



TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS: THE CASE OF THE ETNA WINE ROUTE IN SICILY

Giuseppina Carrà, Iuri Peri

Department of Agricultural Economics and Resources Evaluation - University of Catania

1. Introduction

Tourism has many potential benefits for rural areas: a) it can be an important source of jobs for rural communities and of additional income, especially for those that are economically underdeveloped; b) it can also enhance local quality of life by the creation of synergies for infrastructures and support services in the countryside; c) it can support the local culture by encouraging restoration of historic sites; d) it is a relatively clean industry and may foster local conservation efforts.

Tourism strategies must be consistent with local goals and be sensitive to sustaining a community's character and traditions. Developing tourism that works in harmony with nature, culture and heritage is a goal of sustainable development. That sustainability both contributes to human well-being and is symbiotic with the natural environment.

The efforts to promote tourism can offer existing heritage and cultural attractions the ability to increase the profile of their operations and augment the market size and demand for their products.

The development of cultural/heritage tourism through the regional agri-food products can help to alleviate imbalances in the distribution of arts and heritage products in urban versus rural area, enhance and support the traditional culture and quality of life for residents in that area.

In recent years there is an increasing attention on the link between the marketing and promotion of agri-food regional products and tourism development within rural areas. Regional agri-food products have a great potential in qualifying tourist offer. Actually, many promotional initiatives connected to these products are taken by groups of actors inside the regional product supply chain and outside it within a strategy of the local tourist offer. But successful initiatives requires an organizational structure, modern entrepreneurial culture, investments and so on, of which, almost always, rural areas result particularly poor. That makes the binomial "rural tourism development – regional agri-food products promotion" rather complex and problematic to become a concrete and effective development factor.

2. The wine routes as instruments for developing tourism in rural areas

In the context of development of tourism linked to food regional products in the rural areas, it has seemed useful to analyse the **wine routes**, that can be considered one of the most interesting instruments employed in the valorisation of typical wines and their areas, which has been spreading in recent times through Sicily as well as through other regions of Italy.

The wine route is a sign-posted itinerary, through a limited area (region, province, denomination area) whose aim is the discovery of the wine product in the region and the activities which are associated with it. This discovery is carried out directly in the farms (enabling the farmers to meet the consumers) and/or in the spaces specifically organised around the wine produced (wine tasting centres or wine museums).

Wine routes are a kind of cultural itinerary which play their part in the overall tourist strategy of the Sicilian Region. Like other cultural itineraries, they correspond to a real or imaginary path, able to reveal, through a specific heritage, the elements which make up the identity of specific geographical areas.

Today wine tourism is going through particular growth due to the desire among city-dwellers for recreational and leisure activities in the countryside and to the increasing demand by the general public to learn more about wine, which has become a leisure product symbolising the discovery of an attractive lifestyle.

In this field the experiences are rather different and also the objectives pursued, due to the fame of particular wine, the nature of location (near large metropolis or area of intensive tourist traffic, or mountain or seaside resort and also depending on the way of working of the body running the wine route itself.

In Sicily as in other regions of Italy, the experiences of wine routes are recent and are backed by law giving them a framework and a support. With this law, enacted at regional level, Sicily has recognised the importance of wine routes and gives financial incentives to the working out of such itineraries.

The aim of the legislation is to valorise and promote the high specialised wine-producing areas, as well as the production and businesses present in those areas, with a view to regulate and increase what its integrated tourist industry has to offer the visitor. The law refers to a regulation on quality standards so that what is offered to the wine tourist is regulated, of high quality and uniform. Into these standards are included a set of financial rules which require those who get involved with the wine routes to improve what is offered to the tourists.

Information and cultural services, which have value in terms of the infrastructure of the industry, are promoted even with financial incentives: in particular the creation of and/or realisation of Museums of the Vine and Wine, the creation of Information Centres and the rationalisation of road signs within the wine district. Farmhouse tourist centres and vineyard enterprises which intend to come up to the minimum standards indicated in the regulations may take advantage of financial assistance giving support to help them raise quality. Such contributions amount, on average, to 50% of the investment, with limits which are fixed by law.

Particular attention is given to the Committee of promoters and the consequent Managing Committee, made up of not less than a third of the producers enrolled as members of the Wine Route Association. The Managing Committee will see that, in addition to the viticulturists and their quality standards, wine stores, restaurants and farm tourist centres can take part, and all those in the district who consider that they have an interest in being part of such an organisation. The role of the Managing Committee is extremely important as its task is to supervise the associates who have accepted the rules regarding the wine route, agreeing with its aims and accepting its minimum quality standards. Particular attention is reserved for the training of the staff, operators and the producers who subscribe to these rules.

From 2002 twelve routes have taken off in Sicily. The districts delimited as wine routes can include one or more wine recognised as CDO and CGDO. Much is being done operationally by the institutional bodies which are involved in these wine routes. Much remains to be discussed and much analysis needs to be done on the best ways of exploiting these opportunities and on the identification of the wine areas upon which the greatest efforts should be concentrated.



3. The Etna wine route

The Etna wine route (EWR) case provides important insights for tourism development in a rural area based on marketing and promotion of a well-known regional product, an excellent wine produced over centuries. This case shows how this product is used as a strategic component for rural development and for enhancing local tourist attractiveness. This successful wine route is based on the balanced development of entrepreneurial efforts in wine producing and capacity of exploiting the natural vocation of the area for tourism.

Etna is not only the highest active volcano in Europe (3.273 metres) and one of the most important naturalistic sites of Italy, but it is also a very rich mountain, where the extraordinary surrounding landscape is marked by man's presence: at a lower height, cut into the sides of the mountain, you can see lands in which pear, apple, hazel trees, vineyards and pistachios are grown. Viticulture has very ancient origins in this area, as testified by the discoveries of V century coins. Vineyards emphasize the conquest of nature contrasting with stark lavic landscape. Each winery becomes a cultural space that embodies both the unique aspects of the area and the cultural heritage of wine itself. The wine of Etna was the first Sicilian wine to obtain the guaranteed origin.

In the Etna area, the population lives within the numerous small centres, as is typical in the rural territory of Sicily, but it benefits from the proximity to a large city like Catania (500,000 inhabitants) offering tourism services and transportation infrastructures (motorway, railway, port, airport). The area is characterized by a great diversity of landscapes. In only a few kilometres, the traveller passes from the coast to mountain landscape of great natural value.

Quality is the first determining factor for the development of a tourist activity that creates value added in the local economy. In the very competitive tourism market, the first objective of a rural territory is to guarantee a high level of tourist satisfaction as well as a high level of quality in the development of tourism resources. It is only to extend this quality objective, taken into account in the Etna Wine Route (EWR), that the setting up of the partnership and the implementation of promotion actions will be meaningful.

The EWR has been formed on July 2003 and just from only few mounts has begun to work on a strategy for the development of the marketing plan. Marketing strategy assigns top priority to quality standards of products and services. Strong partnership is identified as an important component to the success of the marketing strategy. The presence in the partnership of public bodies as the local municipal authorities, Provincial Tourist Office, Etna Natural Park contributes to better coordination with other development policies.

4. A strategic approach for tourism development

Tourism planning on a multi-actor organization, like a wine route, is always quite difficult because this organization has limited legal authority and the actors have limited experiences in working each other. Problems can arise among actors about the distribution of efforts and marketing focus, so that improving the coordination is the first and the major challenge.

The multi-actor planning process is being developed by the EWR Managing Committee, supported by a technical staff. This marketing plan comprises an inventory of tourism resources and support services, the arrangement of suitable programmes for prospective target market promotional project and method of funding activities and projects.

At present the efforts are concentrated on the creation of a structured range of tourism products; in absence of which is not likely launching promotion activities. A marketing alliance between different tourism elements would offer the tourist with flexibility and choice, contributing to the development of a tourist image of the area.



Wine tourism combining the stay with some kind of activity is the main market growth area and it is beginning to be assembled. Marketing goals target special interest tourists, characterized by medium-high education and income, aiming to an authentic experience and a customized tourism service which cannot be run in large people groups.

To adequate the infrastructure and development information services as well as promotion initiatives, the emphasis is on funding that originates from multiple resources, with focus on establishing funding from Regional Operational Programme (EU co-financed programmes).

The purpose of this case study goes beyond demonstrating tourism development potential of EWR. Full consideration is given to assets, strategies and conditions that can facilitate and/or hinder the emerging and establishing of a tourism development process. The major issues as mission, objectives, strategy and actions addressed by EWR Managing Committee have been identified on the basis of interview to the members of the same Committee and discussed also with some relevant stakeholders (representatives from local institutions, tourism professionals, entrepreneurs). As result of this investigation emerged a framework for implementing a strategic plan. (See table 1).

5. Application of SOR analysis in Etna Wine Route

Strategic planning for an organization, like a wine route, needs a participatory approach developing the multi-actor planning process. The Strategic Orientation Round (SOR) analysis proved to be a valid tool to identify a number of issues and to formulate strategic options helping this kind of planning process.

The mission of EWR is to raise tourist activities in order to create value added so in the wine industry as in the local economy. EWR Managing Committee strategy focuses on enhancing the quality of tourism services and infrastructures provided to the visitors, it also emphasizes the importance of integrating different sectors and cultural spheres within a strategy of a comprehensive territorial quality of tourist offer.

SOR analysis started raising external environmental factors, opportunities and threats, referring to circumstances in which objective could be reached; in other words, conditions influencing how tourist development might take place in the area (see table 2).

Then, it continued focusing internal environmental factors, strengths and weaknesses, considering both tangible and intangible local assets that can aid or impede the EWR association to accomplish its objective (see table 3).

**Table 1. - Major issues addressed, actions and project progress ¹**

<p>1) Development of tourism resources contributing to the image of the area</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ route design according to the image of the area and to the reputation of the destination. ✓ inventory of the natural and cultural potential of the area (natural sites, monuments, fairs, etc.) ✓ get involved with local associations and public bodies in development programmes related to natural and cultural resources.
<p>2) Improvement of activities linked to communication to offer a real tourist product.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Organizing of the itinerary with adequate sign-posting and light informational equipment ○ Development programme for sites and monuments that appeal strongly in order to ensure overall promotion of the territory (joint action with local public authorities as Etna Natural Park, Provincial Tourist Office and cultural associations working in the community) ○ Implementing of tourism wine linking the reception to activity proposals (e.g. organizing special events, make possible involvement in sport or discovery excursions, etc.) ✓ Create a web site providing an information desk about accommodation, leisure activities and resources. ○ Supply the tourists with basic information tools (cartography, books, leaflets, activity programmes).
<p>3) Improvement of accommodation and catering services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Set up cooperation between producers, food artisans and restaurant keepers, by the partnership or making a network with other thematic itineraries such as typical products, handicrafts, gastronomic roads, etc.. ✓ Make provisions for tourist reception by associating hotels and farming and rural accommodation organizations. ✓ Enforce the regulations governing the quality standards of products and services, going further on minimum standards criteria.
<p>4) Tourism promotion as result of tourism development project</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Organize promotion around a common image of the area respected by all the partners, involving all media. ○ Present the EWR on the tourist market with a joint marketing tool (e.g. in important national and international fairs , EWR bar in the airport of Catania). ○ Organize demonstration and training meeting with tour operators and tourist agencies to make them incorporating the EWR destination in their own marketing and itinerary plans.
<p>5) Implementation and monitoring procedures</p> <p>Actions and project progress</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Quality training programmes for all those involved in the reception and selling services. ○ Creation of an appropriate coordination structure to monitor the quality standards offered by all enterprises involved (e.g. employing technical trained personnel controlling quality standard of products and services offered by each producer). ○ Provide satisfaction forms that can be sent back to the EWR head office.

Table 2. Opportunities and threats of Etna Wine Route

OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<p><u>1. Developing tourism niche markets</u></p> <p>Increasing tourism niche markets, such as cultural tourism and natural tourism, is an opportunity that rural areas could take offering natural and cultural sites.</p>	<p><u>1. Increasing competition with other regional destinations</u></p> <p>Tourism operates in an increasingly competitive market which is characterised by rising expectations among visitors and increasing variety and quality among tourism competitors and other leisure activities.</p>
<p><u>2. Policy and financial support</u></p> <p>Wine routes are backed by law giving a framework and financial support to the working out of such itineraries.</p>	<p><u>2. Seasonality of tourist flows</u></p> <p>High level of seasonality of the tourist flows in Sicily presents a real insecurity to those working in tourism.</p>
<p><u>3. Expansion and growth of tourism-based networks and ict</u></p> <p>New information and communication technology provides new opportunities for rural tourism allowing direct contacts with costumers, networks building up and products direct selling.</p>	<p><u>3. Over bureaucratic regulation and legislative pressure</u></p> <p>Over-bureaucratic regulation and legislative pressure is an disincentive for the emerging of tourist activity linked to wine and food producing.</p>
<p><u>4. Cultural/wine tourism is going trough particular growth</u></p> <p>Wine has become a leisure product symbolising the discovery of an attractive lifestyle. Wine estates are cultural spaces. They embody the ritual and mystique that surrounds the creation of wines.</p>	

¹ The marked lines with (✓) are starting or in progress action, the other ones are foreseen actions.

**Table 3. Strengths and Weaknesses of Etna Wine Route**

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<p>1. <u>Recognised destination with a sharp image</u></p> <p>Etna is not only the highest active volcano in Europe (3273 metres) and one of the most important naturalistic sites of Italy, but it also a very rich mountain, where the extraordinary surrounding landscape is marked by man's presence.</p>	<p>1. <u>Lack of Communication with tourism agents</u></p> <p>Tourism agents are not used to working with rural accommodation. Dispersed rural accommodation does not facilitate its integration in the tourist circuits.</p>
<p>2. <u>Richness of natural and cultural resources</u></p> <p>The EWR is situated within a natural park guaranteeing the protection of nature. This area possesses a really specific natural and cultural potential that can offer a broad range of experiences.</p>	<p>3. <u>Infrastructures and services for the visitor</u></p> <p>Etna's towns do not provide key focal points and service centres for visitor. Signage and information for visitor are not adequate. Other tourism infrastructure are insufficient (e.g. accommodation, restaurants, other facilities and services).</p>
<p>3. <u>Easy access and proximity to airport, motorway and cities</u></p> <p>The EWR area benefits from the proximity to a large city like Catania, offering tourism services and transportation infrastructures (motorway, rail way, port, airport).</p>	<p>4. <u>Tourism industry co-ordination and marketing</u></p> <p>Tourism industry in the EWR area is made up of many businesses, most of them small and independent. There is a clear need for co-ordination of marketing activity and for development of common standards in order to ensure that all those involved in the tourism industry are pulling in the same direction.</p>
<p>4. <u>Partnership working to bring forward a coordinated programme of actions</u></p> <p>EWR is in partnership with local municipal authorities for promoting concerted initiatives in the area.</p>	
<p>5. <u>Culture of enterprise and innovation</u></p> <p>Most of entrepreneurs in wine sector show entrepreneurial culture and propensity to invest in innovation.</p>	

After defining internal and external parameters summarized in the SWOT Matrix, their interrelation were been carefully assessed in order to implement the SOR analysis making out strategic options (attack, defense, clean ship and crisis) for EWR (see table 4).

Table 4. Strategic options for Etna Wine Route

Attack → Maxi-maxi strategy Total point=32
<p>SO1= S1/O3: Make use of new information and communication technology to promote Etna territory and its wine.</p> <p>SO2= S2/O1/O3/O4: Launch the territory into culture-wine-nature based tourism not only at regional level but also at national level and explore its international potential.</p> <p>SO3= S4/O2/O4: Public and private partnership, supported by regional policies and financial incentives, is able to produce competitive advantages over time.</p> <p>SO4=S5/O2/O3/O4: Innovative behaviour of entrepreneurs in wine sector is an important tool to give the necessary dynamism to tourist development in the area.</p>
Defense → Maxi-mini strategy Total points=21
<p>ST1=S1/S2/T1/T2: Communicate about naturalistic and cultural richness of Etna territory, enjoyable in every season, to compete with other well-known tourist destinations in Sicily and catch new tourist flows, especially out of season (in spring and in autumn).</p> <p>ST2=S3/T1/T2: Efficient public transport network within the Etna area and outside linked with the main infrastructures (airport, harbour, motorway) has become necessary for encouraging tourist stay and for developing future tourist infrastructures in this area.</p> <p>ST3=S4/T3: Develop public and private partnership to contrast with over bureaucratic laws and regulation in food and tourism sector.</p> <p>ST4=S5/T3: Create services to assist small enterprises to manage with procedures requiring a heavy administrative input. Help innovation and enterprise start up using specialists.</p>
Clean ship → Mini-maxi strategy Total point=13
<p>WO1=W1/O1: The tourist package in a rural area needs to be sold more widely creating a diversified offer and new communication channels in cooperation with tourism agents. Develop a diverse mix of wine and culture/nature based packages to cater to short term leisure visitors as well as multi-day destination markets.</p> <p>WO2=W3/O2 Provide pooling of public/ private financial resources to ensure investment needed to make the destination more attractive.</p> <p>WO3=W3/O4: Offering good quality services as expected by visitors in order to extend the potential tourist market</p> <p>WO4= W4/O1/O3: Initiatives have to be taken to create a specific organisational structure in place providing an environment for tourism business networking.</p>
Crisis → Mini-mini strategy Total point =15
<p>WT1= W1/T2: Lack of marketing through tourism agents narrows commercial competitiveness.</p> <p>WT3= W3/T1/T2: Poor services and infrastructure is a barrier to reach a reasonable standard for foreign and domestic tourism markets. Establish a number of quality standards programmes.</p> <p>WT4=W4/T3: To avoid that small-scale tourism entrepreneurs are discouraged from participating in the EWR programme, focusing the understanding of potential mutual benefits arising from joint action.</p>

5. Short final consideration

While tourism associated with wineries has shown significant growth in Sicily, Etna Wine Route as the others has a variety of challenges that need to be addressed as well as opportunities to be capitalized on to achieve its potential in the tourism marketplace. It should be clear that such routes enable the wine to include elements that are complementary resources of other modes of tourism, but which taken together form the backbone of a tourism product of great value.

Potential positive effects of the EWR would be improved by extending to other enterprises, especially with complementary activities, present in the area not yet adhered to the wine route. Through the partnership with other rural enterprises, each enterprise may have access to resources that it does not have itself. Furthermore, the process of creating new networks with other thematic itineraries (nature area, typical products, etc) develops economies of scale. They can be reached increasing the size of the network and the volume of exchanges between nodes and the number of activities performed.

As interest will grow and demand increase, the EWR may extend its scope to all those activities linked to the communication (for example, organizing special events, make possible joint participation in important fairs, works on public relations, etc.).

The case of EWR shows the importance of integrating different sector and cultural spheres into development strategies. This in turn requires more coherent intervention on the part of management.