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Producers, and Travelers for Immersive Experiences**



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Ethnographic Insights into Winedocking: Bridging Wine Tourism, Producers, and Travelers for Immersive Experiences

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Abstract

This article examines *winedocking*, an innovative blend of wine tourism and boondocking, where travelers camp overnight at vineyard properties. Using ethnographic methods, it explores the behaviors and motivations of winedockers and producers, revealing how this practice enhances visitor experiences and economic opportunities for wineries. *Winedocking* appeals to modern travelers seeking sustainability, authenticity, and adventure. Travelers enjoy immersive connections with winemakers, while producers benefit from additional revenue and visibility. Fieldwork across U.S. wine regions, including interviews with 47 travelers and 12 winery owners, highlights the mutual benefits and challenges of this trend. The study situates *winedocking* within the broader wine tourism landscape, demonstrating its potential to drive sustainable tourism and innovation in the industry. It provides insights for producers and stakeholders, emphasizing *winedocking*'s role in meeting evolving consumer preferences and supporting local economies.

Keywords: *Winedocking, Wine Tourism, Experiential Travel, Sustainability, Ethnography*

Introduction

Wine tourism is a rapidly evolving sector that not only supports local economies but also redefines travelers' experiences by connecting them with culture, authenticity, and sustainability (Yadav & Dixit, 2022). In recent years, the practice of boondocking has merged with wine tourism, creating a phenomenon often referred to as *winedocking*. This innovative concept involves travelers camping on vineyard properties, fostering direct engagement with winemakers while enjoying the convenience of an immersive overnight stay. This article delves into the emergence of *winedocking* as a distinctive subset of wine tourism in the United States, exploring its potential to enrich the visitor experience and strengthen the economic and social fabric of wine regions.

The practice of *winedocking* reflects contemporary trends in tourism, where consumers increasingly seek authenticity, adventure, and deeper cultural connections (Bousquet, 2024). For wineries, this model presents an opportunity to attract a diverse clientele, generate additional revenue streams, and enhance sustainability through the promotion of local products and practices. This article synthesizes findings from recent exploratory research across multiple U.S. states, addressing key questions about the motivations of both travelers and wine producers and the broader implications for the industry.

1. Literature review

The Rise of Wine Tourism

Wine tourism has emerged as a significant force within the broader tourism industry, evolving from traditional wine tastings to immersive and culturally rich experiences. Initially rooted in Europe, wine tourism expanded to global markets, with notable growth in the United States, Australia, and South America (Sigala & Robinson, 2019). Visitors are drawn not only by the allure of wine but also by the opportunity to connect with the authenticity of local communities and traditions (Gomez, Pratt, & Molina, 2019). This intersection of cultural engagement and leisure positions wine tourism as a major economic contributor to wine-producing regions (Getz & Brown, 2006).

Immersion in Viticultural Experiences

Modern wine tourists prioritize immersive experiences that allow them to actively engage with local wine culture. Pine and Gilmore's (1998) framework on the experience economy underscores the growing consumer demand for unique, personalized activities. Wine tourism aligns with this trend by offering a variety of interactive experiences, such as grape harvesting, vineyard stays, and winemaking workshops (Thach & Olsen, 2006; Amaral et al., 2024). These offerings deepen the emotional connection between visitors and winemakers, creating memorable and meaningful interactions that drive visitor satisfaction and loyalty.

Emerging Trends: Winedocking as an Evolution of Boondocking

One of the most innovative trends in wine tourism is the emergence of *winedocking*, which adapts the practice of boondocking camping without traditional infrastructure to vineyard settings.

Travelers using self-contained vehicles such as RVs can camp directly on winery properties, blending outdoor adventure with a unique wine-focused experience (Alonso *et al.*, 2023). Unlike traditional wine tourism, *winedocking* emphasizes direct engagement with producers, fostering reciprocity and a stronger sense of community between visitors and winemakers (Bousquet, 2023).

Winedocking reflects travelers' desires for sustainability, affordability, and authenticity. It allows visitors to reduce costs while contributing economically by purchasing wine or participating in on-site activities (Santos *et al.*, 2023). For wineries, the practice offers a reliable revenue source and enhances their market reach, especially among younger demographics such as Millennials and Gen Z, who prioritize experiential and meaningful travel (Stergiou, Airey, & Apostolakis, 2018).

Economic and Environmental Impacts of Wine Tourism

The economic benefits of wine tourism extend beyond wineries to include local hospitality, retail, and artisan industries (Jones, Singh, & Hsiung, 2015). Wine regions often experience a ripple effect, with increased demand for accommodations, transportation, and dining. Additionally, sustainable practices are increasingly integrated into wine tourism, emphasizing organic farming, water conservation, and eco-conscious travel (Brito *et al.*, 2024; Golicic, 2022). *Winedocking*, as a sustainable practice, aligns with these environmental goals, fostering responsible tourism and supporting local ecosystems.

Integration of Technology in Wine Tourism (Phygital)

Technological advancements have further enriched wine tourism by enhancing visitor experiences and operational efficiency for wineries. Augmented and virtual reality tools allow visitors to explore vineyards and learn about winemaking processes interactively (Robertson *et al.*, 2024). Digital platforms, such as social media and booking apps, facilitate seamless visitor engagement and allow wineries to personalize experiences based on customer preferences (Sigala, 2023). This integration of technology complements the hands-on, immersive aspects of wine tourism, amplifying its appeal.

A Promising Future for Winedocking

Winedocking represents an innovative convergence of experiential tourism and sustainability. Companies like Harvest Hosts have popularized this practice, connecting boondockers with wineries across the United States. This model fosters a circular economy by encouraging direct interactions between visitors and producers, ultimately strengthening community ties and promoting local products (Gastaldello *et al.*, 2024). The trend aligns with broader shifts toward eco-conscious and experiential travel, positioning *winedocking* as a key area for further exploration and development in wine tourism research.

2. Methodology proposed

This study adopts a qualitative and exploratory approach rooted in ethnographic methods (Cayla & Arnould, 2013) to better understand the phenomenon of *winedocking* and its implications for wine tourism in the United States. By immersing researchers in the field and actively engaging

with both travelers and producers, the study seeks to uncover the nuanced behaviors, motivations, and interactions that define *winedocking*. The methodology is structured around four interconnected steps:

2.1. Ethnographic Field Studies

Four distinct trips were conducted in representative wine regions across the United States: Rhode Island and Vermont, New Mexico and Arizona, Southern California, and Northern California and Oregon. The methodology involved visiting twenty-three wineries and engaging in discussions with 12 winery owners and 47 boondockers (travelers) to gather qualitative insights into the practice of *winedocking*. These field studies involved prolonged engagement in diverse vineyard settings, ranging from small family-run wineries to large commercial estates. Researchers participated as participant-observers, blending into the environment to authentically experience the dynamics of *winedocking* while maintaining a critical analytical perspective.

2.2. Observations of *Winedockers* Behavior

Ethnographic observations discussions were central to capturing the lived experiences of *winedockers*. This phase focused on documenting how travelers adapted to vineyard settings, their routines, interactions with winemakers, and engagement with the local culture. By observing behaviors in their natural context, the study gathered rich qualitative data that highlights the authentic practices and values of *winedocking* participants.

2.3. Informal Interviews

In keeping with ethnographic principles, informal conversations were conducted with key stakeholders, including both *winedockers* and wine producers. For travelers, the interviews explored their motivations, expectations, and perceptions of their experiences. For producers, the discussions focused on their reasons for hosting *winedockers*, the economic and social impacts of the practice, and any logistical or cultural challenges they encountered. This dual perspective enriched the study by providing a comprehensive understanding of *winedocking* from multiple viewpoints.

2.4. Reflexive and Thematic Data Analysis

The data collected during the fieldwork were meticulously coded and analyzed using a thematic approach. Reflexivity, a cornerstone of ethnographic research, was integral throughout the analysis process, ensuring that the researchers critically examined their own biases and assumptions. This approach facilitated the identification of recurring themes, such as sustainability, authenticity, and economic reciprocity, as well as unique insights into the evolving dynamics of *winedocking*.

2.5. Strengthening the Ethnographic Perspective

The ethnographic framework allowed for an immersive exploration of *winedocking*, capturing its richness and complexity beyond what structured surveys or distant observations could reveal. By engaging directly with participants in their natural settings, the study unveiled the deeper cultural

and social dimensions of *winedocking*, including how it fosters community ties, supports local economies, and redefines the relationship between travelers and producers.

3. Data Analysis

The analysis of data collected during this ethnographic study is structured into two primary sections: the perspectives of travelers (*winedockers*) and those of producers. This focused approach allows for a detailed understanding of each group's motivations, behaviors, and experiences.

3.1. Travelers (*Winedockers*)

Motivations and Expectations

Travelers were drawn to *winedocking* for its ability to provide authentic and immersive experiences. They appreciated the unique opportunity to connect directly with winemakers, gaining insights into the viticulture process and developing a deeper appreciation for the craft. Additionally, *winedocking* was frequently praised for its cost-effectiveness, offering an affordable alternative to traditional accommodations. This aspect made it particularly appealing to younger demographics and retirees traveling on a budget. Beyond affordability, many participants valued *winedocking* as an environmentally conscious choice, aligning with their commitment to minimizing environmental impact while actively supporting local economies. Furthermore, travelers found significant cultural enrichment in this practice, as it facilitated meaningful exchanges with producers and allowed them to explore and engage with local traditions in a more personal and memorable way.

Behavioral Patterns

Winedockers exhibited notable behavioral patterns that underscored their engagement with the wineries they visited. A strong sense of reciprocity was evident, as travelers actively supported the vineyards by purchasing bottles of wine, attending tastings, and participating in on-site events. The overnight nature of *winedocking* further encouraged extended stays, allowing travelers to spend more time at each vineyard. This deeper engagement not only strengthened their connection with the wineries but also resulted in increased overall spending. Additionally, *winedockers* often interacted informally with one another, exchanging recommendations and sharing their experiences. These interactions fostered a sense of community among participants, adding a social dimension to the *winedocking* experience that enriched their travels.

3.2. Analysis of Results: Producers

Economic and Social Benefits

Producers identified several economic and social benefits associated with hosting *winedockers*, particularly in terms of revenue generation and marketing. Direct sales to *winedockers* provided a significant financial boost, especially for small to medium-sized wineries that depend on local customers. Beyond immediate revenue, *winedocking* offered valuable marketing opportunities through organic word-of-mouth promotion, as travelers frequently shared their positive experiences on social media and with personal networks. This visibility not only enhanced the

wineries' reputations but also attracted a new segment of customers. Many of these visitors expressed interest in returning for future stays or recommending the winery to others, further increasing foot traffic and building long-term loyalty among a broader audience.

Community and Cultural Exchange

Producers highlighted the importance of community and cultural exchange as key benefits of hosting *winedockers*. Direct interactions with travelers fostered stronger relationships, creating a sense of loyalty and a more personal connection with their clientele. Additionally, *winedocking* attracted a diverse customer base, introducing producers to visitors from various states and countries. This diversity enriched the cultural exchange, offering producers insights into different perspectives while broadening their market reach and enhancing the overall experience for both parties.

Operational challenges

Producers faced several operational challenges in accommodating *winedockers*, particularly in terms of logistics, visitor management, and regulatory compliance. Facilities often required adjustments to support overnight stays, including creating suitable parking areas and managing waste disposal effectively. Balancing the needs of traditional winery visitors and *winedockers* presented additional difficulties, especially during peak seasons or large events when resources were stretched. Furthermore, navigating regulatory barriers, such as obtaining permits and adhering to local laws, demanded significant effort and financial investment, adding complexity to the implementation of *winedocking* practices.

4. Discussion

The phenomenon of *winedocking* is growing rapidly in the United States, largely fueled by platforms like Harvest Host, which facilitate connections between boondockers and wine producers. This trend highlights the shifting dynamics of wine tourism and offers significant opportunities for the industry.

One of the most notable aspects of this practice is the diversity of its clientele. The wide-ranging demographic includes families, young professionals, and retired individuals, presenting an opportunity to segment the market and tailor offerings to specific groups. For example, younger clients may seek social, immersive experiences, while older visitors might prioritize comfort and educational components, such as guided tours or workshops. Understanding these segments is critical for optimizing the experience and maximizing engagement.

For small and medium-sized wine producers, *winedocking* represents an innovative approach to enhancing visibility and diversifying revenue streams. Unlike large-scale operations, smaller producers often struggle to compete on the global market. By offering on-site overnight stays, they can attract a broader audience, foster direct relationships with consumers, and increase sales of their products. This aligns perfectly with the modern consumer's desire for unique, authentic, and immersive experiences, which has become a central driver of tourism trends.

Another striking trend is the growing appeal of *winedocking* among younger clientele, including millennials and Generation Z. These groups value experiences over material goods and are particularly drawn to activities that blend adventure, sustainability, and cultural enrichment. By accommodating this demographic, wineries can future-proof their businesses and foster loyalty among a new generation of wine enthusiasts.

Overall, *winedocking* represents an innovative convergence of wine tourism and experiential travel, with significant implications for the wine industry. Future research could explore how wineries can further integrate this practice into their operations while addressing potential challenges, such as zoning laws, infrastructure requirements, and environmental considerations.

Conclusion

Winedocking represents a transformative evolution within wine tourism, seamlessly merging the adventure of boondocking with the cultural richness of vineyard experiences. This study demonstrates how *winedocking* not only aligns with contemporary consumer preferences for sustainability, authenticity, and immersive travel but also provides small and medium-sized wineries with innovative avenues for engagement and revenue generation.

The ethnographic exploration of *winedockers* and producers highlights the reciprocal benefits of this practice. Travelers gain deeper connections with winemakers and local traditions while enjoying cost-effective, meaningful experiences. Producers, in turn, capitalize on increased visibility, direct sales, and a diverse customer base, particularly among younger, experience-driven demographics. However, challenges such as regulatory compliance, infrastructure adaptation, and resource management must be addressed to fully realize the potential of this trend.

As *winedocking* continues to grow, it offers an opportunity for wine tourism to embrace sustainability while fostering community ties and enhancing the economic resilience of wine regions. Future research should explore market segmentation, environmental impacts, and long-term scalability to support stakeholders in integrating *winedocking* into sustainable tourism models.

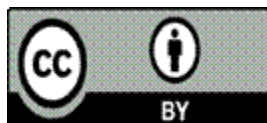
Ultimately, *winedocking* exemplifies the evolving dynamics of wine tourism, reflecting broader shifts in consumer behavior and setting a precedent for innovation in the industry. It is a testament to the adaptability of wine tourism and its ability to respond to the desires of a new generation of travelers while preserving and promoting the cultural and economic vitality of wine regions.

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