

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

# THE EUROPEAN WINE TOURISM CHARTER: APPLICATION TO WINERIES OF THE VALDEPEÑAS WINE ROUTE (CASTILLA-LA MANCHA, SPAIN)

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Wine tourism has become established as a distinctive form of travel that combines the cultural and sensory enjoyment of wine with the appreciation of territorial heritage. This activity responds to growing demands for cultural and sustainable tourism, integrating into broader strategies for economic diversification and the promotion of local products. In Spain, wine tourism is incorporated into the 2030 Sustainable Tourism Strategy, which promotes values such as community participation, the preservation of cultural and natural heritage, and socio-economic development.

The European Charter for Wine Tourism defines this practice as a cultural and leisure experience centered on the vineyard, wine, and its surrounding environment. In this context, wine is considered a heritage asset that generates employment, strengthens local identity, and serves as an educational resource. The recent growth of wine tourism is closely tied to improvements in wine quality, the scenic and architectural richness of wine-producing regions, and the appeal of regional gastronomy.

Wine tourism has proven to be a catalyst for rural development, with a positive impact on both sustainability and the local economy. Initiatives such as the Spanish Wine Routes, promoted by ACEVIN, bring together wineries, tourism businesses, and public institutions to promote wine destinations. Castilla-La Mancha, with over 430,000 hectares of vineyards, leads the country in cultivated areas and boasts six official wine routes. Among them, Valdepeñas stands out for its rich winemaking heritage and its significant role in shaping local identity.

Despite recent economic challenges, wine tourism in Castilla-La Mancha demonstrates significant potential to establish itself as a sustainable activity. Its development is supported by a multifunctional agricultural system, a robust agro-industrial foundation, and a winemaking tradition well adapted to the local environment.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

The research question centers on identifying the extent to which the structural importance of vineyards in Castilla-La Mancha aligns with their true tourism potential, considering the region's scale and its connection to the sustainability paradigm. The comprehensive approach promoted by the European Charter for Wine Tourism is grounded in the development of sustainable tourism initiatives aimed at optimizing the environmental, social, and economic dimensions of the sector within a given territory.

In this context, the vineyards of Castilla-La Mancha represent a land use with deep historical roots, having left a significant cultural and landscape legacy. These vineyards are well adapted to the harsh environmental conditions of the southern sub-plateau and exhibit strong socio-economic integration, supported by a robust agro-industrial sector driven by both private and cooperative initiatives.

These characteristics—typical of a multifunctional and territorially embedded agricultural system—support the hypothesis that the wine sector in Castilla-La Mancha possesses the conceptual foundations and territorial resources necessary to respond, to varying degrees, to the sustainability paradigm outlined in the European Charter for Wine Tourism. Based on this premise, the objective of this study is to assess the degree to which wine tourism activities in Castilla-La Mancha align with the principles set forth in the Charter.

Specifically, the study offers an initial analysis of the wine tourism offerings promoted by wineries and cooperatives operating within the official Wine Routes (ACEVIN). Given the impracticality of covering all six currently active Wine Routes in Castilla-La Mancha (Almansa, Jumilla, La Mancha, Manchuela, Méntrida, and Valdepeñas) in a single article, the Valdepeñas Wine Route was selected. This route is home to one of Spain's oldest Denominations of Origin, features some of the region's most representative wineries, and boasts a long winemaking tradition dating back to the 7th century BCE. The vineyard also plays a key role in reinforcing local identity, as reflected in various annual events, notably the Wine and Poetry Festivals held since 1956.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology for the study on wine tourism along the Valdepeñas Wine Route is organized into three stages. The first stage involves selecting three representative wineries, each corresponding to one of the dimensions of sustainable development as defined by the European Charter for Wine Tourism: environmental, socio-cultural, and economic. The selected wineries are Bodega de las Estrellas (for its ecological approach), Bodegas Navarro López (for its cultural and historical significance), and Bodegas Real (for its investment in tourism and hospitality).

The second stage focuses on designing a questionnaire structured around these three dimensions. Each dimension includes eight key indicators. In the environmental dimension, the questionnaire evaluates aspects such as landscape quality, use of natural resources, vineyard sustainability, and proximity to protected areas. The socio-cultural dimension considers winemaking tradition, cultural authenticity, local community involvement, and product originality. The economic dimension assesses innovation, tourism viability, visitor

perception, staff professionalization, and business synergies. The questionnaire allows for both qualitative and quantitative evaluations, using a scale from 1 to 5 to measure each winery's alignment with sustainability principles.

The third stage involves analyzing the results through methodological triangulation. This includes personal interviews, direct observation, review of official sources, and participation in discussion groups. These groups consist of Oenology students and wine enthusiasts, who provide feedback after visiting the wineries. Finally, the results are compared with the theoretical framework, enabling a comprehensive and meaningful evaluation. The agreed-upon scores are presented in tables.

#### **4. RESULTS**

The analysis is structured around the three dimensions of sustainability—environmental, sociocultural, and economic—as evaluated by researchers, oenology students, and interested visitors.

In the environmental dimension, the results reflect a relatively low score (56/120). While the presence of organic wines at Bodega de las Estrellas is acknowledged, the wineries generally show a weak connection between the landscape and wine quality. The standardized nature of the La Mancha landscape, the lack of water-saving techniques, and limited information about the terroir negatively impact environmental perception. Additionally, the proximity to infrastructure and the absence of nearby protected natural areas diminish the region's appeal as a tourist destination.

The sociocultural dimension received the highest score (94/120), highlighting Valdepeñas' strong winemaking tradition, which dates back to the 7th century BCE. The wineries preserve heritage elements such as underground caves and clay jars, reinforcing cultural authenticity. Active local participation and institutional engagement are also notable, particularly during events like the Grape Harvest Festival and Wine Tourism Day. However, recent conflicts within the Denomination of Origin have negatively affected the reputation of Valdepeñas wines.

In the economic dimension, the assessment is positive (88/120). The wineries demonstrate tourism viability due to their accessibility, historical significance, and cultural offerings. Although technological innovation is limited, there are efforts to differentiate, such as Bodega de las Estrellas' zodiac-themed wine line. Business synergies are well established, and visitor feedback is generally favorable. Nevertheless, the tourism offering remains concentrated in Valdepeñas, with limited expansion to surrounding municipalities.

Overall, the study concludes that wine tourism in Valdepeñas holds strong sociocultural and economic potential. However, improvements in environmental sustainability are necessary to fully align with the principles of the European Charter for Wine Tourism.

#### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The Valdepeñas Wine Route, established in 2018 as part of the Spanish Wine Routes initiative (ACEVIN), has fostered the development of wine tourism strategies that high-

light not only the wines of Valdepeñas but also the rich tangible and intangible heritage associated with them.

The findings of this study confirm the strong potential of the Valdepeñas Wine Route in terms of its social and cultural dimensions. This is evidenced by numerous and appealing material resources, such as underground wine cellars, traditional winery architecture, and the accumulation of winemaking knowledge over time. Additionally, intangible cultural assets emerge through the active involvement of both the production and associative sectors in various cultural events, all of which are unified by the common thread of wine. Respect for cultural authenticity is further reinforced by the consolidation of a Local Production System centered around wine. Within this system, a diverse group of local entrepreneurs—representing different entities and commercial aspirations—coexist and form a robust network of business synergies, positioning Valdepeñas as a key commercial hub for viticulture and wine tourism.

However, alignment with the environmental principles of the European Charter for Wine Tourism remains an area for improvement. There is a lack of a clear commitment to sustainability and a limited contribution of the terroir to the distinctiveness of the final product. This results in a risk of production standardization and reduced added value compared to wines from other Spanish Denominations of Origin (D.O.) that offer greater profitability. This situation has been further exacerbated by the recent image crisis affecting the entire Valdepeñas region.