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Why Virtual Wine Tourism Is More Important Than Ever in 2021 and Beyond

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360 Virtual Vineyard Tour. Modified Photo Credit: Pxfuel.com

The last few years have been very challenging for wineries around the world in terms of attracting wine tourists. Not only have many wine regions been threatened by wildfires, smoke, floods, record-breaking heat, and devastating frosts, but issues not related to global warming, such as earthquakes and pandemics, have also put a halt to wine tourism in many parts of the world. Though we all pray that these destructive events will end soon, the prognosis is not that positive. Many [experts](#) report that it will most likely worsen, unless drastic steps are taken.

An old saying advises that “crisis births innovation,” and one silver lining in all of this destruction is the growth of virtual wine tourism linked to wine ecommerce. As wine regions scramble to find ways to stay in touch with customers, many have turned to innovative solutions such as virtual tours, tastings, and events. These solutions have worked very well for [many wineries](#), allowing some to keep wine sales at even levels, despite natural disasters. Following are some of the successful methods that wineries have adopted, and will need to continue using in the future as a new method of engaging with consumers. Another positive of these virtual wine platforms is the fact that older consumers who can no longer travel physically to a beloved wine region, can now stay connected.

#1 Virtual Winery Tours

With virtual wine tours, tourists can “tour” the winery or wine region virtually by using their computer, tablet or smart phone. This can be accomplished with online videos, 360 photo tours, or 360 videos with VR glasses, and are designed to make the visitor feel as if they are really walking through the winery grounds. The intent is to entice the tourist to visit some day in person and, in the meantime, to encourage them to try the wines of the estate by seeking them out in a local retail shop or online. Links should be located on the winery or region website, as well as winery YouTube and social media pages. Following are some of the current virtual tour methods being used:

- ***Engaging Online Videos*** showcase the winery and allow visitors to see the entrance to the winery, step into the tasting room, walk through the vineyards, see the cellars, wander the gardens, and see the wines. These can be fun and whimsical, such as the one provided by [Buena Vista Winery](#) in California or classy and elegant as in [Antinori Winery](#) in Italy.
- ***360 Photo Tours*** are simply photos of the estate filmed in a 360 format and then edited so that visitors can click on a link to take them into another room, such as the cellar, the wine library, the vineyard, gardens, etc. It is a technique that is often used by home sales websites, and is less expensive to produce than professional videos. A good example is [Hammersky Vineyards](#) in Paso Robles, California.
- ***360 Video Tours*** are filmed with a special 360 video camera and professionally edited. Virtual wine tourists are invited to don a pair of VR Glasses, which can be purchased inexpensively online, such as the [Google Cardboard](#) headset, so they can experience the 360 video as if they were actually there. Some examples include this fast-paced 360 ride through the [Champagne region](#) or visiting [14 Hand Winery](#) in Washington State.

#2 Virtual Tastings

Virtual tastings allow customers to experience a wine tasting from the comfort of their home. Again, this can take place using a computer, tablet, or smart phone with the aid of interactive software such as Zoom, WebEx, or Facetime, and streaming services, such as Facebook and Instagram Live, Periscope or YouTube Live. The two major types of virtual wine tastings are described below:

- ***Streaming Large Group Tastings*** are useful because thousands of people can participate for free by clicking on a link to register for the tasting that is scheduled to be held on a certain date and time. Generally, visitors are also given a link so they can purchase the wine in advance and enjoy the wine along with the streaming video moderator, but this is not mandatory. The moderator is often the winemaker who describes the wine in a fun and engaging fashion, such as William Chris Winery in Texas, where he uses Facebook Live. This method can also be used by retailers, such as Wine.com, who has been very successful in attracting thousands of people to participate in their streaming tastings. Sessions are usually 30 to 60 minutes, and participants can ask questions via the chat function. A benefit of this method is the video can be taped and placed on the winery website or fan page so visitors can watch it in the future. In addition, since visitors must register, wineries are able to develop an email contact list for follow-up.
- ***Intimate Small Group Tastings*** are more interactive in nature but require more advance planning. Customers must sign up and purchase the wine in advance so it can be shipped to their house in time for the session. These private sessions are usually booked on the winery website in advance, and include a fee because the moderator is customizing the session to the small group. Examples include Clos Du Val Winery virtual tastings in Napa Valley and specialized tastings organized for members of the California Vintage Wine Society and Commanderie de Bordeaux. These sessions are usually limited to 10 to 30 people and utilize Zoom or other interactive platforms so that everyone can participate and ask questions in real-time. They are usually not recorded, but are designed to create positive experiences to enhance and maintain wine brand loyalty, as well as to promote wine sales.

#3 Virtual Private Wine Events

Building on virtual tastings, private wine events are more self-directed by consumers, who decide on the event centered around a customized theme or topic. This could include celebratory occasions

such as a baby shower, girl's game night-in, anniversary party, and many other occasions. Other themes could include cuisine pairings, holidays, or teambuilding sessions. In all cases, the consumer works with the winery to purchase the wine in advance, plan the tasting event, select event day/time, and agree on technology and interaction formats. Niche companies have started offering tailored services and products, such as blind tasting kits where customers buy kits delivered individually to taste with friends over a virtual party, or curated packs with add-on services such as live Wine Consultant to direct the tasting. Given the endless opportunities for customization, businesses could offer even more specific services to enhance the consumer's planning and wine hosting experience.

#4 Advanced Virtual Wine Experiences

The future of wine business is evolving with new technologies. Although still not widely available, and some may seem more far-fetched than others, there are some advanced technology options that could be used in the virtual wine experience of the future.

- ***Digital scent technology*** allows customers to smell a product, such as perfume, coffee, and wine via technology. Though still battling implementation obstacles, it could be modified in the future to become part of virtual wine tourism, allowing customers to “smell the wine” on a 360 virtual wine tour.
- ***Smart packaging technology*** is advancing rapidly and may soon be available for wine bottles, allowing consumers to know such important information as the temperature of the wine, best drinking time frame, and ingredients. Already, some wine companies have incorporated some smart packaging techniques such as “cold sensors,” QR codes linked to tech sheets, and augmented reality to create “living wine labels”, allowing their winery partners to showcase the stories behind their wines for consumers.
- ***3D printing*** has already been applied to different wine production and tasting processes. For instance, JCB Wines partnered with Ideum, a tech company with proprietary software that incorporates 3D printed glasses and coasters “connecting” to a smart multi-touch table, which identify where the wine glass is placed, the wine it, and digitally present personalized tasting notes and information for each wine. While this is not virtual, 3D printed glasses with virtual presentations might be further explored for home applications.

- ***Hologram technology*** projects “floating” 3D imagery before consumers’ eyes with the push of a button. While it is not widely used, partially because it requires specific projectors, some smartphone companies were looking into hologram-friendly phones. If this becomes more widely adopted in consumer technology, winery tours could be even further enhanced.
- ***Drone deliveries*** may be possible, although obstacles such as weight – a notorious challenge in wine delivery – and logistical regulations, privacy concerns will need to be resolved. However, there could come a day, when wine can be delivered via drone for a virtual wine tasting.

In summary, both individual wineries and wine region need to adopt virtual wine tourism components as part of their overall marketing strategy. Not only are they useful in times of crisis where wine regions are forced to shut down due to natural disasters, such as wildfires, earthquakes and pandemics, they are also a means of attracting the next generation of wine consumers, who have already integrated online experiences into their lives. Taking the time now to invest in some of the components of an online wine tourism system – linked to wine ecommerce – is a powerful first step towards creating a resilient business that can be successful during both times of crisis and calm.