

ENHANCING RURAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH WINE TOURISM: A STUDY OF SERBIAN WINERIES

Jovana Davidović¹²³, Danijela Pantović¹²⁴, Nikola Jakšić¹²⁵

¹ University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja,
Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia
e-mail: jsdavidovic@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

Wine tourism is a significant factor in both attracting visitors and stimulating the development of rural regions. It encompasses travel to vineyards, wineries, wine festivals, and wine exhibitions, where the central attractions are wine tasting, grape production, and the opportunity to explore wine-producing regions. Serbia, with its longstanding tradition in viticulture and wine production, holds substantial potential in this sector. The presence of quality wine offerings within rural tourism has a profound impact on the development of rural areas and local communities. To assess the role of wineries in the advancement of rural tourism in Serbia, an analysis was conducted of user reviews available on the Google Maps platform. This study focused on 10 selected wineries, chosen for their prominence in the sector. The data gathered from these reviews was processed using MAXQDA, a software program designed for qualitative data analysis. The results of this research indicated that visitors to the wineries generally held positive perceptions and expressed a strong likelihood of recommending their experiences to others. These favorable reviews suggest that wine tourism has the potential to further boost rural tourism in Serbia. In addition, the study included a SWOT analysis of the wineries and provided recommendations for the improvement of rural areas located along the wine route map.

Keywords: *rural development, rural tourism, wine tourism, wineries, visitors.*

¹²³ <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8002-2636>

¹²⁴ <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8605-8614>

¹²⁵ <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0935-5742>

INTRODUCTION

A wine region, as defined by Hall et al. (2002), is “a tourist area that consists of a combination of physical, cultural, and natural environments, giving each region a unique appeal that can be considered a wine tourism destination” (p. 13). Wine tourism, which takes place in rural areas, represents one form of rural tourism. The development of wine tourism requires vineyards and wine cellars, as well as well-marked signage and quality roads (Cvijanović & Ružić, 2017).

The connection between wine tourism and rural tourism has been examined from various perspectives over time. There was concern about the development of rural tourism through wine tourism, mainly because of the limited range of leisure activities offered by wineries and the weak connection between economic activities and the local environment (Tănase et al., 2022). Some studies have found that many wine enthusiasts seek a well-rounded tourist experience that offers the chance to explore picturesque landscapes, attend wine festivals, and engage with and support the local hospitality and culture (Byrd et al., 2016; Thanh & Kirova, 2018; Tănase et al., 2022). For some tourists, a particularly appealing aspect is the opportunity not only to taste a variety of wines but also to learn how to pair them with local gastronomic specialties (Gómez-Carmona et al., 2023). Findings also indicate a strong connection between wine tourism, rural and festival tourism, and cultural heritage (Oltean & Gabor, 2022).

Getz (2000) highlights that wine tourism offers a rich experience that stimulates multiple senses: taste (through wine, local dishes, and fresh grapes), smell (including the earth, vineyards, fermenting wine, cellars, restaurant kitchens, and fresh country air), touch (involving the wine production process, bottles, glasses, grape harvesting, and cooking with wine), sight (with scenic vineyards, clear skies, distinctive local architecture, traditional festivals, and the vibrant colors of wine), and sound (such as the pouring of wine into bottles and glasses, the sounds of winery equipment in use, and lively music). Overall, wine tourism engages the senses and evokes emotions, offering a pleasurable experience within a picturesque rural environment (Brochado et al., 2021). These sensory experiences contribute to the development of complementary sectors of tourism, such as rural tourism. In many regions, wine tourism has emerged as a key component of rural development. Its growth offers significant benefits both for individuals and communities, such as increasing winery sales, improving the image of the destination, and attracting more visitors (Getz, 2000). Vuković et al. (2020) confirm the association between respondents' positive perceptions of wine tourism and increased sales revenue, environmental protection, and intrapersonal and interpersonal communication.

There is a correlation between winery experience and visitor loyalty, especially regarding the brand, which proves that users who have a pleasant and unforgettable experience are more likely to promote it to others (Bruwer et al., 2013). Teng et al. (2022) confirmed that there is a strong relationship between wine tourism experiences and trust and loyalty toward wineries. They also stated that wine tourism has the potential to make a significant impact on tourism in rural areas.

In recent years, wine tourism has increasingly played a central role in driving sustainable development in rural areas. It promotes economic growth, preserves cultural heritage, and supports environmental protection in wine-producing regions around the world. In this context, the successful integration of wine tourism into rural development requires careful planning, stakeholder collaboration, and a commitment to balancing economic prosperity, environmental protection, and social inclusion (Milićević et al., 2024).

Wine production in Serbia fluctuates annually due to varying climatic conditions. Despite having highly favorable conditions for viticulture, Serbia's wine output remains significantly lower compared to other countries with similar natural resources (Sekulić et al., 2016). Serbia possesses excellent natural and additional resources that could enable it to achieve larger, more stable, higher-quality wine production (Petrović et al., 2015). According to official statistics from the Serbian Chamber of Commerce, there are nearly 20,000 hectares of vineyards in Serbia, with over 400 registered wineries (data from 2024). The question arises whether Serbian wineries can contribute to the development of wine tourism in rural areas, which directly impacts rural prosperity.

An analysis of user reviews on the Google Maps platform was conducted to evaluate the impact of wineries on the development of rural tourism in Serbia. The study focused on 10 wineries, and more than 450 reviews were collected for analysis.

The paper analyzes reviews to examine the components that affect the quality of wineries and determines the likelihood of recommending them to potential visitors. Their positive image contributes to the development of the entire area in which they are located.

Based on the findings, wineries offer wines of exceptional quality, which form the foundation of wine tourism and are essential for further development. In addition to the quality of the wine selection, the food accompanying the tastings and the service provided by the staff are essential factors that significantly contribute to the positive reputation of the wineries. The three wineries with the most reviews are thoroughly described.

MAXQDA version 24, a qualitative data analysis software, was employed in the research. In addition to the qualitative analysis, a SWOT analysis was conducted, complementing the conclusions regarding the current state of the wineries and highlighting critical areas for improvement.

The paper is organized into three interrelated sections. The first section, the introduction, offers a concise overview of the relevant literature on the research topic. The second section outlines the methodology. The final section presents the research findings, accompanied by a discussion.

MATERIAL AND METHODS OF WORK

The main goal of this study is to confirm the role of Serbian wineries in the development of wine tourism, a specific type of rural tourism. Additionally, it aims to provide recommendations for improving wineries, which will directly contribute to rural development, as they are located in rural areas. The analysis focuses on visitor reviews related to the quality of wineries in Serbia. To achieve this, an evaluation of reviews for 10 selected wineries (Figure 1) over the past three years was conducted.

These ten wineries have been rated as the best in Serbia on the Vino.rs portal. They also stand out for having a large number of reviews on the Google Maps platform. A total of 462 reviews were collected, covering the period from the beginning of 2022 to the end of 2024.



Figure 1. Winery map
Source: Authors

The reviews were analyzed using MAXQDA version 24, a software for qualitative data analysis. In the initial phase of analyzing the reviews, coding allowed for the grouping of codes and the identification of categories that were deemed important elements of the wine tourism experience. The Autocode system provided insights into numerical ratings (Figure 2).

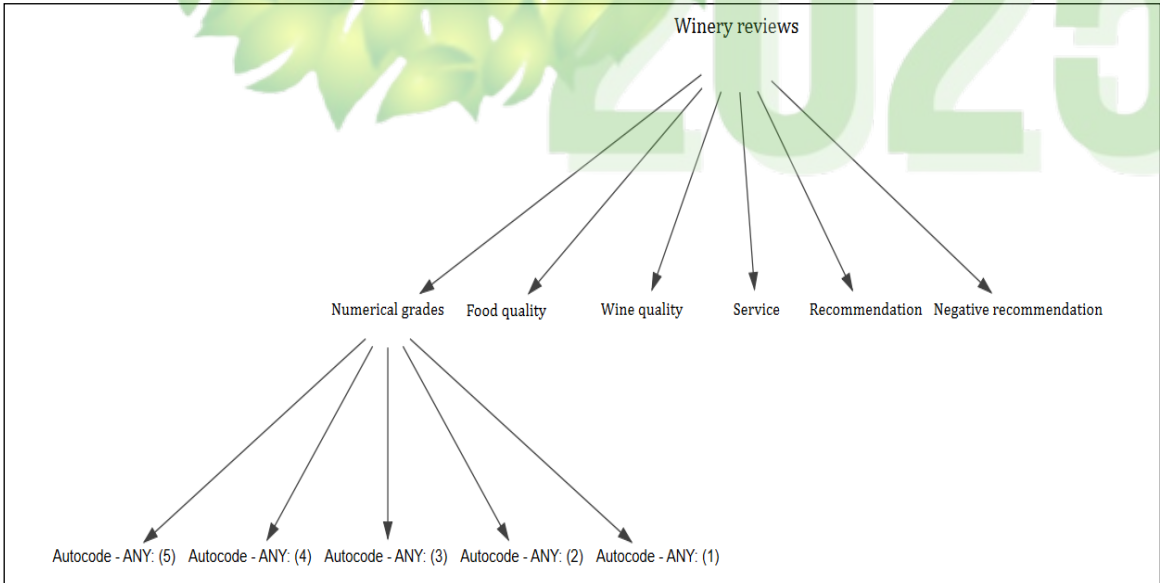


Figure 2. Code system
Source: Authors

In order to display the content of the reviews and explain the defined codes, a few examples are given below.

"A beautiful place and atmosphere. The interior amazed me—it creates a sense of comfort and coziness. The food (and desserts) is excellent, and the wines are even better. The staff is very helpful and friendly! The whole experience was truly enjoyable." (5).

"A winery with soul and style. It stands out from traditional Serbian establishments. Top-quality wines and dishes tailored for wine tasting. The service and interior are at a European level. All praise and recommendations for a delightful experience." (5)

"Great food, even better wine! Service is professional." (5)

Throughout the coding and review analysis process, the memo function was frequently employed to summarize negative feedback and establish guidelines for enhancing winery services. Additionally, the code frequency function was utilized to track how frequently the chosen categories were referenced.

The SWOT analysis was used in the second phase of the research. Based on the analysis of winery reviews and secondary data from selected wineries, their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats were identified. Recommendations were then provided on how to improve the current situation while also contributing to the development of the rural areas surrounding the wineries.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of reviews identified the wineries "Matalj" (Negotinska Krajina wine route), "Aleksandrović" (Šumadija wine route), and "Deurić" (Srem-Fruška Gora wine route), which are characterized by the highest number of comments. In addition to having the highest number of reviews, these wineries would be highly recommended by a large number of users. The reviews contained key components (defined codes), and their frequency is presented in Figure 3.

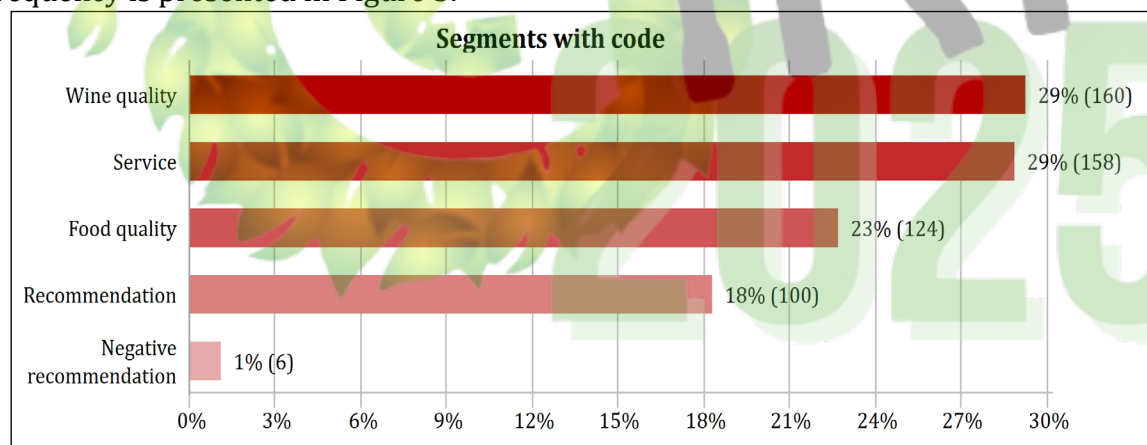


Figure 3. Code frequency
Source: Authors

The aforementioned function provided valuable insights into the dominance of codes, enabling the identification of the most prominent aspects of the reviews. The primary factor identified is the quality of the wine (29%), with the majority of reviews highlighting the exceptional selection and quality of wines offered. Following this, the quality of staff performance and the atmosphere within the winery itself were also significant (29%).

Additionally, the quality of the food emerged as a notable factor (23%), underscoring the importance of the winery's complementary offerings. Recommendations accounted for a substantial portion (18%), with only 1% being negative, suggesting that the majority of reviews expressed positive intentions for future visits. An impression is created that these wineries have loyal consumers who will further spread the positive image of the wineries, thereby directly influencing the increase in the number of visits to these rural areas.

The Matalj winery is characterized as a breathtaking place. It offers high-quality and delicious wine, while the service and food have been negatively commented on on a few occasions. A large number of reviews include recommendations and promises of a return visit. An example of a positive review is as follows:

"A beautiful place in Eastern Serbia, with a stunning view of Negotin and the surrounding area! A modern winery with exceptional wines from this region and a professional sommelier who will guide you through the details of each wine on offer, its aromas and flavors, the production process, and everything else you may be interested in about Matalj wines. The restaurant is phenomenal, with a menu tailored to complement the wine selection and incredibly beautiful and delicious desserts!"

Based on the comments, the Aleksandrović winery offers high-quality wine and food, with only four negative comments. It is frequently mentioned that online reservations are mandatory. Below is an example of a review for this winery:

"Great place to visit; besides their extraordinary wine, they offer great food during the tasting. The interior is also beautiful."

The overall impression of the Deurić winery is positive. The quality of the wine is highlighted in most reviews, and an example of one such review is presented below:

"The Deurić winery is a real discovery! Their wines are outstanding, with a perfect balance of taste and aroma. The ambiance is beautiful, the staff is friendly and professional, and the overall experience is unforgettable. I highly recommend visiting it to any wine enthusiast!"

Analyzing the reviews gave satisfactory results. The main observation that can be drawn from the research is that visitors to the wineries generally held positive perceptions and expressed a strong likelihood of recommending their experiences to others. The findings also highlight components that require special attention and, if properly presented and provided, can contribute to the improvement of wineries.

The quality of service emerged as the most criticized aspect among the core components of the winery experience. Specific issues raised included the rudeness and perceived incompetence of staff, which indicates a need for improvement in customer service training and staff professionalism. Additionally, there were concerns regarding the food selection offered alongside the wines. It is recommended that wineries pay greater attention to curating a more complementary and diverse food menu that enhances the overall tasting experience, ensuring that the food pairs well with the wines and meets the expectations of visitors. The winery's online system has received negative comments on a few occasions. Addressing these areas of concern could significantly improve the overall reputation of the wineries.

The second part of the research involves a detailed SWOT analysis, which is based on winery reviews as well as the current state of the wineries on the ground.

Table 1. SWOT analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>1. Geographical Diversity and High-Quality Terroir</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The wineries are located in different regions: Negotinska Krajina, Šumadija, Toplica, and Fruška Gora, allowing them to produce wines with unique terroir characteristics. - Fruška Gora and Negotinska Krajina are known for their mineral and fresh wines, while Šumadija is emerging as the center of modern Serbian winemaking. <p>2. Combination of Indigenous and International Grape Varieties</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wineries such as Matalj, Erdevik, and Aleksandrović are recognized for their premium international varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, and Merlot. - Despotika and Doja focus on indigenous Serbian varieties such as Prokupac and Tamjanika, contributing to the authenticity of Serbian wines. <p>3. International Recognition and Awards</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Matalj Winery's "Kremen Kamen" has won multiple awards and is often considered one of the best red wines in the region. - Deurić Winery was named the best winery in Serbia in 2022 by the Vino.rs portal. <p>4. Well Defined and Quality Wine Tasting Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For example, Aleksandrović Winery provides detailed information about different tasting packages, making it easier for visitors to choose an experience that suits them. <p>5. Development of Wine Tourism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Many wineries offer tastings and wine tours, with Aleksandrović, Matalj, and Erdevik being particularly known for providing high-quality visitor experiences. 	<p>1. Inadequate service within wineries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Poor quality of service within wineries due to inadequate staff training. - Mismatch between the food and drink offerings in winery restaurants. <p>2. Limited Online Presence and Availability in Foreign Markets</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Matalj Winery does not have an English-language website, limiting its accessibility to international customers and tourists. - Additionally, there is no option for online wine purchases through its website, which can hinder sales outside Serbia. <p>3. Social Media and Communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wineries are active on social media, but its content lacks a strategic approach and is not sufficiently informative to attract new customers and visitors. - The lack of clear information about wine tasting programs, available wines, and tourism offers may discourage potential visitors. <p>4. Lack of a Clearly Defined Wine Tasting Program on the Website</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Matalj Winery's website does not provide a well-defined wine tasting program, which may be confusing for visitors who want to plan their trip in advance. <p>5. Restaurant with Insufficient Online Information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The lack of details regarding the menu, working hours, and restaurant concept may discourage potential guests who wish to visit the wineries for a gastronomic experience.
Opportunities	Threats
<p>1. Growth of Wine Tourism in Serbia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Investing in website modernization and better presentation of the tourism offer could increase the number of visits and direct wine sales at the winery. - Wineries that offer accommodation, restaurants, and educational tours can attract a larger number of tourists. <p>2. Increasing Demand for Authentic, Organic, and Biodynamic Wines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prokupac and Tamjanika, as indigenous 	<p>1. Strong International Competition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Serbian wineries compete with large producers from France, Italy, Spain, Croatia, and Slovenia. - Without strong online sales and a presence in foreign markets, it is difficult to achieve significant sales outside the Balkans. <p>2. Climate Change and Unstable Weather Conditions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Droughts, sudden temperature changes, and extreme weather conditions can

<p>Serbian grape varieties, have the potential to become more recognized in international markets if properly branded and promoted.</p> <p>3. Enhancement of Online Sales and Digital Presence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adding an online store to the wineries' websites would expand their market reach and increase sales. - Regularly updating social media with engaging content can improve communication with potential customers and tourists. 	<p>negatively impact grape yield and quality.</p> <p>3. Underregulated Wine Market in Serbia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The export process for Serbian wines to the EU and other major wine markets can be complex, making it harder to distribute Serbian wines internationally.
--	---

Source: Authors

Matalj Winery and other Serbian wineries have great potential, but improvements in tourism offers, gastronomic offerings, customer communication, and online presence are necessary. Serbian wineries have the opportunity to become recognized in global markets, but strategic planning and modernization are essential to reach their full potential. Realizing their potential would significantly impact the socio-economic development of the rural areas in which they are located.

Regarding the tourism offer, it could be improved through the development of thematic parks focused on presenting the history of Serbian wine over the centuries, thereby providing an immersive and educational experience for wine enthusiasts and tourists. This would link various forms of rural tourism and provide a new experience for potential tourists.

Serbia is globally recognized for its excellent gastronomic offerings, which present a significant opportunity for wineries to promote not only their wines but also their restaurants. By combining high-quality wines with traditional and modern Serbian cuisine, wineries can create a unique wine and dining experience that appeals to both local and international visitors. By integrating gastronomic experiences into their promotional efforts, Serbian wineries can further enhance their appeal and establish themselves as must-visit destinations for food and wine lovers.

Serbian wineries invest very little in social media promotion, resulting in weak online visibility and engagement. Additionally, many are poorly positioned on Google search results due to inadequate SEO optimization, making it difficult for potential customers and tourists to find relevant information. Some winery websites are also not optimized for mobile browsing, which negatively impacts user experience and accessibility.

A potential solution would be for wineries to collaborate and enter the market together by leveraging blogs, online presentations, and joint marketing campaigns to attract new visitors from other regions of Europe and within Serbia.

All of the aforementioned can enhance rural tourism, considering that wineries are situated in rural areas, which subsequently influences overall rural development.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the literature review, it is evident that the provision of high-quality wine tourism experiences, particularly in rural regions, warrants growing attention. Investing in wineries in Serbia and providing a quality offer within them promotes the development of rural tourism, which further enables the development of rural areas and local communities.

The research analyzed visitors' reviews of wineries in the territory of Serbia. The results showed that the selected wineries have a strong reputation, with users expressing a willingness to recommend them and visit them again. The analysis also identified dominant elements in the offerings of these wineries, and based on these findings, recommendations for improvement were provided. While the quality of the wine is indisputable, other aspects of the service could be elevated to a higher standard. The SWOT analysis highlighted additional key issues that require attention, such as the need for wineries to have a richer tourist offer, an online presence, and to be active on social media. It also pointed to the necessity of improving hospitality offerings within the wineries. Furthermore, the rural areas located along the wine route map can offer various types of tourist activities that will further stimulate development. These include, primarily, activities in the field of cultural and historical tourism. Additionally, there is potential for offering active day trips that include activities like cycling tours through vineyards and nature walks and similar experiences.

These recommendations can also be applied in other wine-producing regions, considering the growing trend of rural wine tourism. Establishing connections between wine routes across countries in the region may bring mutual benefits, particularly when guided by the principles of sustainable development.

All of the above emphasizes the importance of the study. A limitation of the study is the subjectivity often associated with qualitative research. It's important to note that each review segment was analyzed objectively by comparing the content of the reviews with the numerical ratings provided by visitors. SWOT analysis is also based on the given reviews and the current real state of the wineries. For future qualitative research, it is recommended to conduct interviews with winery visitors in order to clearly convey the complete experience and provide a thorough understanding of visitors' attitudes and to take into account their suggestions for improving the content of wineries in rural areas.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research is supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development, and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia by the Decision on the scientific research funding for teaching staff and researchers at the accredited higher education institutions in 2025 (No. 451-03-137/2025-03/200375 of 04.02.2025).

REFERENCES

- Brochado, A., Stoleriu, O., & Lupu, C. (2021). Wine tourism: a multisensory experience. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 24(5), 597-615.
- Bruwer, J., Coode, M., Saliba, A., & Herbst, F. (2013). Wine tourism experience effects of the tasting room on consumer brand loyalty. *Tourism Analysis*, 18(4), 399-414.
- Byrd, E. T., Canziani, B., Hsieh, Y. C. J., Debbage, K., & Sonmez, S. (2016). Wine tourism: Motivating visitors through core and supplementary services. *Tourism Management*, 52, 19-29.
- Cvijanović, D., & Ružić, P. (2017). *Ruralni turizam [Rural tourism]*. Fakultet za hotelijerstvo i turizam u Vrnjačkoj Banji, Vrnjačka Banja, Srbija.
- Getz, D. (2000). *Explore Wine Tourism: Management, Development & Destination*. Cognizant Communication Corporation, New York.
- Gómez-Carmona, D., Paramio, A., Cruces-Montes, S., Marín-Dueñas, P. P., Montero, A. A., & Romero-Moreno, A. (2023). The effect of the wine tourism experience. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 29, 100793.
- Hall, C. M., Sharples, E., Cambourne, B. & Macionis, N. (2002). *Wine Tourism Around the World: Development, Management and Markets*. Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford.
- Milićević, S., Đorđević, N., & Kraguljac, V. (2024). Wine tourism and sustainable rural development. *Tourism International Scientific Conference Vrnjačka Banja-TISC*, 8(1), 419-428.
- Oltean, F. D., & Gabor, M. R. (2022). Wine tourism—A sustainable management tool for rural development and vineyards: Cross-cultural analysis of the consumer profile from Romania and Moldova. *Agriculture*, 12(10), 1614.
- Petrović, J., Krstić, B. & Stanišić, T. (2015). Analysis of production potential and competitive position of Serbia on the international wine market. *Economics of Agriculture*, 62(3), 813-829.
- Sekulić, D., Mandarić, M., & Milovanović, V. (2016). Motivation of travelers for participation in wine tourism in Serbia. *Economics of Agriculture*, 63(4), 1237-1252.
- Tănase, M. O., Dina, R., Isac, F. L., Rusu, S., Nistoreanu, P., & Mirea, C. N. (2022). Romanian wine tourism—a paved road or a footpath in rural tourism?. *Sustainability*, 14(7), 4026.
- Teng, Y. M., Wu, K. S., & Wang, W. C. (2022). Exploring rural winery loyalty: The effect of visitors' experience in Taiwan rural winery tourism. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 96, 32-41.
- Thanh, T. V., & Kirova, V. (2018). Wine tourism experience: A netnography study. *Journal of Business Research*, 83, 30-37.
- Vukovic, D. B., Maiti, M., Vujko, A. & Shams, R. (2020). Residents' perceptions of wine tourism on the rural destinations development. *British Food Journal*, 122(8), 2739-2753.