

“You felt like lingering...”: A “real” experience at the winery tasting room

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Abstract

There is a growing body of research on the experience of visitors to winery tasting rooms, and their expectations and satisfaction. This overview uses qualitative research in Australia and New Zealand to examine a number of themes relating to the visitor’s experience in the tasting room, including the impact of the size of the winery, the nature of the service encounter and the effect of paying for wine. The significance of these is placed in the context of the experience economy and the provision of hospitality generally. The practical relevance of the paper is to relate consumers’ expectations and perceptions of tasting rooms to the goals of wineries generally and also the issue of wine quality as a significant factor in the experience, with some specific recommendations for further research and for the implementation of practical outcomes for a successful tasting room.

Introduction

Much is already known about the experience of visiting a winery – including most of the tangible elements surrounding the experience – signage, the neatness of staff, and the cleanliness of the winery. Less attention has been placed on the psychological and affective characteristics of the winery experience. This paper, based on a series of qualitative studies in two locations in Australia and one in New Zealand, examines a number of aspects of the tasting room encounter focusing especially on the size and characteristics of the winery, the nature and process of the service encounter and the impact that these features have on the visitor's perception of their experience.

The tasting room experience is significant because in wine tourism, as with all forms of tourism, the service encounter is critical. Many commentators note clear and direct links between service encounters and customer satisfaction (Gronroos, 1988; Reichheld, 1990), and in turn satisfaction is believed to impact on post-purchase perceptions, future purchase decisions and long term customer loyalty (Mitchell, 2006; O'Mahony, Hall, Lockshin, Jago, and Brown, 2006; O'Neill and Charters, 2006a). Thus, understanding the nature of the visitor's response in the tasting room has a direct bearing on the development of a winery's brand equity, customer relationship management and sales. At the same time, there is a theoretical relevance to this given that traditional, commercially-focused theories of the hospitality experience are being extended – with a focus on the meaning of experience (Gilmore and Pine, 1999, 2002) – or even challenged by different ways of viewing what it means to be hospitable (Lashley, 2000; Telfer, 2000).

Context

This study examines the experience of wine tourists. In order to provide context, current knowledge of the experience of wine tourists is reviewed. A theoretical

framework is then provided by examining the tourist's experience as one of "hospitality". Additionally, as the study is essentially phenomenological, that approach is considered briefly.

The wine tourist

It is well established that service quality is key in the tourist's experience at a winery tasting room and consequently in the affective attachments a visitor develops for a particular producer which, by extension, can have an impact on their future purchase intentions. In early tasting room research projects, researchers suggested that the concrete attributes of the wine tourism product, such as the taste of the wine, buildings, facilities, information and signage, were most important in the overall experience (Dodd, 1995; Morris and King, 1997). More recently, research has begun to focus greater attention on the "intangibles" of the tasting room experience. For instance, O'Neill and his colleagues (O'Neill and Charters, 2006b; O'Neill, Palmer and Charters, 2002) suggest that tasting room visitors make decisions about buying wine on service satisfaction, rather than wine quality. In this study visitors suggested that staff responsiveness and contact were the most important factors in their visit – ahead of the tangibles such as the physical environment or the taste of the wine.

Recent research has been responsible for providing additional insights in this area. For example Mitchell (2004) reports that a vital part of the tasting room experience is the hospitality and service received and the opportunity to interact with staff and to learn about wine, something reinforced by other studies (Roberts and Sparks, 2006).

Roberts and Sparks (2006) noted a broad range of motivating factors for tourists, including the nature of service interactions, the desire for personal attention, the importance of an authentic experience, and the opportunity for personal growth in the form of learning opportunities. It has previously been noted by Ali-Knight and

Charters (1999) that education as a part of the experience may be important for some visitors.

Gilmore and Pine (2002) observe that “no company truly sells an experience unless it charges its guests an admission fee” (p.89). One topic of interest about the tasting room encounter relates to the issue of wineries which charge for tasting. Whilst it is commonly asserted that wine tourism is beneficial for wineries, operating a tasting room brings numerous financial costs. One possible solution to this situation is to charge a tasting fee for tourists visiting the tasting room. This approach has been introduced in many wine regions, yet there has been little research which explores wine tourists’ attitudes towards a tasting fee, or the impact of a fee on their overall winery experience. Morris and King, with their study in Margaret River in the 1990s, reported that one third of respondents to their survey stated they probably or definitely would not visit a winery which charged a \$2 tasting fee (Morris and King, 1997). More recently, Roberts & Sparks (2006) found there was an expectation that wine tastings in the tasting room would be complimentary, with a charge considered acceptable only where some tangible “extra” was offered, such as a free tasting glass. An alternative perspective exploring the value of the tasting room experience is offered by Kolyesnikova (2006). Her PhD explored the role of gratitude and obligation in purchases by winery visitors and found some evidence that respondents who experienced outstanding service at a winery with no tasting fee might be more likely to buy a wine than they would were a tasting fee charged, due to a feeling of gratitude or a certain sense of obligation.

The experience of hospitality

Two recently-developed theoretical constructs offer an interesting interpretation of what the tourist may expect at the tasting room. Historically, the discipline of

consumer behaviour developed with a focus on the utilitarian dimension of consumption. Its methods tended to concentrate on consumers' cognitive processes, particularly information-gathering and processing as determinants of consumption behaviour. This includes, for instance, the stream of work based on Fishbein and Ajzen's theory of reasoned action (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). In the early 1980s another approach was developed focusing on hedonic and experiential consumption (Hirschman, 1982; Holbrook, 1982). This interpretation showed that the experiential processes (such as amusement, fun, enjoyment and sensory stimulation) were intimately linked to a consumer's engagement with a product and that increasingly consumers seek not use but experience when they consume.

This perspective has been further developed more recently by Gilmore and Pine (1999) with the concept of the "experience economy" Their idea extends the concept of service consumption, arguing that instead of providing a standardized and flawless service operation service providers should aim to create a service *event*. A true event should be memorable, personalised and based on sensations rather than merely functional and utilitarian. Gilmore and Pine (1999) suggest that consumers seek four kinds of experience in their consumption of services. Crucially, each of these four is a component of the experience of wine or wine tourism. The forms of experience are, aesthetics (Charters and Pettigrew, 2005), education (Ali-Knight and Charters, 2001), entertainment (Mitchell, Hall and McIntosh, 2000; Taylor, 2006) and escape (Yuan, Jang, Cai, Morrison and Linton, 2006). Critically, the idea of the experience economy is that consumers do not just want a tangible benefit (wine tasting) but they seek added value from aspects of the encounter which surround that benefit, something which Gilmore and Pine (2002) have explicitly noted for the hospitality industry, and

others have suggested is particularly appropriate for tourism (Hayes and Macleod, 2007). It is this added value which allows the product to be differentiated from others, particularly through the individual staging of experiences tailored to specific customers' needs.

A contrasting perspective has also been emphasised by some hospitality academics in recent years. This takes the idea of hospitality back to its roots – of hosting – and seeks to de-emphasize the commercial aspects of the transaction and stress the social and private elements of the engagement (Lashley, 2000). The symbolic and perhaps subconscious aspect of this relationship is noted, with food (including wine) at the heart of the concept. The transformative process of preparing food and drink is crucial to creating allies and friends – to ensuring that people are on your side; historically there was a quasi-sacred aspect to this relationship (Selwyn, 2000). This “sacred” aspect carries the notion of sharing one’s home with guests (Telfer, 2000), something which is not done for apparently selfish motives. In the same way, one can note, entering a French shop is perceived to be entering someone’s home – so that in walking into a bakery you are not just their customer, but also their guest, with social expectations arising on each side. Offering a drink on arrival, especially, has been perceived historically to be an act of friendship and hospitality to a guest (Visser, 1991), and anthropologists have noted how, for instance, different drinks symbolise different levels of intimacy. In contemporary Austria, for example, sparkling wine is offered as a formal drink of welcome, whereas close friends were given a glass of artisanally-produced schnapps (Thornton, 1987). As Visser (1991, p. 246) has noted “sharing, which makes eating such a powerful symbol of community, is in some respects more perfectly performed when people drink the same liquid”. Crucially this approach notes that “calculative hosting, where the guest senses an ulterior motive,

can be counterproductive.” (Lashley, 2000, p. 15). Inevitably, such a perspective is at odds both with the current emphasis on service quality in the tourism and hospitality industries generally, and with the experience approach specifically. In the latter it has been observed that hospitality providers are now charging a fee not just for the service they provide, but for the experiences they offer – a reflection, it is suggested of a changing mentality within the industry (Gilmore and Pine, 2002). These two contrasting approaches offer some interesting insights into the relationship of drink, cellar doors (which may often be part of, or adjacent to, someone’s home) and the relationship between visitor and winery as it develops during the encounter.

A phenomenological approach

Most tasting room research has relied on quantitative, rather than qualitative, methods. Thus the studies yield clear, definable data. However, two factors limit their usefulness. The first is that many projects survey visitors at the tasting room. The fact that such surveys are occurring is known to the tasting room staff, who are able to modify their behavior accordingly, skewing the service experience and thus potentially modifying the survey responses. Additionally, most of the studies have focused on the concrete aspects of the wine tourist’s service encounter – tangibles and processes – rather than probing more affective aspects. This research provides some exploratory insights regarding those more affective factors which have emerged from an ongoing qualitative study of winery tasting room visitors, during which tasting room staff were not aware that they were being examined (Charters and Fountain, 2006). In this context, the researchers were interested in exploring participants’ attitudes to the tasting room experience in general and, in particular, what aspects of their encounter added value to the experience making it seem more, or less, genuine.

The goal of this research is thus to bring a more phenomenological epistemology to the experience, prioritising subjective and affective components by “thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon-how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104).

The “aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 36).

Van Manen outlines four methodological practices involved in this endeavor: turning towards lived experience; investigating the experience as lived; reflecting on essential themes; and writing and re-writing (Van Manen, 1990; Hayllar and Griffin, 2005).

The phenomenological approach often focuses on a “group experience” (Patton, 2002), rather than merely the isolated activity of an individual, and it is especially appropriate for consumption behavior which focuses on the experiential rather than the utilitarian (Wertenbroch, 1998), making it particularly appropriate for activities such as wine tourism.

Process

The overall aim of this research has been to investigate visitor perceptions of service in winery tasting rooms. To date, fieldwork has been conducted in two Australian locations (Swan Valley, Western Australia; Yarra Valley, Victoria) and in the Waipara Valley, New Zealand. This research has used a modified mystery shopping approach to explore the winery tasting room experience. Mystery shopping is a form of covert participant observation in which data is collected using individuals who take on the role of customers or potential customers in order to “monitor the processes and

procedures used in the delivery of a service” (Wilson, 1998, p. 148). Crucially, mystery shopping enables the researcher to get first-hand knowledge of the service environment as it unfolds in a natural and uncontrived setting (Grove and Fisk, 1998). The potential of observational methods for investigating service provision is increasingly acknowledged (Grove and Fisk, 1998; Wilson, 1998), and mystery shopping has been used extensively in the services industry to investigate service quality. However, it has rarely been used in academic research on tourism (Hudson, Snaith, Miller and Hudson, 2001).

In the commercial sector an important aim of mystery shopping is to reduce the impact of the shopper’s personal characteristics and subjectivity on the assessment of a service encounter (Hudson et al, 2001; Morrison, Colman, and Preston, 1997; Wilson, 1998). By contrast, the aim of the current research has been to explore the differences in perceptions and expectations of different types of consumers visiting a winery tasting room, bringing a phenomenological emphasis on the visitor experience of the winery tasting room. Therefore the researchers modified the traditional mystery shopping approach and returned the methodology to its qualitative origins.

This modified mystery shopping approach consisted of two main parts. Firstly, a short, open-ended questionnaire was developed to assess the participants’ experience of the winery tasting room. This questionnaire was developed based loosely on the SERVPERF technique of measuring service performance (Cronin and Taylor, 1992), which is itself based on the SERVQUAL instrument with dimensions comprising responsiveness, assurance, tangibles, empathy and reliability (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985). SERVPERF has been used previously to assess service quality at winery cellar doors (O’Neill et al, 2002; O’Neill and Charters, 2000), however in this context, the approach was to be tested using a qualitative questionnaire (See

Appendix 1). The second component of the modified mystery shopping exercise was a focus group, which revisited the questions covered in the questionnaire in more detail.

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling amongst residents in the cities adjacent to the winery regions (Perth, Christchurch and Melbourne respectively), and were selected by virtue of having visited a winery, having some interest in wine, and to represent a range of generational cohorts. They therefore all had some level of involvement with wine (Charters and Pettigrew, 2006). A range of interest was felt desirable, to offer some form of triangulation to the research from the different perspectives that would result (Denzin, 1989). An examination of the sample reveals that 72% of participants reported consuming wine at least weekly, and a similar proportion (74%) had visited at least one winery over the past twelve months. However, participants with a very high degree of involvement were avoided, as it was felt that their extreme knowledge and experience could skew the findings and might intimidate other participants. None of the participants in this research reported their wine knowledge as high; 33% reported intermediate wine knowledge and 65% basic wine knowledge.

Fitting with the phenomenological approach of this research, before visiting the winery, the participants were briefed to treat the experience as a normal and pleasurable experience. This differs to commercial mystery shopping research where the experience is scripted and structured, with an emphasis on trying to achieve objectivity. Following the briefing, the participants were sent out to visit wineries in teams of six participants. In general each team comprised a pair of each of three “generational groups”; one pair of Baby Boomers, one from Generation X and one from Generation Y. All participants were sent out in pairs, thereby eliminating the

influence of the size of the travelling party on the experience, whilst nevertheless offering alternative perspectives on a single encounter, thus adding depth to the data and increasing its trustworthiness (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). There was a mix of same sex and mixed sex pairs. The teams, although at the winery at the same time, were sent in a staggered way to avoid any appearance of acting as one homogenous group. On leaving the tasting room the participants were asked to independently complete a questionnaire about their experience (see Appendix 1.). As soon as each team returned to the project headquarters (generally within 30 minutes) they were debriefed in the focus group setting, in which one of the researchers explored the experiences of each team member and the whole group in more detail, having first read their questionnaire responses. In keeping with the phenomenological nature of the study there was no formal guide to this stage of the process, however the completed questionnaire provided a general guideline for the process. The focus groups thus explored the feelings of participants about their experiences, and any issues they raised were discussed by the group generally. Each focus group tended to last for between 20 and 40 minutes, and they were recorded on audio-tape, then transcribed for later analysis.

The analysis involved the close examination of both the transcriptions and the questionnaires for patterns of behavior and for emergent themes – as well as for any apparent contradictions. In this context, the term “pattern” is used to refer to a descriptive finding, often in response to specific questions from the questionnaire, whereas the themes are more topical or categorical and extend beyond the responses to specific questions (Patton, 2002). The identification of themes helped order and categorize the essential characteristics or “experiential structures” of the tasting room encounter (Hayllar & Griffin, 2005, p. 519; Denzin, 1989). To reduce the chance of

systematic bias, analysis was carried out by each of the researchers independently evaluating the transcripts in depth, assessing key themes and patterns, then discussing their findings jointly and reaching a common perspective, with the aim of the analysis being to “re-create lived experience in terms of its constituent analytical elements” (Denzin, 1989, pp. 58-59). These perspectives were developed and refined with each separate stage of the data collection process. The conclusions presented here, therefore, are the result of multiple perspectives which refined insights as the analysis proceeded. Thus investigator triangulation was established which adds to the credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Denzin, 1989).

The qualitative nature of this research may limit its generalizability. However, the number of encounters (28 winery visits -16 in Australia, 12 in New Zealand- made by 82 research participants with 162 individual winery experiences in total) over a series of regions and sites does mean that the study approached data saturation, and as a result allowed for the possibility of “theoretical saturation” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), with all potential analyses and explanations being exhausted. A further limiting factor is that the study only took place in an Anglophone context, albeit over three locations in two countries. Also, the Australasian focus – where “tipping” for service is not part of the culture – will have had an impact. This may be different in a North American context where tasting room fees are more prevalent. Additionally the research was carried out using participants who were happy to be autonomous visitors to wineries, using their own transport and sharing in the direction of the encounter. Tourists who use mass tours, provided by companies were not used, and it is possible that their expectations of and responses to the tasting room encounter would have been substantially different. Finally, the study did not include any participants who

were highly knowledgeable about wine; their perspective and expectations of the tasting room experience would differ also.

Findings

As stated above, while much has been written over the past decade about the wine tourist, few studies have focused on the affective components of the tasting room experience. This study therefore examines some of these aspects less-well researched over the past few years, and considers issues which often go to the heart of how the consumer feels about the experience. Facets of the tasting room which will be considered include the emotional impact of the winery environment – especially the winery's size – and various aspects of the experience of the service encounter. Whilst all of these have a practical relevance, they also relate directly to theories of experiential consumption and hospitality.

The experience of the winery

An aspect of winery visitation which has been little studied is the role of aesthetics to the overall experience. In this research a number of participants intimated that a winery should be aesthetically appealing. There is, after all, a partially aesthetic dimension to wine consumption (Charters and Pettigrew, 2005), and the built environment should enhance rather than conflict with that. The building within which the tasting room is situated is crucial for accentuating the welcome and reflecting the company's wines. A visitor to one winery said "it was an intimidating building" – a comment which was echoed by others visiting the same place. It may well be that arriving at a winery which intimidates has an impact on how one anticipates the ensuing encounter. By the same token, a winery described as having a "rustic" feel was considered a "functioning ... homely winery", based solely on its appearance.

Moreover, a good tasting room should also have character. This seemed to be important to visitors of all age groups. A young participant commented approvingly of the “museumy” atmosphere of one place he visited. There were also frequent comments from visitors about wanting to see evidence of a “connectedness” to the wine making process in or from the tasting room. This ranged from seeking photos of the winemaker, the vines and the harvest, to wanting to see the “actual mechanics ...of wine making” including the vats and barrels.

This distinctive character, some suggested, should reflect the identity of the winery and winemaker, so that on entering the visitor has a sense of what the producer is trying to achieve and what style the wine might take. This view was developed by a number of participants who focused on the atmosphere inside the tasting room.

Inevitably décor was important, as was the style of music (if any). A big tasting room may be necessary for a large through-put of visitors, but it may also be counter-productive if it gives a sense of “mass-production”, or if the intimacy and special nature of the occasion is lost as a result. The balance between the need for efficiently catering to large numbers of visitors while maintaining an appropriate atmosphere was missing at times, so that the aesthetic dimension of the winery experience could be diminished by efficiency. At some larger wineries the use of measured pourers on wine bottles or a pressurized pump for dispensing wine, meant participants felt the establishment seemed like an ordinary bar rather than a winery. One participant observed that at a winery she wanted “pouring wine from a bottle; the noise of the cork [coming out]”. Another participant agreed, suggesting that the “biggest turnoff of the whole experience of tasting wines for me, [was] pumping it out, like it is mass produced.” In other situations, the presence of a large quantity of merchandise, often in the form of foods, clothing and other wine-related accessories, at times detracted

from the wine-making message. These issues seemed to be especially important for younger participants.

However, the difficulty with much of this advice is that because it relates to the aesthetics and character of the experience, there is also an element of personal taste in the individual's response. Some visitors like music, others do not. Of those who do enjoy it some like the nonchalance and unorthodoxy of jazz, others prefer the tradition and harmony of classical music. What does seem important, though, is that wineries think about and – crucially – research the impact of the way their building and tasting room looks and feels to a wide range of visitors, how it generates a particular atmosphere, and how it supports the positioning of their wines and brand.

The findings of this research show that there was complete agreement that the type of experience offered at the smaller wineries was significantly different from that offered at the larger wineries and, in the large majority of cases, was a more enjoyable and memorable experience. This enhanced experience had a great deal to do with the sense that what was encountered at the smaller wineries was a “real” winery experience. As one respondent reported positively “[this] felt like a working winery; there were no tourist trappings, it was about the wine”.

The main difference reported between large and small wineries was the clearly commercial focus of the larger ones. This was in part a result of the aesthetics and appearance of the bigger establishments and was reinforced by other commercial elements, noted above. There were often large number of visitors in the tasting rooms of large wineries also which, coupled with limited numbers of tasting room staff, meant there was very little personal attention or sense of welcome. As one young woman commented:

You almost feel like they get so many people just popping in that they don't actually appreciate each person that stops and goes in the door (Gen. Y, Female).

Combined with this was the fact that the large size of the winery gave visitors the impression that they were part of a process, rather than a rural, artisanal experience. The feeling of being on a "production line" was reported by a number of participants, as the following quotation reveals:

It's not the best experience when you feel you are on a conveyor belt. I felt like it was my time to leave, because other people had arrived, and it was their time to taste the wine, and I was taking space at the counter (Gen. Y, Male).

These experiences at larger wineries did not mean that participants necessarily left these wineries disappointed, however. Many stated that they enjoyed their experience, purchased wines and would return again. However few of those who said they would return suggested that they would come again to taste wine, reporting instead that a future visit would be for a social occasion. Interestingly, some participants of all ages implied that the commercial, non-personalized experience is what they would expect at larger wineries and that it did not surprise them. One young man claimed "I wouldn't expect to have a great conversation with someone at a bigger winery. I'd just be in a queue for wine." This contrasts sharply with the experience of participants at the smaller wineries. These wineries were described as "cozy and friendly" and welcoming, with tasting room staff who seemed genuinely interested in visitors and who demonstrated a passion for the wines and the winery.

It is the nature of the service transaction that seemed to have the most significant impact on participants' experience of the winery tasting room. The commercial and

rushed nature of transactions at many larger wineries left some participants feeling that there was little opportunity to engage in a personal dialogue or to learn from their experience; crucially, feedback from participants indicates that visitors seem to want to be engaged with the winery and the winery staff in their tasting room experience and this is more likely in an intimate environment.

The experience of encountering staff

The engagement with the staff at the winery is crucial. It is well understood that engagement between winery staff and customers necessitates a warm welcome with eye contact and a sense of sincerity. However, the staff must also enable the visitors to have a sense of connection with the winery; they must convey passion about it and they have to provide a story or a myth, which can engage the visitor with the place. Each of these will be considered.

Visitors need to feel a sense of “connection” to the winery itself. This connection may be partly achieved by the physical aspects of the tasting room, as discussed; however the role of the staff in this process is crucial also. One couple felt that their experience with a staff member was “like we were just sitting with this new person, getting to know them”, rather than undertaking a commercial transaction. Comments about the personal and “real” nature of the interaction between the visitor and staff of smaller tasting rooms were frequently made, and there was a sense that at these smaller wineries, participants were made to feel special. Other participants similarly talked about the “human face” and personalized nature of the experience in smaller, less rushed tasting rooms.

This connection between staff and customer helped the participants feel connected to the winery. The “connection” between the staff and the wine they were selling, and the passion many small winery operators demonstrated for their product also added to

the sense of a genuine interaction. This experience was often described as “authentic”; and the following quotation typifies this sense of an authentic experience:

The lady is attached physically to the place, there is a passion for what she telling us. She’s got the dirt of the place in the cracks on her hands and you see that, and you know that this is her passion and her life. The others are employees; that’s the big difference (Baby Boomer, Male).

This passion exhibited by tasting room staff at smaller wineries was commented on by many participants, and also increased their desire to purchase the wine; as one reported: “he was overflowing with passion and love for what he did and that really came through so that was one of the things that inspired me to buy wine”. The connection did not end when the wine tourist left the tasting room, moreover, and there was a clear indication that the memorable nature of this experience could well result in future brand loyalty and visitation.

Brand loyalty may also be achieved if the consumer is given a story about the winery and wines which attracts their attention and wins their sympathy and interest. For many visitors, uncertain about their ability to evaluate the quality of the wine, there have to be other reasons to like the winery. Furthermore it seems that gaining a sense of authenticity about the experience can translate into a sense of authenticity about the wine (Beverland, 2005). One participant talked about a holiday in Marlborough:

I went to a heap of beautiful wineries. And then I went to this one where the guy behind the counter was the guy who owned it; he owned it with his wife. And he ... didn’t look or talk down to us. And we had no money anyway, but we ended up buying a bottle off him. He told us about how he’d moved there, and how him and his wife were trying to set this up. It

just makes such a massive difference. Even though [the winery] wasn't as nice, or as big, or matching the other places you just found yourself buying a bottle. You know "I'd love to buy a bottle from you, and if I meet people I'll tell them about your wine". Because otherwise it's just another label isn't it? (Gen. Y, Male).

In this instance a series of stories are rolled together to "sell" the winery; the family business (perhaps struggling in the face of competition from larger, slicker outfits), the background and history of the establishment and winemaker, and intimate knowledge of vineyards and processes. Most significantly, this informant would return to buy the wines and would talk about the winery with other people. Other issues – the history of the region, interesting production issues or unusual grape varieties – can be utilized in this way to build a relationship with the customer.

Another participant who visited both a large and small winery during the exercise noted that she preferred the wines of the larger winery, but would support the smaller winery to keep it going, as a result of the stories she heard and the experience she had there.

As is indicated above, the opportunity to learn more afforded by the smaller wineries was another factor which helped to strengthen participants' ties with the wineries. This factor seeming to be particularly important to the younger, less experienced wine tourists, who generally sought more interaction with the staff and welcomed the opportunity to ask questions, as the following respondent explained:

You felt at the [larger winery] ... they were too busy; here you could ask anything. You could talk about the foods that would go with the wine and the different types, and the grapes... We actually learnt more just in that little time there, and it was a lot more interesting (Gen. Y, Male).

One young female reported that her experience at the winery, where she felt comfortable asking “stupid questions” would make her consider returning again with a group of friends to specifically learn more about wines. Overall, there was an appeal to spending time at these smaller tasting rooms; as one woman said “you felt like lingering”.

The experience of paying and taking away

As previously stated, there is evidence suggesting that the service a tourist receives in a winery tasting room will affect not only their satisfaction with the experience, but also their purchase intentions (O’Neill and Charters, 2006a; O’Mahony, Hall, Lockshin, Jago, & Brown, 2005; Mitchell, 2006); the findings of the current research reinforce the importance of the total tasting room experience on purchase intentions. However, also apparent is a complex relationship between the appreciation of good service and hospitality, and a sense of obligation to purchase. In some cases, participants specifically used the word “obligated” to describe how they felt about the unspoken expectation that they would buy wine after tasting. Where the tasting room encounter was perceived as excellent this sense of obligation was described in a positive light, as respondents were “happy to spend money on the wine”. In one situation where a couple did not like the wine but greatly enjoyed the entire event, they stayed for a coffee, stating that this was their “contribution”; this suggests that wine is not the only thing that can be purchased in the exchange process. Where the experience was poor or did not exceed expectations, however, the attitude towards this sense of obligation was different. Some participants felt no need to purchase wine in this case, while others reported still feeling a sense of obligation, resulting in discomfort and negative emotions which detracted from their overall experience:

The last thing I want when I do a wine tasting is to feel like I'm under pressure to buy something. I do feel a certain pressure ... because you've been given something free (Gen. X, Male).

Focusing on the positive aspects of obligation, respondents reported that a purchase made after a tasting represented an exchange for the enjoyable experience received; one participant went so far as to describe it as "a moral kind of balance there, that you've got to meet".

Other respondents felt that that by making a purchase, one was able to "complete" the visit appropriately. As one young male stated, his purchase "just felt like finishing an awesome experience; walking away and taking a bit of it with you". The word "souvenir" was used to describe the purchase of wine, with the implication that the purchase was more about the total experience than the wine itself and that it was necessary to take away a future reminder of the visit. Thus, a young woman anticipated drinking the wine she had purchased, saying "you'd remember the experience, and if you were drinking it with friends you'd say 'oh, I bought this at [the winery]. I remember we had a great experience, this is what we did'".

There was some evidence that a sense of obligation was more prevalent at smaller wineries, and participants in this research bought more wine at the smaller than larger wineries, a phenomenon which has been reported elsewhere recently (Mitchell, 2006). There are many possible explanations for this, including the fact that the wine is often difficult to acquire in other places. However, as noted, participants also tended to experience a more personalized and pleasurable encounter. It was the case also that as the winery was a small business, often run by a family, this desire to purchase became stronger for some participants; a sentiment stated explicitly:

Our experience with her made it special, and the fact that she is so involved with the family business, I felt like by buying her wines we were supporting ... local good people so they can do what they want (Gen. X, Female).

Interestingly, for a couple of participants, the more individualized attention made small wineries *less* appealing with one openly admitting the sense of obligation to purchase felt much greater in these environments where she might be the only person tasting.

At only one winery out of the thirteen visited were all participants charged a tasting fee, although at another winery tastings of reserve wines incurred a small charge. The issue of a tasting fee had arisen unprompted at earlier stages of the fieldwork, but only Yarra Valley participants were explicitly probed about the issue. The majority of those asked directly could see some merit in a charge being levied, and some said they would prefer this. It seems that being charged a tasting fee reduced the sense of obligation to purchase for some people – the “moral balance” had been restored. Furthermore, some participants felt that having contributed a small token amount they had “paid” for the right to try as much wine as they wanted without feeling guilty. A small minority, however, were quite opposed to any fee and one participant stated that she would walk out if she saw a tasting fee charged. There was also the comment from a couple of participants that the wineries should recognize that the free tastings they offered were an investment in future brand loyalty, even if no purchase was made by the visitor on that day.

The issue of the genuine and real experience offered in the tasting room was also raised implicitly in the discussion of a tasting fee, especially in relation to the smaller wineries. As stated above, one of the aspects enjoyed at the smaller wineries was the

sense participants had that their conversations with staff were genuine, rather than staged commercial interactions, and that the primary aim of staff was not selling the wine, but imparting knowledge and enthusiasm:

They related their experience and their context to the visit and I think that made it more genuine too. You can relax more knowing that these guys do everything and that you are not talking to a sales assistant but actually talking to people on the ground (Baby Boomer, Female).

There was a sense, therefore, that the introduction of a tasting fee, particularly at small wineries, might commercialize the whole experience, thereby degrading it. Furthermore, given that participants were *more* likely to purchase wine at the smaller wineries for a range of reasons, including the more personalized, genuine experience, then introducing a tasting fee at these wineries might actually *reduce* the financial returns smaller wineries receive through the tasting room.

Discussion: Providing a genuine experience; providing genuine hospitality?

The issues raised by this study focus firmly on what a winery is trying to achieve when it opens a tasting room. Is the object to generate revenue (particularly, though not solely, by selling wine) or is it to assist in the development of the label's brand equity, and especially to develop more effective customer relationship marketing (Charters and Pettigrew, 2006)? The aesthetics of the tasting room, the management of the service encounter and issues around sales and charging for tasting all intersect at this point.

Much has been said of the need for good and responsive staff in the tasting room that does not need repeating. However, from the findings of this study certain issues have been raised which have been rarely addressed by researchers previously, and other

topics seem so significant that they should be stressed again. Crucially, all the evidence from this study suggests that it is the nature of the experience that counts. Participants regularly implied that they are seeking a great experience when they visit a tasting room – not just the chance to taste good wine, reinforcing previous suggestions that the quality of wine is less of an issue (O’Neill et al, 2002). Certainly, there is no doubt that the wine must attain a good basic quality so that it should be fault free and fruity. Beyond that, however, the impact of the wine as the means of creating a perfect “moment of truth” or as the facilitator of greater brand loyalty fades. To this extent the study tends to endorse the arguments of Gilmore and Pine (Gilmore and Pine, 1999; Gilmore and Pine, 2002) for a personalized experience rather than a customized benefit.

An important part of what makes this experience memorable and worthwhile is a sense that the winery visitor has had a genuine, or real, encounter with the winery, and the winery staff. For the vast majority of participants in this study this could be achieved by winery staff who “connected” with the visitors, by personalizing the service, imparting information about the wine, and exhibited enthusiasm for their product during their encounter. The staff’s ability to “connect” the visitor to the winery, through stories which “root” the winery to its history or environment or production approach, is essential to this process of authentication.

The tasting room experience must delight the visitor also. It must create in them a sense that this is a winery which they can enjoy, linger in and return to, and to which they want to offer their loyalty. It seems that for some visitors there may also be a distinction to be made between commercial hospitality and being hospitable. Some participants in this study made explicit comments about the appeal of the “homely” – a key word, implying a personal welcome and the possibility of friendship rather than

a transactional relationship. The explicitly derogatory dismissal of a place as “an ordinary bar, not a winery” reinforces this perspective and there is an expectation that the encounter will offer hospitableness, even friendship. The connection to the winery, the process of “getting to know them” confirms this idea, as do the use of a bottle as souvenir and a reminder of that friendship.

Having said this, not all visitors want the same experience; sensitivity to individual needs is essential, based on the ability to gauge a visitor’s level of interest and knowledge, and their particular expectations from the encounter and this individual responsiveness is, itself, a demonstration of hospitableness. Tasting room operators must understand that visitors are not identical. For example, it seems that “efficiency” in the service encounter is more important to older visitors, who like to be given more space to taste wine in; younger ones want more continual interaction with winery staff (Charters and Fountain, 2006). Nevertheless, it is also essential not to stereotype visitors. Consequently a fine balance must be struck between understanding gender, generational and cultural difference and yet treating each visitor and group as individual, with specific needs to be understood and met. This ability to gauge the particular situation and needs of varying groups of visitors is not easy; nevertheless, it is an essential part of effective service provision generally and wineries need to pay attention to helping their staff develop this skill.

Some comments can also be made about the expectation to buy. First, as Beverland (2005) has noted in regard to luxury wines, those which are perceived to have the highest quality manage to distance themselves from mere commercial considerations. This reflects the experience of visitors in this research who responded to the story or the intimacy of small producers who gave a sense of passion rather than overt marketing in the tasting room encounter. Likewise, if a sense of aesthetics can be

generated it can provide another means of minimizing the transactional nature of the encounter; beauty is seen to transcend price. When these factors come together the winery is no longer “talking to you just to make money out of you”, but engaging in a conversation about issues much more significant than another sale. Thus paradoxically at this point, another sale – and even more a long-term customer – becomes much more likely.

It also seems that the question of “what price service?” is not easily answered. While many participants said that some sort of exchange felt necessary at the tasting room, particularly where the service experience has been excellent, it is unclear whether charging a tasting fee is an appropriate response. Many people having a good experience would, in retrospect, have been happy to pay a fee; the question remains, however, how many would appreciate paying this “upfront”, and to what extent this would add an explicitly commercial element to the wine tourism experience.

Furthermore, if, as Kolyesnikova’s (2006) research indicates, wine tourists are *more* likely to purchase wine at wineries without tasting fees, such a charge might be doubly inadvisable for small wineries. However these comments are as yet exploratory, and further research on this topic seems warranted.

It is also clear, up to this point, that the encounter must provide an emotionally satisfying experience, confirming the approach of Gilbert and Pine (1999). However, the experiential perspective, at least in its “commercial” or transactional form, then diverges from the hospitality approach of Lashley (2000) and Telfer (2000), particularly in the context of smaller wineries. This is reiterated by the comment of the visitor who did not want to talk “to a sales assistant”. The two approaches divide, and it may be that the limits of each has been reached. Creating hospitableness makes friends – but it is small-scale, labor-intensive and works with small groups or

individuals and not easily replicable in larger organizations. Selling experiences may work (if well applied) in larger enterprises, but destroys the intimacy of the relationship where the encounter is perceived to take place in an extension of the host's home.

Conclusions

Wine tourism has emerged as a growing area of special interest tourism in Australasia; it is increasingly significant to the regional tourism product and a significant element of the business strategy of many wineries (Charters and Carlsen, 2006). For a winery operation to be successful, the wines produced must find a sustainable and loyal market. The option of providing visitor facilities at the winery tasting room is one that many winery managers recognize as an important avenue for sales, and building brand loyalty. The visit to the tasting room plays a crucial role in the wine tourism experience. Understanding the wine tourists' tasting room expectations and experiences is important to allow winery managers to better meet those expectations. Wine tourists are not homogeneous, however, and differ in terms of expectations and preferences (Charters and Ali-Knight, 2002; Charters and Fountain, 2006; Dodd and Bigotte, 1997; Mitchell and Hall, 2001).

This research has important implications for both larger and smaller wineries, in terms of their wine tourism objectives and the outcomes they hope to achieve. In fact, it may be that what is offered at small and large wineries is so fundamentally different that they need to be considered as separate operations or events; something yet to be addressed in wine tourism research. Large wineries provide a modern, transactional process – as most restaurants or hotels might. On the other hand, whilst noting that there may be significant cost implications, it could be suggested that small wineries should be being hospitable, perhaps even trying to provide a sense of community

(Visser, 1991), and have to concentrate on making friends not selling wine nor charging for tasting, for no-one would charge a friend to drink in their own home. Increased brand equity will follow if they clearly and effectively pursue this course. The experience which the customer receives is paramount. Specific factors such as friendliness, the welcome and demonstrating a knowledge and passion for the wine and winery enhance the visitor experience at tasting room. It seems also that the strength of the personal interaction and the connectedness felt – between the customer and tasting room staff; between the staff and the wine and winery – has the ability to increase the likelihood of a purchase and future brand loyalty.

The smaller tasting room seems to have the greater potential to achieve the genuine encounter outlined above and encourage brand loyalty for the winery, yet all wineries have the possibility of doing this. Larger wineries can offer a greater, individualized experience for which a charge is entirely valid, if it enchants the visitor and they need welcoming staff and an authentic story – and then something else, which differentiates the experience from all other providers. That added value will not be the quality of wine (O'Neill et al., 2002) nor will it be homeliness or friendship, but some form of further enchantment (Aune, 2002).

There is no doubt that winery visitation has a potentially strong impact on the winery's competitiveness and long-term sustainability. The current research suggests that this impact comes from more than just the wine quality and the efficiency of the service encounter at the tasting room. The total experience of the winery (Gilmore and Pine, 1999) is important, as is the experience of hospitality (Lashley, 2000; Telfer, 2000). It may be the case, however, that different wineries need to make their mark in different ways. While larger wineries need to build enchantment into their service provision through the experiences they offer, smaller wineries need to demonstrate

their hospitableness. Through each of these strategies, large and small wineries alike can establish a “connection” with their consumers, ensuring the creation and/or maintenance of customer loyalty to their wine and brand.

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Appendix 1: The cellar door Post-visit questionnaire

1. How did you feel about the welcome you received from Cellar door staff?
2. What did you like/dislike about...
 - a. ...the ambience of the winery?
 - b. ...access to the winery and the cellar door?
 - c. ...the wines that the winery had to taste?
 - d. ...the *range* of wines available?
3. How did you feel about ...
 - a. ...the willingness of the staff to help you?
 - b. ...the courtesy of the staff towards you?
 - c. ...staff understanding of your needs?
4. Did the winery...
 - a. ...listen to what you wanted?
 - b. ...respond appropriately to your requirements?
 - c. ...take steps to avoid you feeling intimidated?
 - d. ...give you individualised attention?
 - e. ...*primarily* focus on selling you wine?
5. Did the winery...
 - a. ...ask you to join their mailing list?
 - b. ...try to sell you wine?
 - c. ...invite you to come back, or attend a special event? (If so, please specify).
 - d. ...encourage you to maintain links with their winery and/or their wines?
6. On the basis of this experience how likely is it that you would purchase the winery's wine in the future (whether at the cellar door, or elsewhere)?

Any other comments about your experience?