

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

Wine tourism represents an increasingly important source of revenue for New World wine producers. But good wine tourism isn't just a matter of opening up a winery to visitors, as Robert Joseph explains. It requires research and regional infrastructure.

Sometimes one of the best ways to understand a situation is to approach it obliquely. The view from underneath or above can suddenly provide a clarity that was previously absent. That, at least, is a conclusion I came to when working on the Wine Travel Guide to the World, a book published in late 2006 aimed at consumers who travel and enjoy wine. The focus, in other words, was on "wine tourism". But the moment you set those two words down on paper - or make them a major discussion point at a conference, it becomes clear that they mean very different things to different people, countries and regions.

A fascinating illustration of these different attitudes is provided by a pair of the world's most dissimilar wine regions. On the one hand, there's Bordeaux, home to some of the most illustrious wine estates in the world and, in itself, a brand whose name is familiar to almost anyone with even a shallow knowledge of wine. On the other hand... there's Queensland. Even within Australia, you'd be hard put to find a wine enthusiast who could name as many as one of Queensland's wineries. But now compare the way these French and Australian regions approach the matter of wine tourism.

Capturing information is critical

One of the best places to look for a clear view of Bordeaux's attitude is a thesis published last year by Marc Torterat as part of his Master of Wine Business Administration. Torterat focused his attention on the Graves and Pessac Leognan. This area, close to the city of Bordeaux, is home to Chateau Haut Brion, arguably the world's oldest wine brand and Chateau Smith-Haut-Lafitte, the highly successful chateau-

hotel-restaurant-and-spa. Torterat's paper is invaluable because there is so little authoritative information available from other, official sources. Type 'Queensland' and 'wine tourism' into a search engine, however, and you find a detailed website created by the state government, and aimed at producers, complete with headings such as "The Need to Plan for Tourism" and "What is a tourism development plan?".

But in Bordeaux, information is less



easy to come by. While researching this article, I phoned Bordeaux's regional tourist office for some statistics. How many wine tourists take advantage of the area? I wondered. The representative - who preferred not to be named - responded directly: "We have no idea". I was a little surprised. The Napa Valley, I pointed out, has recorded its wine tourist numbers carefully, noting growth from 15m in 2002 to 20m in

2005, with spending rising from \$1.3b to \$2b. Surely Bordeaux has some kinds of statistics to set alongside these? "No," came the answer. "If you can persuade the chateaux to tell us what they are doing, I'd be very grateful. We contact them and we try to get information back, but it never comes."

Torterat had better luck than I did, discovering a total potential market of 450,000 visitors and an actual number of 100,000 visitors for the region as a whole. This figure, however seems questionable when one learns that Chateau Mouton Rothschild (which does record the number of people who pay to enter its chais) welcomes some 18,000 of them. Are we really to believe that nearly one visitor in five join an organised group tour or make their own appointment to see around and possibly (for an extra €8.50) taste? According to Torterat, other classed growths in the Medoc report 5,000-8,000 visits.

Wine is just one part

While it would be useful to have some more accurate statistics for Bordeaux vineyard visits, Marc Torterat, who is now a consultant in strategy and marketing, makes a very perceptive point about wine tourism in general: "wine is not necessarily the first motive in visiting a region. For example, heritage is the dominant motivation for visiting the region of Burgundy, wine being only fourth. In Bordeaux, seaside recreation and visiting the Atlantic Ocean come before wine and food. This means tourists would require other types of attractions and would visit wineries along other sites". In this respect, regions like the Medoc perform doubly poorly. On the one hand, the chateaux generally offer little beyond the chance to taste wine and possibly

look at barrels - in many cases, there is not even the opportunity to buy - but on the other, the region is poorly stocked with alternative activities. The Hunter Valley, for example, offers golf courses and garden resorts; in the Médoc it is often hard to find a restaurant.

Any analysis of the way wine tourism is viewed in the Old and New Worlds reveals that in Europe, most producers focus on the business of tasting and selling, most probably placing a significant amount of their effort into annual festivals at which all of the producers of a village or region gather to show off their wares, possibly alongside foods and handicrafts. In the New World, there is greater emphasis on offering a broader experience at the winery. Winery restaurants - a rarity in France - are commonplace. And where food is not offered, there is often a picnic or even a barbecue area where visitors can cater for their own needs. The best explanation for this difference in approach may lie in the traditional European notion of "to each their own craft". Many French producers have only recently even begun to bottle and sell their own wine.

Historically, the job of a vigneron lay in tending vines and crushing and fermenting grapes. The process of transforming the wine into cash consisted of negotiating with a broker or merchant. Once one understands this basic attitude, it is easy to comprehend why wine labels are often so unadventurous (usually bought from a printer 'off the peg'), and why the very thought of setting up a restaurant is anathema.

Consider the tourist

In the New World, there seems to be a far greater readiness to consider what the Queensland authorities call "tourist expectations" in a broader way. It is revealing to look at the criteria that were recently established in the Rhone Valley for its "Welcome of Quality" "Welcome of Service" and "Welcome of Excellence" ratings that wineries are invited to apply for.

Those wineries that want to be considered for a "Welcome of Quality" have to offer cleanliness, a place to park, "at

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Marc Tarterat, wine consultant

least one correctly functioning toilet and a water distribution point available to its visitors", chairs, a tasting (using wine glasses and appropriate temperatures), a spittoon and non-alcoholic drinks for children (though not carbonated examples). To be considered "excellent" - the highest possible rating - the bar is not raised much higher. The glasses must now be crystal, English must be spoken and available on the mandatory website. The staff should also have some training and be able to "offer other services: arranging visits to other wine making cellars, restaurant reservations and booking accommodation". Little, in other words, that will set one "excellent" winery apart from its neighbours.

The idea of an official, regulated system of wine tourism seems, though, to appeal to the European industry, in direct contrast to the laissez-faire attitude of the New World. And, while winemakers in the the Antipodes and Americas go their own way, benefitting from, but not relying on generic local websites and promotional bodies, the Europeans seem to prefer officially structured organisations. Perhaps the best known of these is a body called 'The Global Network of Great Wine Capitals' that was launched in 2003 and brings together Melbourne, Bordeaux, Porto, Cape Town, Florence, and two cities that are apparently known as Bilbao-Rioja and San Francisco-Napa Valley. The aim of the group is to build "business networks and relationships in the viticulture industry" and to "encourage international winery tourism as well as economic, academic and cultural exchanges between them".

In fact, the group's highest profile activity has been in running a series of annual conferences and the creation

of a set of "Best Of Wine Tourism" awards, which are listed on the website and promoted through a limited amount of advertising and public relations as well as a colourful brochure which can be downloaded from the website. The awards, for categories ranging from "Sustainable Wine Tourism Practices" and "Innovative Wine Tourism Experiences" to "accommodation", "architecture" and "parks" reveal much about the differences between the various regions. Not to mention the fact that the organisation was established by the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce rather than either the tourism or any of the wine promotional organisations.

The prizes are given by an unnamed "international panel" which seems to have a Gallic and generally European bias. Of the 210 awards made since 2004, nearly a fifth have gone to French entrants. Spain, Italy and Portugal have 34, 31 and 24 respectively, while Australia has to make do with 21 and the US a mere 12.

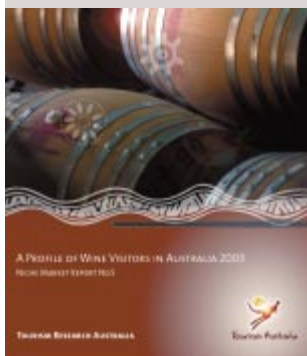
But when one considers the winners, more interesting facts emerge. First, the same names seem to appear with curious regularity from year to year, making it easy to imagine the number of entries is limited. But second, and more curiously, in France awards are given for Best Winery Restaurant to establishments such as Chateau Grand Moueys that actually have no restaurant at all, but would cater for a party if required. Hardly what one might consider "wine tourism" as we know it.

The very existence of the Best Of awards reveals the fact that wine tourism is being taken more seriously than it was, especially considering the efforts of such individuals as Georges Duboeuf, creator of le Hameau du Vin in

Beaujolais, or Jean-Michel and Sylvie Cazes, who launched the brilliant Cordeillan Bages hotel and restaurant in Paulliac. But these are exceptions to the national rule that is light years behind even some of the least ambitious New World regions.

The issue of wine tourism is, however, set to become a far more important issue over the next few years. For many – and I would say most – wineries, the business of welcoming visitors and selling them wine will no longer be an option. It will be a necessity for survival, as routes to market become ever more narrow and prices are squeezed downwards by wholesalers and retailers – not to mention currency fluctuations. And, as producers globally struggle to escape the tyranny of Parker Points, the appeal of direct sales will inevitably grow. As it does, my guess is that there will be a major move by European producers to learn the tricks of wine tourism from their New World counterparts. If they haven't left it too late. ■

Australia's wine tourism research



Australian wine regions can access information about wine tourists that has been collected by both state and national tourism bodies. One collection tool is the National Visitor Survey (NVS), which asks domestic travellers about recent trips. This is done in their own homes, with more than 120,000 people surveyed annually. Another tool is the International Visitor Survey (IVS), which is conducted in airports. Participants are asked about their:

- Overnight trips
- Day trips that involve staying away from home for at least four hours
- Outbound trips – trips to another country by Australian residents

The information collected includes:

- Gender, age, life-cycle stage and income
- Details of the trip: location, length, number of stopovers, expenditure, how the bookings were made
- The accommodation, transport and purpose of visit for each leg of the journey

The statistics collected are freely available. The Winemakers Federation of Australia (WFA) also advises wineries to:

- Ask for postcodes when recording purchases and analyse this information monthly
- Ascertain the country of origin of international visitors. Ask for a business card
- Conduct cellar door surveys every quarter and ask where customers come from, if they have visited before and what other attractions they would either like or they have visited

As a result of these efforts, the WFA has identified wine tourists as people who are:

- Avid readers of both newspapers and magazines
- More like to use the Internet to plan and book holidays
- More likely to travel by hire car or four wheel drive
- More likely to stay in bed-and-breakfast style accommodation

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