

Wine Tourism In Italy: Tourist Experiences And Destination Perception

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ABSTRACT

Changing lifestyles also affect tourist demands and preferences. In this direction, there is an increase in alternative tourism types that can adapt to environmental conditions. In this study, wine tourism, one of the alternative tourism types, is discussed. It is aimed to obtain information about tourist experiences and destination perceptions through interviews with wine tourists visiting Italy. In the study, a literature review was conducted and semi-structured interviews were conducted between March 21, 2025 and May 04, 2025 with 20 participants coming to Naples from 10 different countries. The research findings show that wine tourism is not just a simple experience of trying a drink; it has a multi-layered structure combined with history, nature, gastronomy and culture. Prominent themes in the interviews were the high interest in wine experiences and gastronomic elements, cultural and natural beauty, infrastructure and language gaps. Participants indicated that gastronomic elements were influential in their travel intentions and all of the participants said that they intend to travel to Italy again. As a result, Italy is a prominent wine tourism destination and in order to develop wine tourism, it is recommended to produce multilingual content, invest in infrastructure, and bring rural areas to tourism.

Keywords: Wine Tourism, Gastronomy, Italy, Naples

INTRODUCTION

Tourism demand is continuously evolving worldwide due to environmental imperatives, technological advancements, and the diversification of tourist profiles. Mass tourism, traditionally centered around the triad of sea, sun, and sand, has gradually been replaced by experience-based tourism activities (Yüncü, 2010). Urbanization and the necessity of adapting to urban lifestyles have limited individuals' connection with nature, thereby impeding their ability to benefit from natural environments (Guardini et al., 2023). In recent years, it has become evident that tourists increasingly prefer customized holiday experiences tailored to individual needs over standardized package tours. While some tourists prioritize historical and cultural tours, others seek adventure, gastronomy, or sports-oriented experiences during their travels (Agovino et al., 2017). In response to these shifting demands, various forms of alternative tourism have emerged. Alternative tourism encompasses initiatives that are designed to cater to individual preferences while also aiming to mitigate the detrimental environmental impacts of mass tourism (Akdağ, 2015). These tourism forms aspire to offer experiences grounded in culture, nature, gastronomy, and rural life. Among these, wine tourism stands out as a significant type of alternative tourism.

In today's context, where gastronomic tourism has gained remarkable momentum, individuals travel not only to discover new flavors but also to experience the cultural identity and local production practices of visited destinations through food and beverages (Türker & Akmanoğlu, 2022).

Wine tourism extends beyond mere wine tasting events held at specific destinations. Activities encompassing the winemaking process itself have proven effective in attracting tourist interest. The entire production cycle—from viticulture to wine production facilities—can be included in the tourism experience. This form of tourism, often enhanced by fine dining and quality accommodation, offers visitors a memorable journey as they witness each stage of the process. Furthermore, the experience can be enriched through educational sessions on the history of wine, grape varieties, and food pairings (Kasaroğlu et al., 2021).

In countries endowed with fertile lands for viticulture, wine tourism has begun to serve as an alternative source of income. With initiatives aimed at improving productivity, wine routes have been established in these regions to promote the development of this form of tourism. Among the most renowned wine tourism destinations are France, Italy, Spain, the United States, and Turkey (Soylu, 2022). Factors such as the quality of grapes cultivated in these regions, the cultural and natural attractions along wine routes, and destination marketing strategies all play critical roles in this context (Teyin, 2023).

Although the history of wine dates back centuries, activities specifically related to wine tourism have notably increased since the 1990s. Technological developments, coupled with changes in societal structures and unsustainable resource consumption, have also affected the tourism industry, necessitating the search for more sustainable solutions. As a result, regulatory measures have been implemented in viticultural regions to maximize the benefits derived from wine tourism. As a sustainable form of tourism, wine tourism holds significant value in raising environmental awareness, generating employment opportunities for local communities, and contributing to national economies (Süer & Keskin, 2023).

This study focuses on Naples, Italy—one of the destinations strongly associated with wine tourism. In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of wine tourism, relevant academic literature has been reviewed and contemporary media sources have been examined. In the subsequent sections of the study, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with wine tourists visiting Naples from various countries to explore their perspectives on wine tourism and to identify key factors contributing to the destination's brand image.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Towards the end of the 20th century, the intensification of industrial activities and changing human lifestyles initiated a movement toward rural areas. This shift gave rise to new approaches such as environmental awareness and sustainability, contributing to the development of ecological consciousness among individuals. Within this new paradigm, Italy witnessed an increase not only in artistic and cultural tourism but also in environmentally friendly, food-and-beverage-oriented wine and gastronomy tourism (Pineiro, Salvo, & Giommi, 2019).

Local foods with cultural significance and regionally distinctive beverages such as wine play a crucial role in the branding of a destination and in shaping tourism supply. Gastronomic elements that have achieved brand recognition often become the primary attraction of their respective regions. These products serve to promote the areas in which they are produced, highlight cultural values and geographic distinctiveness, and reflect the identity of local communities (Asero & Patti, 2009).

The history of the grape is believed to date back approximately 130 million years, while the earliest evidence related to wine production can be traced to around 7,000 years ago. Viticulture and winemaking played a significant role during the Babylonian and Egyptian civilizations. Throughout human history, wine has not merely been regarded as a common beverage but has acquired a distinct cultural status, often associated with the elite or used in religious rituals (Yılmaz & Akay, 2020).

Wine is an alcoholic beverage produced through the fermentation of fresh grape juice or grape must. Although composed primarily of water, sugar, and alcohol, wine can develop a variety of aromas, flavors, and colors through different production methods and additives (Beykoz, 2021). According to the International Wine and Spirits Academy (2020), wine is defined as an alcoholic beverage obtained through the fermentation of juice derived from fresh grapes. With its history extending back 7,000 years, wine holds a significant place in human culture, often regarded as sacred in certain societies and symbolizing abundance (Teyin, 2023).

High-quality wine production requires high-quality grapes. To ensure productivity and desirable taste profiles, certain conditions must be met in the cultivation area. Soil characteristics suitable for viticulture, along with climatic factors such as temperature and precipitation, are vital considerations (Yüncü, 2010).

Tourism, in general terms, refers to travel undertaken for personal satisfaction. In this context, marketing activities aimed at attracting tourists to specific destinations, along with actions that impact economic sectors such as accommodation and food services, fall under the scope of tourism (Erhan, 2021). After the 1980s, a departure from conventional tourism practices was observed, coinciding with rising education levels and a growing tendency among individuals to pursue their specific interests. Consequently, there has been a notable increase in special interest tourism activities to address these emerging preferences (Yılmaz & Akay, 2020).

The integration of technology into gastronomy enables individuals to diversify, personalize, and enhance their culinary experiences. At the societal level, this integration contributes to food security, sustainability, and economic development on a macro scale (Akmanoğlu, 2025).

Tourists of the digital age have become more environmentally conscious and increasingly inclined toward sustainable tourism practices. In this regard, wine tourism emerges as a prominent form of alternative tourism. In its broadest definition, wine tourism encompasses a multi-faceted process that begins with grape cultivation, and extends through wine production and tasting, to the exploration of the historical background of wine (Keskin et al., 2023).

Current State of Tourism in Italy

Italy is recognized as one of the countries with the most deeply rooted tourism traditions in the world. In the early 1980s, when international tourism was limited to a small number of destinations, Italy ranked second after the United States in terms of global tourism expenditures. With its rich cultural and natural heritage, Italy continues to be one of the leading countries in the global tourism landscape.

Although tourism activities increased after the 1990s, Italy experienced a relative decline in its tourism sector. However, policy interventions implemented after 2010 helped mitigate this decline, allowing Italy to reclaim its position within the competitive global tourism market (Petrella et al., 2019). Today, Italy remains one of the most prominent international tourist destinations. This status is not only attributed to its geographic location, climate, and scenic beauty, but also to the fact that it hosts approximately 40% of the world's historical, artistic, and monumental heritage.

When examining Italy's tourism typologies, in addition to the primary forms such as art, culture, and religious tourism, seaside tourism, thermal and spa tourism, natural parks, lakes, and theme parks, gastronomy and wine tourism also feature prominently. Particularly since 2010, Italy has attracted a growing number of visitors as a gastronomy destination. Supported by fertile agricultural land suitable for viticulture and the production of high-quality grapes, the country has emerged as a leader in wine production and wine tourism.

Although Italy holds a significant share in global wine production, its domestic consumption remains relatively low. As an alternative to stagnant domestic demand, wine has become a major export commodity and an economically valuable product. In 2016, wine tourism in Italy generated an estimated revenue of between 2.5 and 3 billion euros. Of the more than 14 million participants in wine tourism activities, the majority were day-trippers, while approximately 14% opted for overnight stays in wine tourism regions. These

figures suggest a strong need to integrate accommodation services into wine tourism destinations (Festa, 2020).

Visitors perceive wine tasting as a holistic experience intertwined with the cultural and natural environment of the region. The quality of the landscape, cultural richness, and the synergy between gastronomy and wine are key determinants in destination selection (Festa, 2020). For travelers who prioritize wine tasting and gastronomic experiences in their journeys, Italy stands out as a premier destination. Wine tasting is often regarded as a unique cultural experience—akin to visiting a historic monument dating back to the 16th century. It is estimated that between 4 and 6 million international tourists visit Italy's wineries annually, with numbers increasing each year.

However, research indicates that high-quality wines alone do not drive tourism demand. Visitors are drawn to experience prestigious wines in rural areas that are environmentally preserved and respectful of nature. This highlights the importance of the broader destination context in shaping wine tourism experiences (Colombini, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to examine wine tourism in Italy. Through a comprehensive literature review, information regarding the history of wine and the development of wine tourism was gathered, and the current state of tourism in Italy was outlined. The literature review was conducted to develop a theoretical foundation and to better understand wine tourism within the context of the research questions. The research seeks to explore the development of wine tourism in Italy, its significance within the broader tourism sector, and its cultural and economic impacts.

Accordingly, a theoretical framework was established through the literature review. In the subsequent stage, primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with wine tourists visiting the province of Naples. Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method. Although this technique is based on a set of pre-formulated questions within a defined framework, it allows participants to express their thoughts and experiences more freely (Polat, 2022).

Between March 21 and May 4, 2025, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants from 10 different countries who had traveled to Naples. These interviews aimed to explore the significance of wine tourism from the tourists' perspective, assess levels of visitor satisfaction, and understand local residents' attitudes toward wine tourism. The data obtained from these interviews are expected to provide the necessary qualitative insights to understand the dynamics and impacts of wine tourism and to contribute to the main findings of the research.

Following the literature review and semi-structured interviews, the collected data were analyzed and core thematic categories were identified.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of interviews conducted with tourists from various countries who visited Italy. Within the scope of gastronomy and wine tourism, tourist experiences, the current state of tourism in Italy, and tourists' perceptions of wine and gastronomy tourism were collected and analyzed. The section includes both the demographic information of the participants involved in the research and the insights obtained from the interviews.

Based on the responses provided by the participants, general assessments were made, and key themes were identified. The interviews were conducted in the province of Naples, Italy, between March 21 and May 4, 2025. Demographic characteristics of the interview participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Cauntry
Participant 1	Woman	29	Single	Spain
Participant 2	Man	38	Married	Germany
Participant 3	Man	35	Single	Türkiye
Participant 4	Woman	41	Single	France
Participant 5	Woman	28	Married	USA
Participant 6	Man	27	Single	China
Participant 7	Man	72	Married	UK
Participant 8	Woman	34	Single	Türkiye
Participant 9	Man	26	Married	Italy
Participant 10	Woman	24	Married	Italy
Participant 11	Man	45	Married	USA
Participant 12	Man	33	Married	Italy
Participant 13	Woman	31	Married	Italy
Participant 14	Woman	38	Single	France
Participant 15	Man	23	Single	Sweden
Participant 16	Woman	26	Single	Spain
Participant 17	Woman	68	Married	Germany
Participant 18	Man	66	Married	Germany
Participant 19	Woman	30	Single	Netherlands
Participant 20	Man	34	Single	Netherlands

Upon examining Table 1, it is observed that the participants are evenly split with 10 females and 10 males. The age range is concentrated between 25 and 55 years. Half of the participants traveled as married couples or partners, while the remaining 50% traveled alone, as single individuals, or with friends. The majority of the tourists interviewed originated from European countries, particularly Germany, France, and Spain. Additionally, there is notable interest in gastronomy tourism among domestic tourists.

When asked about their perceptions of tourism in Italy, the participants generally provided positive evaluations but also highlighted areas for improvement. For instance, Participant 15 stated, “Italy remains one of the most attractive countries in the world, but it is very crowded,” whereas Participant 5 commented, “The historical buildings and cuisine are incredible; however, it can sometimes be confusing for foreign tourists. More English signage could be added.” Besides historical and cultural richness, routes integrated with natural environments were particularly appreciated. Nonetheless, crowding and accessibility challenges elicited neutral or negative responses from some participants. Table 2 presents the most frequently cited responses by the participants.

Table 2: Participants’ Opinions on Tourism in Italy

Opinion	Number of Participants
Cultural richness is very impressive	5
Crowded and overwhelming	6
Infrastructure deficiencies exist	4
Tourism is very lively but has become commercialized	1
Very expensive during high season	4
Not suitable for individuals with special needs	1
Insufficient signage in foreign languages	4

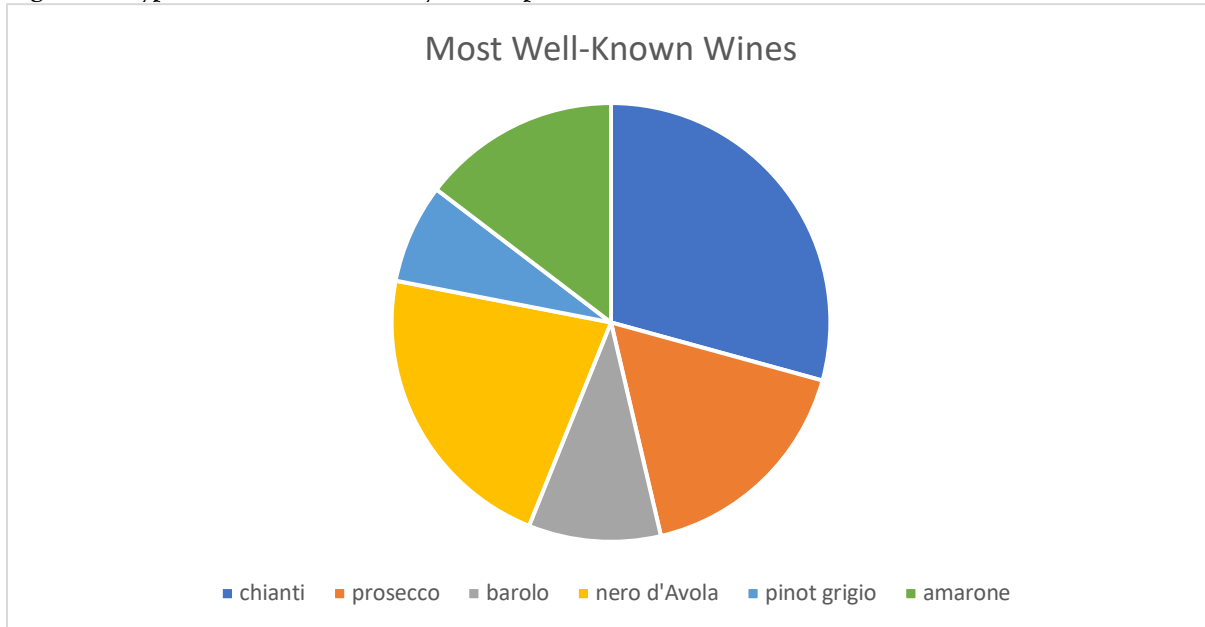
Lack of attractive features for children	2
Tourism activities concentrated only in certain areas	3

Eighty percent of the participants expressed complaints about overcrowding in tourism areas in Italy. To improve and diversify tourism, it was suggested to move away from popular routes and integrate lesser-known rural areas into tourism offerings. Participant K9 recommended, “Historical sites could be combined with modern activities. There are limited options for families with children; more family-friendly activities should be added.” There is a prevailing perception that tourism in Italy is expensive, and it was proposed to offer more economically accessible alternatives for young travelers.

The interviewed tourists come from various countries and represent diverse demographic backgrounds; however, they share a common interest in gastronomic tourism. High interest in gastronomic elements was observed even among tourists primarily visiting for cultural tourism. Local cuisine was frequently emphasized as a cultural discovery tool. Culinary experiences integrated with wine further reinforced this interest. The flavors of traditional Italian dishes, such as those prepared with olive oil, pastries, and both sweet and savory certified specialties, were perceived as appealing to a wide range of palates.

When asked about types of wine, the most frequently mentioned were Chianti, Barolo, Nero d’Avola, and Prosecco. In terms of knowledge about grape varieties, students and individuals with higher incomes tended to possess greater information. Three-quarters of the participants found the wine presentations to be professional and satisfactory. It was highlighted that interest in wine extended beyond specialists to include local guides, restaurant staff, and even residents encountered on the streets.

Figure 1: Types of Wines Known by Participants



Intent to Revisit Italy

All participants expressed a desire to travel to Italy again, indicating a high level of overall satisfaction and strong destination loyalty. However, shortcomings in the promotion of Italy’s tourism and wine tourism were highlighted. In particular, younger travelers, individuals with disabilities, and families noted a lack of inclusive content and expressed a demand for more comprehensive, accessible offerings. Participants emphasized that gastronomic elements and wine experiences significantly influenced their travel plans.

Question No	Main Theme	General Opinion
1	Current State of Tourism	Emphasis is placed on cultural and natural richness; however, infrastructure problems and language barriers are frequently mentioned. The crowdedness of cities creates a negative experience.
2	Diversity Suggestions	Suggestions include accessible tourism, affordable and family-friendly routes for young travelers, and increased promotion of rural areas.
3	Definition of Gastronomy Tourism	Definitions highlight integration with culture, the richness and flavor of local cuisine, and an experience-focused approach.
4	Wine Preference	Regional wines are favored, with Barolo, Chianti, and Prosecco standing out prominently
5	Presentation Evaluation	Participants noted a quality gap between luxury segment offerings and local experiences.
6	Grape Varieties	Classic grape varieties are well-known; students and professionals tend to have more detailed knowledge, especially those who have previously participated in wine tourism.
7	Participation Level	Participation is high, with voluntary and boutique tours particularly prominent.
8	Promotion Assessment	It is expressed that promotion is insufficient for elderly and special groups. Limited digital accessibility is also highlighted as a concern.
9	Future Potential	Wine tourism holds potential across multiple market segments.
10	Association/Activity Evaluation	Local initiatives are appreciated; however, it is noted that they receive insufficient support.
11	University and Local Contributions	There is a lack of adequate information regarding contributions from universities and local entities.
12	Positioning of Wine Tourism	Wine tourism should be integrated with culture, nature, and other alternative tourism types.
13	Development Suggestions	Requests were made for accessible infrastructure, family-friendly spaces, Wi-Fi availability, and foreign language support.
14	Personal Experience	The majority of visitors expressed satisfaction with their experiences.
15	Intention to Revisit	Nearly all participants indicated intentions to revisit, especially with a desire to explore different regions.

Based on the individual interviews conducted, the tendencies of tourists visiting Italy regarding gastronomy and wine tourism were observed as follows: The vast majority of participants indicated that local cuisine plays a significant role in their travel planning. Notably, pizza, pasta, fresh seafood, tiramisu, and olive oil-based dishes were highlighted. Participants also emphasized that wine experiences are an important aspect of their visit to Italy, expressing particular interest in tasting wines such as Chianti, Barolo, Prosecco, and Nero d'Avola. The most desired regions to visit included Rome, Milan, Tuscany, the Naples area (especially Amalfi), and Sicily.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to reveal Italy's position in wine tourism as well as the perceptions and experiences of tourists visiting Italy regarding wine tourism. The research findings demonstrate a strong interest among tourists in gastronomy and wine tourism. The results indicate that wine tourism contributes not only to cultural and economic values but also plays a significant role in international tourism mobility. The interviewed tourists emphasized that wine tourism is not merely about tasting beverages but serves diverse purposes such as cultural discovery, connecting with local identity, and gaining an authentic experience. This suggests that wine tourism has become integrated into the concept of "experiential tourism."

Regionally certified quality wines such as Chianti, Barolo, Prosecco, Nero d'Avola, and Amarone are among the preferred products of tourists. Another finding is that wine tourism gains greater value when integrated with gastronomy. The richness and flavor of the local cuisine complement the wine experience. Factors such as presentation quality, level of guiding, and wine-food pairing emerged as prominent elements influencing participant satisfaction. These findings support the idea that wine and gastronomy tourism should be planned in an integrated manner rather than as separate categories.

Alongside the positive aspects of wine and gastronomy tourism, infrastructural issues in cities, the lack of multilingual content, limited digital materials, and insufficient options for special needs groups, families with children, and middle-income travelers were identified as limiting factors. It is also considered that there are many rural areas outside of well-established branded destinations that could be developed for tourism. Investments in these areas could alleviate overcrowding in other regions and offer diverse experiences to tourists.

In conclusion, wine and gastronomy tourism in Italy holds significant potential for promoting local culture, supporting regional and economic development, and advancing sustainable tourism policies. However, to fully realize this potential, destination management plans must be updated with a greater focus on sustainability. In this regard, changes in tourism policies should prioritize gastronomy and wine-themed experiences, promotion of rural areas, collaboration with local producers, provision of language support to facilitate tourist experiences, and ensuring accessibility of these efforts via digital platforms. These strategies will contribute to the development of wine tourism and broaden its target audience.

For future research, it is recommended to apply the study to other tourist groups and conduct similar studies in different time periods and in well-known wine tourism destinations.

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