritage preservation and enhancement were included in touristic, culinary, and technical high school programs in the area. Youngsters represent an essential resource for developing new skills lacking in the area:

“We need to increase the sense of belonging to this place among young people, which can support a tourism approach in line with sustainability. We want to work with schools to teach kids about this territory, its landscape, the quality and value of the wine we produce, and the respect they must have for this” (Institutional actor 1).

“We are working on UNESCO awareness programs in schools so that young people can learn what it means to be citizens in a World Heritage Site” (Institutional actor 2).

However, young people are not the only group able to provide new skills for sustainable tourism development. People of all ages employed in tourism, hospitality, and gastronomy need to be upskilled in both how to welcome tourists as well as in terms of how sustainability should be implemented at multiple levels. Therefore, a Wine Tourism Lab has been established as a collaboration between the DOCG consortium and the local UNESCO Association: *“We need to support this incredible economic opportunity where the landscape has become an economic resource, as people come here to see our landscape. This is also a great responsibility as this is a UNESCO territory as well as a viticultural landscape”* (Institutional actor 1).

These excerpts show that local actors are aware of the need to develop and diffuse a better culture of hospitality, and that this can be achieved through educational/upskilling initiatives directed both at young people and professionals employed in different sub-sectors underlying the new sustainable wine tourism model (hospitality, gastronomy, etc.). Local actors' approach towards education and training for sustainable tourism development is in line with recommendations from the literature that emphasises the compelling role of education. Indeed, in order to turn sustainable tourism into an accepted social norm, it appears necessary to educate organizations and consumers, as well all interested parties, systematically (Streimikiene et al., 2020). Hence, bringing multiple stakeholders together to participate in dialogue, decision making, and implementation of responses to this development project.

Change management is a slow motion and process that requires time to avoid a distortion of the whole project. A good relationship between residents and tourists is at the basis of sustainable tourism development: attracting tourists whose values are aligned with those of the host is more important than the quantity of tourists visiting a destination (Dwyer, 2018). The excerpts discussed above show that the local economy has developed primarily through wine selling (wine-based economy), while the arrival of tourists in the area calls for new approaches to generate a tourism-based economy. As recalled in the literature review, having tourist potential is not sufficient for places to become tourist destinations (Russo & van der Borg, 2002). While data unveils some shortcomings, such as the need to develop

accommodation facilities as well as a culture of hospitality, it also shows that local stakeholders are aware of these issues and are introducing several initiatives to address them.

Conclusion

The case at hand, the Prosecco Hills in North East Italy, is a relevant case that puts clearly on display some critical factors entailed in the touristic capitalization of long-held winemaking traditions. The unfolding of the Prosecco Hills Candidacy, and the subsequent mobilization of the area towards the execution of a destination strategy, exposes the problems that might arise from the mismatch between the aspirations of a territory and the lack of tangible and intangible infrastructures to sustain incoming flows. The absence of tangible infrastructures—e.g. bike roads, restaurants – directs our attention towards three sets of critical factors that need to be considered in further research and by practitioners in this and similar areas. These factors refer to three different dimensions: a cognitive one, one entailing the governance of local systems, and the final one related to the development and retention of novel skill profiles.

First and foremost, the area we considered is home for the production of a wine whose domestic and international market shares have grown steadily during the last 30 years. Currently, Prosecco is among the global best-sellers; production volumes topped Champagne ones in the past two years totalling over 750 million bottles. While only partially produced in the area (the Conegliano Valdobbiadene DOCG area is responsible for 100 million bottles in 2022), the wine's striking success triggered a lively entrepreneurial activity and the multiplication of wineries in the GI area, whose focus has been eminently on production processes and marketing. There has been a discussion emphasising the touristic potential of the Hills for a long time, while in the past 20 years tourism has become visible around the Prosecco Hills thanks to different wine tourism events and the Prosecco Road. However, firms' and operators' attention towards structured and systematic actions aimed at attracting and sustaining incoming flows was quite limited. In other words, the case points to the rigidities affecting firms in "old world" winemaking countries, especially when the market is showing a relentless growth in demand and absorption of the wine. This situation creates incentives for firms – and for their representative bodies such as consortia and trade associations – to focus their attention and investments in operations and marketing and to overlook considerations regarding additional revenue sources such as tourism. When contingencies or institutional actors – in this case policymakers that envisaged the potential of a winemaking area to express its touristic potential – succeed in mobilizing the local actors towards ambitious goals such as the UNESCO recognition, the lack of skills and strategic intent that fit with tourism, or activities that exceed winemaking and marketing can become critical factors.

A second theme emerges from our analysis of the Prosecco Hills case: governing the set-up of the local system of actors that contribute to the deployment of the tourism development strategy. In Conegliano-Valdobbiadene, after the successful ignition of the process by the then Ministry of Agriculture, a multiplicity of actors reclaimed a pivotal role in the refinement of the strategy and in its implementation: local associations of municipalities, the Prosecco Consortium, associations of hospitality firms, etc.. The presence of several actors with specific competences and prerogatives in a territory is a key element to sustain a collective effort aimed at a successful destination strategy. Nonetheless, the lack of coordination among

actors and the absence of criteria to establish the primacy of a leading actor might frustrate such mobilisation.

Third, the case stresses the importance of specialized skills for a tourism strategy to take off and for a territory to sustain its attractiveness in time. Being the touristic ambitions relatively recent if compared to the long-held specialization in winemaking and sales, both firms and institutions in the area lack competences and sensitivities to inject novel streams of activities in the extant entrepreneurial fabric. This consideration opens the discussion and further research lines to a second type of attractiveness that territories should take care of to actually benefit from touristic flows: that of skilled tourism actors and novel professional families, alien to the traditional milieu. Such a double effort towards attraction requires to think not only in terms of tangible and intangible infrastructures for tourists but also for novel “residents” or new generations of local dwellers oriented towards career paths that diverge from those strictly connected to winemaking.

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