

Master Thesis

Telling the story of the Hills: How do winemakers in the Prosecco region perceive their role in preserving cultural heritage through wine tourism?

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Abstract

Over the recent years, cultural heritage has emerged as a key driver of the wine tourism industry, offering unique experiences that connect local culture and traditions. This research will examine the connection between cultural heritage and wine tourism in the case of Le Colline del Prosecco di Conegliano e Valdobbiadene, Italy. The region is essential for a case study due to its global significance in wine production, as recognized by its listing on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 2019. The research explores how local winemakers perceive and integrate cultural heritage into wine tourism activities. By applying a qualitative method of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, the study seeks to fill a gap in the existing literature, which tends to overlook winemakers' perspectives on the topic. Key objectives are to examine winemakers' perceptions of cultural heritage within wine production, as well as identify ways through which they integrate the cultural heritage dimension into wine tourism. The following research highlights the perspective of winemakers and gives insights into practices that preserve local identity, simultaneously enhancing the value of wine tourism.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the way people travel has undergone significant changes. While some tourists still enjoy simply relaxing on the beach or sightseeing famous landmarks, more and more of them are no longer satisfied with that. They are rather seeking experiences while travelling (Seeley et al., 2024), and they want these experiences to be and feel meaningful and authentic (Agarwal & Singh, 2022). This growing interest in authenticity has given rise to certain forms of tourism, which allow for a focus on stories and traditions, as they strongly resonate with the expectations and preferences of tourists worldwide (Kapareliotis, Kyriakopoulou, & Matiatou, 2024). Wine tourism has become one of those sectors, attracting visitors with more than just a tasting, but also with immersive experiences connected to culture, heritage, and local traditions (Sigala & Robinson, 2019), through aspects such as authenticity and storytelling (Frost et al., 2020). As an example of that, wine tourism allows visitors to engage with the cultural meanings of wine and food, which helps in preserving local traditions and heritage (Morrow, 2023).

In recent years, cultural heritage in general has also become increasingly discussed for a variety of reasons. Some emphasize its growing importance as a contributor to social capital (European Commission, 2024), while others emphasize its rising value in the context of tourism (Radovic et al., 2018). Some sources argue that cultural elements serve as essential pillars that attract tourists from around the world (Kumar, Kumar, & Nicolau, 2024). Furthermore, the heritage tourism sector is currently the fastest-growing segment in the entire tourism industry. In the past, it was also recognized as a significant factor in reducing poverty worldwide, while also being a significant contributor to economic development. (UNWTO Tourism Highlights, 2005 Edition, 2005). This growth can be caused by changing preferences of modern tourists, who seek rather meaningful and authentic experiences than conventional sightseeing (Rickly & Canavan, 2024). Cultural heritage sites usually offer those immersive experiences to incoming tourists.

In the light of the escalating global climate crisis, the preservation of cultural heritage is also seen as crucial for future generations (Pasikowska-Schnass, 2024). Heritage assets, particularly in rural areas, often play a vital role in maintaining the community's regional identity and fostering a sense of belonging. As emphasized by Nikielska-Sekula (2016), cultural heritage plays that role as it represents the binding of the past with the present times. Especially in rural communities, heritage is expressed through shared traditions and practices that reinforce both cultural and emotional ties to a certain place (Nikielska-Sekula, 2016). That

is the case particularly in the wine industry, where tourism serves as a powerful tool for expressing local traditions through stories and practices (Morrow, 2023).

Despite more attention being brought by academics to cultural heritage and its role in tourism, crucial perspectives remain underrepresented. Much of the existing literature tends to focus on the connection between wine tourism and cultural heritage, from various perspectives, however, still leaving a gap when it comes to the perspectives of winemakers themselves. This is especially evident in the case of Le Colline del Prosecco di Conegliano e Valdobbiadene, which, despite its UNESCO site designation, has received very limited academic attention.

Therefore, the following study addresses this gap by exploring the perspectives of winemakers in the Prosecco region through a qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews. Moreover, this research aims to understand not only winemakers' perspectives on cultural heritage, but also how they integrate it into wine tourism activities.

The following sections of this master thesis are structured as follows: Chapter 1 consists of a review of all relevant literature on cultural heritage, wine tourism, and defines the research gap in specific. Chapter 2 focuses on the methodology used. Chapter 3 presents empirical findings of this study, while Chapter 4 discusses those findings in the context of existing literature. Lastly, Chapter 6 summarizes the thesis by including key insights and recommendations for future research.

1.1. Cultural Heritage

According to UNESCO, the United Nations specialized agency for Education, Science, and Culture, cultural heritage is a legacy that consists of monuments, artifacts, buildings, sites, and museums that have either symbolic, historic, or social significance (UNESCO, 2009). Other sources define cultural heritage as “a set of goods that in the course of time and a process of historicization, comes to be recognized as the conveyor of specific cultural traditions” (Guido Guerzoni, 1997). According to Jacynthe Bessière, heritage can be looked at as a process that binds the past, present, and future. She emphasizes that both tangible and intangible cultural heritage should be viewed as markers of identity, enabling the distinction of a social group's features (Bessière, 1998). On the other hand, Noel Salazar points out that cultural heritage has an increasingly significant economic value, due to its importance in global tourism (Salazar, 2012).

In the existing literature, we can find a clear distinction between tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage (Intangible Heritage Embodied, 2010). Tangible heritage fits

perfectly with the UNESCO definition of heritage, as it consists of the objects, buildings, and artifacts that represent a certain history; they are the physical objects that can be “touched” (Tangible Heritage | Soqotra Cultural Heritage, n.d.). While the intangible part of cultural heritage (ICH) includes:

1. Oral traditions, which also include languages.
2. Art performances;
3. Rituals, festivals, and social practices;
4. Knowledge and practices;
5. Traditional craftsmanship.

Source: (“Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003,” 2005).

Heritage portrayals are increasingly shaped by the economic value of cultural heritage. It is driven by the commodification of cultural heritage, as an example of that the UNESCO World Heritage List (Salazar, 2011). The objects that are on the list are defined as ones having an “outstanding universal value”, and can be cultural, natural, or mixed (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). The heritage sites are protected under the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (UNESCO, 1972). The list is an accreditation system for heritage sites worldwide, and it primarily supports tourism, therefore, it is also a significant revenue generator (Salazar, 2011).

The relationship between cultural heritage and tourism has been present and analyzed in numerous discussions over the last years (Panzera et al., 2020). Heritage tourism has been defined as a separate sector of tourism and consists of visiting historic monuments, sites, landscapes, as well as places of interesting living cultures or where significant events happened (Timothy & Boyd, 2006). Within this context, wine tourism emerges as a culturally rooted travel experience that reinforces local identity, as well as contributes to creating new opportunities for the locals and boosts economic growth (Morrow, 2023)

1.2. Wine tourism

Wine was the very first beverage in history that has indirectly enter the UNESCO World Heritage sites (Marina Regis Cavicchioli, 2018). Wine heritage can be both tangible and intangible, depending on how we perceive and interpret it. It consists of both vineyards surrounded by beautiful landscapes, architecture, and historical monuments, as well as the traditional methods of production and consumption passed down through generations (Marina Regis Cavicchioli, 2018). Some scholars argue that storytelling and authenticity are two main

aspects of wine heritage, as they hold significant economic potential and can be used as effective strategies for enhancing wine tourism, which is estimated to be developing even more in the future (Frost et al., 2020).

Wine tourism, emerging from wine heritage, is a form of gastronomy tourism, and that is commonly characterized by people travelling to experience and try local foods, cuisine, locally sourced products, as well as participating in other activities that are part of culinary experiences (UNWTO, 2022). According to the OECD, food is nowadays one of the most important elements of intangible cultural heritage worldwide, which also shows the importance of ICH in tourism (OECD, 2012). Wine tourism, in particular, is identified as participating in wine tastings, as well as visiting vineyards and wineries (UNWTO, 2022). Other sources add to that, stating that it additionally consists of attending wine festivals and travelling with the purpose of learning about types of grapes and wines in the particular region (C Michael Hall & Al, 2004). Wine tourism, similarly to cultural heritage, has become more significant across the world throughout the last decade (Sigala & Robinson, 2019).

Discussions about the connection between wine tourism and cultural heritage can be found not only in many academical papers, but also as topics of international conferences, such as conference ran by United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) on how wine tourism celebrates heritage and innovation (Global Conference on Wine Tourism Celebrates Heritage and Innovation, 2024). It was stated by UNWTO that there is a growing demand for experience-driven tourism, due to changing travel preferences for future generations. It argued that tourists are looking for more than just wine tasting; they want to connect with the people and places behind them and learn about the local heritage through, for example, storytelling (Global Conference on Wine Tourism Celebrates Heritage and Innovation, 2024). However, some sources are stating that wine producers, especially the ones from non-industrial wineries, exploit their cultural heritage as merely a marketing tool. They claim that winemakers may exploit various elements that distinguish the place as unique to gain more customers (Riviezzo et al., 2016).

1.3. Research gap

While going through the literature on the topic, it became clear that the perspective of winemakers on their cultural heritage had not been researched enough. Although the cultural heritage in wine regions has been analyzed from various angles, the voices of the producers have remained overlooked. As marked by a UN Tourism Secretary-General, heritage in wine

tourism is not only a history of winemaking, but rather stories about the land, people, and cultures who have sustained winemaking traditions over generations (Global Conference on Wine Tourism Celebrates Heritage and Innovation, 2024). Furthermore, integrating heritage into wine tourism has also been analyzed from an economic perspective, focusing on how to use it as a competitive advantage and make revenue out of it (Frost et al., 2020). Wine tourism has also been studied from the perspective of local communities with a focus on industrial wine heritage. The study was based in Vila Nova de Gaia and aimed to receive the perspective of local residents on the wineries located in the area where they live (Andrade-Suárez & Caamaño-Franco, 2020). Despite these contributions, the gap concerning producers' perspectives remains. One noticeable exception is a study that concerned winemakers' perspectives on wine tourism in general, and the purpose was to examine the perceptions regarding their own involvement in wine tourism (Güven Sevil & Hilmi Rafet Yüncü, 2009). Lastly, as Thompson and Prideaux emphasized, there is a need to pay more attention to the supply side of wine tourism, since the current research tends to focus more on the demand side of it (Thompson & Prideaux, 2023).

In recent years, the Prosecco region has been increasingly recognized internationally, particularly following UNESCO's recognition. The status of the area highlights its cultural significance, but also contributes to boosting tourism in the area. Those factors increase the need to understand how local wine producers perceive and carry forward their cultural heritage, since ultimately they are those most connected to the land and its history.

Compared to other UNESCO-listed wine regions, such as Langhe-Roero-Monferrato in Italy or Saint-Émilion in France, which have been subjects of academic research on the topic of heritage and wine tourism before (Canovi & Lyon, 2023), the Prosecco region remains overlooked. The study in the mentioned regions, however, did incorporate the perspective of local winemakers, as it included many stakeholders involved. It was found that they do express a great appreciation for the UNESCO site designation, as it elevates the development of those regions and highlights their history and culture (Canovi & Lyon, 2023). On the contrary, the study on the case of the Chianti region, known for its exquisite wines, which does not hold the UNESCO site designation, the winemakers expressed their concerns concerning the certification. They believe that gaining UNESCO list designation would only introduce more limits and fewer possibilities for the region (Canovi & Lyon, 2023). Taking into consideration those case studies, we can notice that winemakers' perspectives on certain aspects across wine regions may vary completely. It reinforces the idea that the perspectives of winemakers are

critical in understanding heritage-based wine tourism, but also shows that even though other UNESCO-listed wine regions have been researched, the Prosecco region remains underrepresented.

The perspectives of winemakers on their cultural heritage are crucial since they are the ones carrying on traditions and traditional ways of winemaking procedures, therefore, they are the ones who share it with tourists and integrate it into wine tourism activities. Moreover, as the wine regions nowadays face both increased tourism and the risk of commercialization (Salazar, 2012), understanding winemakers' voices becomes crucial. Their knowledge offers insights into how the cultural heritage is perceived, practiced, and shared with tourists in their daily operations at their wineries. There is a clear gap in the literature on their perspectives on cultural heritage, which needs to be examined. The mentioned studies were done in multiple wine regions in Europe, however, there is still a majority of them unexplored, with no research done there on the topic.

The following research will try to cover some part of this gap to receive perspectives of winemakers on cultural heritage and how they integrate it in wine tourism activities, in the region that has not been researched in that topic before, Le Colline del Prosecco di Conegliano e Valdobbiadene in Italy. Therefore, the following research will examine:

How do wine producers in the Prosecco region perceive and integrate cultural heritage into wine tourism activities?

Moreover, to better understand the focus of this research, it is crucial to introduce the location and cultural background of the chosen region, Le Colline del Prosecco di Conegliano e Valdobbiadene.

1.3.1. Le Colline del Prosecco di Conegliano e Valdobbiadene

The Prosecco region, which is officially recognized as Le Colline del Prosecco di Conegliano e Valdobbiadene, is famous and known for its white sparkling wine production (Basso, 2018). In addition to its global reputation, the area is known for its unique landscape features, which are marked by narrow hills that have been shaped by local people since the Middle Ages (Italia it, 2022). It was chosen due to a noticeable lack of academic research focusing on that wine region, in particular concerning the topic of cultural heritage and wine tourism. The gap in the existing literature was the main factor influencing the selection of the Prosecco region, however, other factors also played a significant role. Given the emphasis of the following research is the cultural heritage, the selection of the Prosecco region was further justified by its

recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage site, as of July 2019 (Centre, n.d.). The UNESCO recognition highlights the region's exceptional landscape, moreover, it declares the region's significant cultural importance.

It was particularly important for me to conduct the study in the region, which is on the UNESCO heritage list, due to its significance for cultural heritage. To be enlisted on the UNESCO heritage list, the site must meet rigorous criteria that demonstrate historical, cultural, or environmental significance (UNESCO, 2019). The UNESCO recognition also brings increased attention to the region, therefore often contributing to the growth of tourism (Pedro Paulo Funari, 2006).

Geographically, the Prosecco region is situated within the broader region of Veneto, located in the northeast part of Italy. (Your 2023 Guide to Prosecco in Veneto Region, n.d.). It is widely recognized as one of the most competitive regions in terms of wine production, not only within Italy but across the entirety of Europe (Basso, 2018). The region is internationally renowned for producing Prosecco, a distinguished wine which is primarily crafted from the Glera grape variety (Basso, 2018).

Putting this into context, exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of local winemakers in the Prosecco region, offers a valuable opportunity to understand how the cultural heritage of the region is both preserved and utilized in response to increasing tourism.

1.4.Epistemology

The epistemological framework for the following research is based on the constructivist approach. Constructivism is an epistemology that claims that individuals create knowledge and meaning through integrating their experiences with their beliefs (Mogashoa, 2014). In the following study, I will try to examine how wine producers in the Prosecco region perceive and integrate cultural heritage into wine tourism activities, therefore, the focus will be on their subjective perspectives and perceptions. Knowledge in the context of this study is shaped by unique cultural, social, and historical values and dynamics that are specific to the Prosecco region. To understand the participants' lived experiences of cultural heritage and the role of it in wine tourism, I will use the qualitative method significant for the constructivism, interviewing, since it will allow participants to articulate their perspectives in their own words.

1.5.Aim and objectives

By exploring the question of: *How do wine producers in the Prosecco region perceive and integrate cultural heritage into wine tourism activities?* The research seeks to contribute to a

better and deeper understanding of the role of cultural heritage in wine tourism in general, as well as wine tourism activities provided by winemakers in the Prosecco region in Italy.

There are two major objectives for this study:

1. To learn about the perceptions among wine producers in the Prosecco region on their cultural heritage.
2. To investigate the ways through which winemakers integrate cultural heritage into wine tourism activities.

In this way, the research will have theoretical contributions to the fields of cultural heritage studies as well as wine tourism. It will fill a gap in the existing literature concerning producers' perspectives on heritage in a tourism context.

2. Methods

2.1. Methodological Approach

In the following chapter, the methods as well as the methodology that were used to receive an answer to the research question will be discussed in detail and justified. The chapter will also include ethical considerations, positionality, and limitations of the following study.

To gain a better understanding of the perceptions of wine producers on preservation of cultural heritage through wine tourism activities, data collection was done by a qualitative research method, which consisted of semi-structured, in-depth online interviews. This digital approach was chosen both due to sustainability reasons, aimed to minimize the carbon emissions associated with travelling, as well as due to financial constraints, given the self-funded nature of the following research and the researcher's geographical distance from the area of the following study. Both of these are advantages in conducting research using digital tools, as they save time and costs for the researcher (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Moreover, it enables reaching participants from diverse geographical contexts (Janghorban et al., 2014), in this case, the producers in the Prosecco region. However, on the other hand, during the online interviews, there is a likelihood of experiencing technical difficulties, such as unstable connection or software issues (Gray et al., 2020), which also happened a few times while conducting interviews.

The following study has an explorative character, since it enabled me to get more insights on a certain phenomenon (Singh, 2021), which in this case were the perceptions of wine producers in the Prosecco region on their cultural heritage and the integration of them in wine tourism activities.

The qualitative research method was used to allow the respondents to describe their own perceptions and insights on a certain topic (Eze, 2023). In the following research, the aim was to receive as much information about the personal perceptions, feelings, and experiences of the wine producers, which justifies the choice of the qualitative research rather than the quantitative one. Moreover, interviews as a tool for qualitative research provide multiple benefits for both the researcher and participants. During each interview, the researcher can take notes for themselves to understand better what the respondent is trying to express, or the interview can also be recorded using digital tools (Jamshed, 2014). Recording the interviews with digital tools provided me with a chance to rewatch all of them and capture more information, since then I have had the opportunity to pause when it is needed. Furthermore, I chose the semi-structured format of interview to allow for an opportunity to ask follow-up questions, since it may reveal unexpected insights, enriching the data analysis process (Kakilla, 2021).

2.2.Data collection

The data collection for the following study took place between the 1st of April 2025 and the 7th of May 2025, using digital tools for interviewing participants who came from the Le Colline del Prosecco di Conegliano e Valdobbiadene in Italy.

The research consisted of 6 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which were all conducted using digital tools of video calls using the Google Meet platform. The duration of each of the interviews varied between 31 and 47 minutes.

Determining the right number of participants for the study was influenced by the practical constraints, in this case, including the limited access to producers willing to participate in this study, as well as time constraints. Within the time frame allocated for data collection, only 6 participants were willing to engage in this research.

The respondents for the following study were initially supposed to be selected through purposive sampling, which is a method used mainly for qualitative research to choose participants for interviews, focus groups, or surveys (Stewart, 2024). The purpose of this method is to focus only on a specific subset of individuals to gain a deeper understanding of the variations within a specific culture, region, or context (Stewart, 2024). In the following study, I wanted to understand perceptions of winemakers specifically in the prosecco region; therefore wanted to identify the participants through their business websites. Specifically, I

wanted to target those who in some way highlight long-standing winemaking traditions, knowledge, or cultural heritage on their professional websites.

This approach at first seemed like the best option since the study focuses on understanding perceptions and integration of cultural heritage into wine tourism activities by the winemakers; therefore, selecting wineries that explicitly reference such elements ensures alignment with the research aim and objectives. Additionally, I, the researcher, am not based in the Prosecco region nor the country of Italy, and this method was thought to allow for efficient recruitment and identification of potential participants for the study.

The participants were searched through websites based on the values that they stick to while producing the wine, and if they still advertised themselves as the wineries that follow the traditions of winemaking from their ancestors. However, with this method, I was able to recruit only 1 participant, despite contacting about 60 winemakers using emails, phone calls, and contact forms. For that reason, I came to the conclusion that the local winemakers are not very open to participating in research without knowing the researcher, and for that reason, the rest of the participants had to be found using another sampling method. The rest of them were recruited using the snowballing method. In this case, the snowballing method turned out to be the most suitable one after all, since it is useful in accessing communities who are often difficult to reach externally (Pasikowski, 2024). The snowball sampling method is a type of nonprobability sampling, which is characterized by the lack of possibility to generalize results to the larger group of people. In this sampling method, the study participants help in identifying and recruiting future participants, using their own personal connections (Burns & Grove, 1993).

In the following research, the second participant was recruited through a chain of personal referrals, given that they were originally from the Valdobbiadene Prosecco region and due to their personal involvement with one of the local wineries. From that participant, once again using the snowballing method, the rest of the participants were recruited. Since the second participant was involved in wine production and wine tourism, it enabled access to more people involved in that sector in the Prosecco region.

2.3.Ethical considerations

Ethics are one of the most important aspects of research that need to be kept in mind while conducting it. When using qualitative tools for collecting data, such as interviews, the ethical considerations are particularly important since there is a direct connection between the

researcher and participants of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Therefore, in the following research, there are multiple considerations to bear in mind.

First of all, at the beginning of every interview, each participant was asked to read and sign the consent form. It is essential to recognize that the consent form is not just a formality, but it is a comprehensive process in which the participant familiarizes themselves thoroughly with the research, including the risks it involves. Participants were provided with a sufficient amount of time to review the form and to make an informed and voluntary decision about their participation in the research- in each case, the time varied, however, it did not take anyone more than 5 minutes. Furthermore, the consent form needs to be written in a clear language that is easily understood to ensure understanding and eliminate the opportunity of coercion (International Council for Harmonisation of Technical Requirements for Pharmaceuticals for Human Use [ICH], 2016), which I kept in mind and answered any possible questions for clarification. The whole process was transparent, and participants had an opportunity to withdraw from the study at any point in the interview.

Another crucial ethical consideration is to ensure anonymity and confidentiality for the participants. It is done to ensure that respondents are protected from any potential harm (Kang & Hwang, 2023). For those reasons, the participants of the following study were given names such as: Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, etc, so that none of them could be linked with their individual responses (Endicott College, 2023). The recordings of interviews were removed as soon as they were transcribed, and are saved using only the given names for this study.

Since I, the researcher, come from a different country and background from the potential participants of the study, it was crucial to keep in mind cultural sensitivity. I have respected local norms, traditions, and values of the Prosecco region without attributing specific judgment to these differences, whether positive or negative (Porta, n.d.). Moreover, since I do not come from the Prosecco region itself, that can be a bias itself. The local inhabitants may have perceived me as an outsider and might not want to share certain aspects of their lives, or may have reframed their response, in comparison to responding to a person who comes from the Valdobbiadene region. However, I can use the local language- Italian- therefore offering the possibility for the participants to take part in the research using their mother tongue. That was done in order to make the participants feel more comfortable and at ease while conducting interviews, and to give them an opportunity to express themselves best while minimizing the

bias coming from my background. However, only one participant decided to participate using his mother tongue.

A crucial ethical consideration for the following study comes from the snowballing sampling method. That method gives the researcher access to participants from communities that would have been difficult to reach otherwise (Pasikowski, 2024), as well as it is a faster method to carry out (Ahmed, 2024). On the other hand, it comes with risks. The biggest risk is a selection bias, which may lead to the chosen sample of participants having overrepresentation or underrepresentation of certain groups (Ahmed, 2024). However, in the case of the Prosecco region, the population aimed for the interviews had to be specifically associated with the Valdobbiadene region and involved in wine production and wine tourism. Therefore, the snowballing sampling method, as the second choice, still seemed to be suitable.

The researcher needs to avoid deceptive practices during the recruitment and ensure that all information regarding the study, including the purpose, risks, and benefits, is transparent and clear to all participants (Kang & Hwang, 2023). I ensured that by explaining in detail the purpose, risks, and benefits of following study, while asking for consent to participate.

Lastly, while conducting interviews, the researcher needs to constantly reflect on the process of interviewing, so that there are no harmful or unethical practices taking place (Nadin & Cassell, 2006). During each interview, I constantly reflected on the way I was asking questions, the tone, as well as respecting the boundaries of participants in what they did not want to talk about.

2.4. Positonicity

As an Eastern European white woman, who is highly educated with a good knowledge of English, that puts me in a privileged position for conducting research, my background in Cultural geography and sustainable tourism makes me more sensitive and focused on the cultural heritage of local communities. However, I approach this study as an outsider to the Prosecco region, which may have caused some difficulties in interviewing or may have prevented them from sharing some of their opinions, but most importantly, that could have been a major factor that influenced difficulties in recruiting participants. However, with my international mobility experience, I believe it enabled me to engage empathetically with local winemakers and appreciate their cultural heritage. Lastly, due to my celiac disease, I pay close attention to food and beverage safety practices, which may have influenced the follow-up questions on that topic, while discussing integrating their cultural heritage into wine tourism

activities, such as local food and wine. All those factors could have influenced the analysis of the collected data and the way the researcher interpreted it; however, due to the awareness of that, the researcher made every effort possible to avoid those biases.

2.5.Limitations of the research

The following study has faced several limitations. While the snowballing sampling method was suitable, considering the topic of this study, it relied on personal referrals, which may have caused similar responses in participants due to their belonging to a close network of producers.

Secondly, finding volunteers to participate in the study turned out to be challenging; many wineries declined or ignored the request to participate in the research. Despite doing my best efforts to find participants and using different sampling approaches, as the result, I was not able to find more than 6 participants for the following study. The difficulty in the recruitment of participants also reflects a hesitation towards academic research, expressed by the inhabitants of the Prosecco region, or hesitation in participating in the research conducted using digital tools, rather than “face-to-face” interviews, or conducting research by a person coming from a different country. This could also become a potential cultural barrier for future researchers, which they should be mindful of while conducting similar qualitative research that involves participation in interviews by rural communities.

Lastly, the interviews were conducted using digital tools, mostly due to sustainability considerations, however, it might have influenced the depth of the interactions with participants. Moreover, as mentioned above, it could have influenced the willingness to participate in the research, as some of them might feel discomfort with technology or have certain concerns over privacy (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014).

3. Results

In order to identify the similarities and differences between winemakers’ perceptions of cultural heritage in the prosecco region and how they integrate it into wine tourism activities, a thematic content analysis was used. I focused on analyzing transcripts of all the interviews to learn how the participants construct meaning around cultural heritage and its implementation in wine tourism activities, in their own words.

This research included six participants, working for wineries within the region of Valdobbiadene and Conegliano. To ensure the anonymity of all participants, they were assigned names for the purpose of this study, numbered from 1 to 6. The group includes three female participants and three male participants, whose age ranges from their 20s to mid-50s. Their roles within wineries go from younger staff with a strong personal connection to their family business to experienced producers and strategy consultants. This mix of participants allowed me to have a more holistic overview of perceptions and integration of cultural heritage into wine tourism, including voices from different generations as well as different professional roles within the wine sector.

3.1. Perceptions of cultural heritage

Although participants' perceptions of cultural heritage did vary, they focused mainly on similar themes. While all 6 of the participants focused mainly on intangible aspects of the local heritage, 4 of the participants also expressed the importance of the tangible heritage for the region.

3.1.1. Tangible heritage

Participants 1, 2, 3, and 5 all shared a perception that the landscape of the Prosecco hills is a core element of the region's cultural heritage. Participant 1 emphasized that:

"You can make Prosecco in a flat area, but it's never gonna be the same as a hill area because in the hills everything is hand-picked, and then if you go to a flat area, it's only tractors and types of machinery."

Similarly, Participants 2 and 5 highlighted the aspect of manual labour:

Participant 2: *"We need to spend and dedicate more or less from 800 to 1000 hours of manpower practice climbing the hills as a Sherpa, so if you go to walk inside a vineyard to take care of everything, the connection to the hills is really important. And you cannot understand wine if you don't understand the process."*

Participant 5: *"The manual harvesting methods and the local festivals celebrating the harvest. All those really show the dedication and the passion of our community."*

The Participant 3 just briefly mentioned that in his opinion, Santo Stefano town has the most beautiful landscape of the whole UNESCO-certified area, when talking about the tangible heritage of the Valdobbiadene and Conegliano region.

3.1.2. Intangible heritage

In addition to the physical landscape of the Prosecco region, all participants placed a significant emphasis on the intangible aspects of cultural heritage. The key elements that emerged concerned the history, the importance of food, storytelling, and the local community.

History

When asked about their perceptions of cultural heritage, 5 participants immediately mentioned history as a crucial part of it. Each of them, however, focused on a different part of the history and its significance. Participant 1 explained that cultural heritage is closely tied to a history of how people grow up in that region, influencing their identity.

Participant 2, on the other hand, despite expressing that storytelling of the history of the region is, in fact, the most important heritage, initially focused immediately on wine heritage, stating that for him it is:

“A matter of the soul. It's a matter of going slow. It's a matter of sharing a good glass with some friends, with some visitors, and not running fast every day to produce more.”

He also emphasized that it is crucial to differentiate the Prosecco region, which can be the name for the whole region of Veneto, and the Valdobbiadene DOCG region, which, in his opinion, produces the real Prosecco. Participant 2 mentioned that to differentiate the regional heritage, the locals want the type of wine produced there to change to Valdobbiadene instead of Prosecco, so that it gives the regional heritage a certain status, a higher status in terms of wine.

Participant 3 expressed that a deeply rooted history of community-based practices in the Valdobbiadene region is something particular. However, he also expressed his concerns about it for the future:

“Now we can see how people are just hiring employees for doing this job. So it's kind of ruining this connection between neighbors and the area nowadays.”

Participant 4 emphasized that storytelling the history of the region and winemaking is a crucial part of the cultural heritage. She said that in her opinion, the heritage is educating and sharing with others what wine was and comparing it with what it represents in today's world.

Participants 5 and 6 both said that the cultural heritage of the region is the history of traditional winemaking. Moreover, Participant 6 expressed that a crucial part of heritage is mentioning those historical nods to where the Prosecco started, whenever talking about the region.

Food

The only one consistently referenced and repeated aspect of intangible cultural heritage of the region of Valdobbiadene and Conegliano DOCG was traditional food. Participants across all 6 interviews described it as a crucial cultural expression of the Prosecco region. Moreover, 4 of them mentioned the importance of serving locally sourced cold cuts and cheeses during wine tastings at their wineries. They were described as an integral part of tastings, as Participant 1 stated: *“The wine tasting always goes with food, because of course when you drink wine you need food. It’s always the Italian bread with Sopressa. That’s it. That’s how we eat it”*.

To be more specific, 4 of the participants talked about Sopressa, a typical type of salami from the Valdobbiadene area. Participant 6, coming from a smaller family-run winery, stated that food is a part of sharing their local lifestyle- *“It is always Sopressa on the table with local cheese, nothing else.”* Participant 2, however, provided the researcher with a background story of this type of ham:

“We used to kill the pork in January. And so it needs 7-8 months of maturation to be ready. It depends from the dimension, but normally it’s like this. And normally, we bottled the wine during the Easter season. Before the spring. And when the temperature starts to rise, the second fermentation in the bottle starts to move. And the wine was ready when the first Sopressa was ready.”

In addition to sopressa, cheese from the surrounding mountains was also referenced a few times, while only Participant 5 mentioned cichetti with various things on top, as an important local type of food.

Participant 4 also stated that they want to share their local heritage with tourists through food, therefore, they also provide tourists with addresses of local food producers from whom they can buy local products. She also explained further that food as heritage is not only important in terms of the Valdobbiadene region, but that it is rather the Italian culture in general to focus on food and diet.

3.2. Integration of heritage in tourism experiences.

All 6 of the interviewed participants discussed how the cultural heritage of the Prosecco region is being incorporated into wine tourism activities and experiences offered at the wineries that they work for. The most common example that appeared in every interview was a guided tour, however, each winery did it in its own special way. However, in each case, they ended the guided tour with the tasting of local wine, mostly with food pairings of the products that have been mentioned before. As Participant 2 mentioned, *“Normally when we have visitors, we start talking about the geography and the history of the region... and then we arrive to taste the final product”*. Similarly, another wine producer stated: *“We are going to make a guided tour of the place where I explain the landscape, and that this used to be a castle (the winery itself), and then we do the tasting”*.

Storytelling, however, seems to be a tool that most wineries use to communicate their cultural heritage with their visitors. Participant 1 said that in their winery, the staff talk about the grandparents and show how exactly they started with winemaking, and that *“They didn’t have tanks back then, so everything was in the bottles- and we still sell that and present it to people to show the difference”*. In the case of Participant 4, they share an anecdote on how the founder of the winery used to smuggle French wines for himself inside bouquets of roses. A story like that does not have anything to do with the actual winemaking process, however, it presents the history of the owner to the visitors, who enjoy hearing unusual stories, as it keeps their attention throughout the whole tour.

While all the mentioned wineries follow some sort of schedule when it comes to tours and tastings, Participant 2 expressed that in his winery, they try to do the absolute opposite. He says that *“Normally we ask, okay, can we have a degustation? How much time can you dedicate to us? Please take a seat. It's a minimum of one hour. But that could turn out to be 3, 4, 5, 6. Doesn't matter.”* He believes that taking this time to share the value and story behind wine production is the best way to spread their cultural heritage. As he says, *“So it's more important for me to be real and to share what we really are. And I think if you are like this, the visitor can breathe it. And so everything after that can happen. Can happen good music. A degustation can happen for seven hours, and then have lunch or dinner together.”* In his opinion, this is the only way to give the visitors a truly authentic experience of the Valdobbiadene cultural heritage. Moreover, to show the tangible part of the heritage, the Prosecco hills, the winery offers to take guests into the vineyards in their jeep.

Lastly, only one winery engages in heritage beyond the guided tours, incorporating food and storytelling. As Participant 5 expressed, they try to integrate heritage not only through wine tourism activities but also through broader cultural events. She noted that they try to host art exhibitions and music events at their winery in where they can blend showing visitors parts of the regional culture, together with drinking wine and trying local foods. *“The incoming visitors simply love it, they get to taste the wines, try good food and learn and see types of music or art that they have never seen or heard before”*, she emphasized that not many people get to learn those parts of the Valdobbiadene heritage, which makes the experience truly unique.

Overall, the winemakers all agreed that heritage is an integral part of wine tourism, which is brought by from surrounding landscapes to the stories that people tell the visitors. As one winery representative summed it up: *“No fake storytelling, just sitting down in a real mood and talking about our passion”*.

3.3. The future of cultural heritage.

While the topic of the future of the cultural heritage for the region of Valdobbiadene and Conegliano was not a part of the research questions, however during the interviews it emerged as something important considering the current trends in wine production and consumption worldwide. Four of the participants reflected on generational shifts and concerns about the constantly changing values in wine production and tourism as well. While 2 respondents were positive about the future of cultural heritage in the region, believing that it would continue to be appreciated in the following years, others had some major concerns about it.

As Participant 1 was a child of the winery owner, her observation was that: *“With my generation it’s not gonna be about cultural heritage anymore... It’s gonna be about selling and profit, not about people and planet.”* Three other participants expressed similar concerns. One of them mentioned that: *“They are trying to create the cheapest and most efficient way... we are kind of losing the cultural heritage because of it”*.

On the other hand, two respondents believed that tourists, especially those coming from younger generations, were becoming more interested in experiences involving cultural heritage. There was also a discussion on adapting cultural heritage to the current trends and needs. Participants 3 and 4 brought up an example of the trend in Gen-Z, which is scepticism towards alcohol in general and choosing not to consume it. For that reason, certain wineries started producing more non- alcoholic wines. Participant 3 expressed that engaging in non- alcoholic wine production could ruin the culture in the short run, however, it would bring more

visitors in the long run. Participant 4 did not share a similar view. In her opinion, developing more alcohol- free wines would ruin completely the heritage of the region, just because not alcoholic wines taste nothing like the original wines.

Overall, looking to the future, the participants recognized the risks that cultural heritage faces today due to commercialization and generational changes. With younger generations showing declining interest in alcohol consumption and potentially showing less interest in the cultural heritage itself, the participants acknowledge the possibility of heritage evolving and changing in the following years. Nevertheless, 4 of them remained optimistic that, with the right approach, it could still play a significant role in wine tourism in the future.

In summary, the conducted interviews reveal that the cultural heritage of the Valdobbiadene and Conegliano region is perceived as a foundation of local identity but also an integral component of wine tourism. These findings offer the researcher insight into how wine producers perceive, preserve, and integrate cultural heritage within the current wine tourism landscape.

4. Discussion

The following chapter discusses the findings of this study in the context of existing literature on cultural heritage and wine tourism. This research aimed to explore how wine producers in the Prosecco region perceive and integrate cultural heritage into wine tourism activities. The collected data contributed to answering that research question, therefore, the findings will be interpreted by connecting them to academic discussion on cultural heritage, authenticity, storytelling, and wine tourism, which have been outlined in the introduction to this thesis.

4.1. Perceptions of cultural heritage

All participants of the following study focused their perception of cultural heritage in the Prosecco region on both tangible as well as intangible aspects of it, which seems to be the most commonly used division in the existing literature for cultural heritage in general (Intangible Heritage Embodied, 2010). Moreover, existing sources discussing wine tourism in particular mention wine heritage being a mix of both vineyards surrounded by beautiful landscapes, as well as the methods of production and consumption (Marina Regis Cavicchioli, 2018), which additionally shows the most common division of cultural heritage.

The tangible aspect that has been most commonly mentioned is the landscape of the Prosecco hills, which was recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2019 (Centre, n.d.). The

respondents emphasized steep hills and manual labour in particular due to their importance in terms of regional identity and the quality of the wine production. Both of those align with the definition provided by UNESCO of cultural heritage, such as sites or landscapes, having historic and social significance (UNESCO, 2009). Other sources also support that definition, as Timothy and Boyd noted, visiting landscapes of significant value is a crucial part of heritage tourism nowadays (Timothy & Boyd, 2006). The emphasis on the landscape and manual labour also reflects on the participants' sense of belonging. Just as Tuan (1977) argued, landscapes go beyond the physical spaces, but rather are filled with meanings for the people who inhabit them (Tuan, 1977).

When it comes to the intangible heritage of the region, all participants emphasized elements such as the history of the region and of winemaking, as well as traditional food, which seemed to be the foundation of their regional and cultural identity. Those categories align closely with the categories introduced by the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003). Moreover, repeatedly mentioning by participants certain local products and foods, such as sopressa, as a part of the region's heritage, supports the OECD's recognition of food as one of the most important elements of intangible cultural heritage worldwide (OECD, 2012).

Overall, the perceptions of cultural heritage expressed by the participants of this study majorly align with the definitions of tangible and intangible heritage presented in the existing literature.

4.2. Integration of heritage into tourism activities

Exploring the integration of cultural heritage into wine tourism activities was the second aim of the following research. Across all conducted interviews, the researcher was provided with specific knowledge of each winery's ways to integrate cultural heritage in experiences for incoming tourists.

How cultural heritage was most commonly integrated into tourist experiences was through guided tours, during which the history of the region and winemaking were shared using storytelling techniques. This aligns closely with a theory represented by Frost et al., who argue that storytelling and authenticity are crucial in wine tourism (Frost et al., 2020). Moreover, those practices are used to match with expectations of incoming tourists. As Kapareliotis et al. claim, current tourists seek more meaningful experiences when travelling, which the participants of this study seem to be providing to them through storytelling, during wine tourism activities (Kapareliotis, Kyriakopoulou, & Matiatou, 2024).

Additionally, one of the participants mentioned hosting broader cultural events at their winery, mentioning also how appreciated it is appreciated by the incoming guests. This closely aligns with UNWTO's theory that there is currently a higher demand for experience-driven tourism (Global Conference on Wine Tourism Celebrates Heritage and Innovation, 2024). Since only one participant mentioned it, there is still potential for the future in utilizing it across more wineries in the Prosecco region, in order to improve the experiences for incoming guests.

During the interviews few participants voiced their concerns on the commodification and commercialization of the Valdobbiadene area which align with the argument of Salazar, who claims that heritage portrayals are increasingly shaped by economic value of the heritage and bring up the example of the UNESCO World Heritage list, which the Valdobbiadene area has its placements on (Salazar, 2011). However, unlike the literature suggests, these concerns were connected to the future, rather than to the current situation within the region.

The tone and body language used by all participants revealed a genuine sense of pride in their cultural heritage and a strong willingness to share it with visitors. This suggests a more personal approach to the integration of cultural heritage, which contrasts with Riviezzo et al's arguments that cultural heritage is merely exploited as a marketing tool in contemporary wine tourism (Riviezzo et al., 2016).

Although it was not directly explored in the following research, it is worth considering how sustainable these mentioned heritage practices are. Even though the region is recognized by the UNESCO accreditation, and the number of visitors is expected to be constantly growing, the local winemakers seem to be maintaining authenticity and preventing the over-commercialization of local cultural heritage. It seems to be more important for them to share their authentic perspective on heritage, rather than adjust to what tourists might want to see and experience.

5. Conclusion

The following research aimed at exploring how wine producers in the Prosecco region perceive and integrate cultural heritage into wine tourism activities. The study aimed to respond to the clear gap in the existing literature, which extensively examined heritage tourism and wine tourism in general, as well as the commodification of cultural elements for tourism purposes, however, it rarely included the perspective of the winemakers themselves.

Through six semi-structured in-depth interviews with winemakers from the Unesco-listed hills of Valdobbiadene and Conegliano, this research found that cultural heritage is perceived in terms of being both a tangible and intangible asset. Tangible elements of the landscape, blended during the interview together with intangible aspects of regional history, traditional food, and the history of winemaking.

The integration of heritage into wine tourism activities was shown to be rather personal and slightly varied depending on each winery. However, in each case, it relied mostly on a guided tour including a storytelling aspect, finalized by a tasting of the wines. These findings are strongly supported by existing literature on the importance of storytelling, authenticity, and experience-driven tourism activities, while also challenging the common narrative suggesting the commercialization and exploitation of cultural heritage. Instead, the participants expressed a genuine pride in their heritage and willingness to share it with incoming visitors. They did, however, acknowledge the risk of commercialization for the future.

The findings of this study contribute to the field of cultural heritage, tourism studies, and gastronomy and wine tourism in particular. It is doing so by highlighting the voices of winemakers in an under-researched wine region. Moreover, the study provides insights that cultural heritage is not only a resource for tourism but an integral part of local identity and tourism practices in the Prosecco region.

However, the study also faced certain limitations, such as a small sample size and difficulties in finding further participants. That may have caused a lack of diversity of perspectives. Moreover, the use of digital tools to conduct this research may have restricted the depth of the given answers by participants. For future research, the study could be expanded by including more participants, conducting it in a wine region in a country different from Italy, or comparing different wine regions. It would also be valuable to see how heritage practices change and evolve, to respond to the demand of contemporary tourists.

In conclusion, cultural heritage in the Prosecco region is a pillar of the local identity and a foundation for the wine tourism experiences offered. As wine tourism constantly grows, wine producers will play a crucial role in maintaining and sharing cultural heritage, ensuring its preservation for future generations.

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