

Editorial note, organisation and contents of this special issue

Rural tourism has attracted growing interest amongst tourist markets and correspondingly agents of tourism supply, in times of revalued closeness to nature, healthy lifestyles with outdoors activities, demand for fresh, local products and original gastronomy, quest for unique local culture and ways of living, revealing not only interesting business opportunities, but also (re)new(ed) societal values associated to the qualities of territories and communities that have, for some time, been neglected in many countries.

The opportunity of promoting and preserving traditions, rising pride of local residents, improving income and well-being of rural communities are only some of the multiple benefits of this relevant tourism activity. Food and wine, local culture, landscapes and local people emerge as important resources of rural territories with great potentialities (Garrod, Wornell, & Youell, 2006), especially if presented in an engaging manner (Carvalho, Kastenholtz & Carneiro, 2021a; Rachão, Breda, Fernandes, & Joukes, 2021). Food and wine and, usually, landscapes, are anchored in a core activity of rural areas – agriculture –, with the latter creating the setting of the rural tourism experience, and offering interesting opportunities for multisensory experiences. Additionally, local people bring life to these territories, moulding culture and determining modes of development. Rural settings provide thus chances to contact with nature and traditional activities, and become the place for many host-visitor encounters and interaction, giving rise to memorable tourism experiences, to both visitors and residents (Carvalho, Kastenholtz & Carneiro, 2021b; Kastenholtz Carneiro, Eusébio, & Figueiredo, 2013; Kastenholtz, Carneiro, Eusébio, & Figueiredo, 2016; Rachão et al., 2021).

This new quest of 'the rural', particularly for leisure and tourism reasons, with large potential to additionally benefit other sectors, has also led to new hope for alternative development, and corresponding attention amongst politicians and regional development agents. Rural areas, indeed, currently face many challenges, mostly due to socio-economic changes that have occurred in agriculture, while rural tourism, particularly if based on endogenous resources and competences, professionally planned and developed, and well-integrated within the overall regional (economic, social and cultural) development strategy, may positively contribute to a more dynamic, resilient and sustainable reality of these territories. Naturally, this challenging context, with its multiple facets, causes, conditioning factors and implications, calls for increasing research efforts trying to understand respective phenomena, evolutions, challenges and opportunities, to ideally contribute with theoretically and empirically founded suggestions to sustainable rural development (see also Eusébio, Kastenholtz & Breda, 2014; Kastenholtz & Figueiredo, 2014; Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015; Lane, Kastenholtz & Carneiro, 2022; Saxena, Clark, Oliver, & Ilbery, 2007).

This special issue aims to contribute to this debate, with a selection of articles from contributions presented at the *International Conference TWINE - Co-creating sustainable rural tourism experiences with food & wine, local culture, landscapes, and people*, held in February 2022 (Kastenholtz, Carneiro & Cunha, 2022), organized at the Universidade de Aveiro. The selected papers were subject to rigo-

rous double-blind reviewing by a highly qualified scientific commission, the editors of this special issue are particularly grateful to. After a year of consistent work on this issue by all authors, reviewers and the editors, we are happy to publish a final set of articles that integrate empirical evidence from diverse geographical and cultural contexts (Portugal, Spain, Greece, Brazil, as well as multi-destination), and research initiatives with distinct methodological approaches (literature review, field observation, documental, statistical and geo-referenced analysis, surveys, interviews, the Delphi method, social media analysis). These papers provide a valuable insight in diverse phenomena and realities, as well as evidence-based reflections on the future(s) of rural tourism within a regional development scope.

The present edition integrates research focusing on rural tourism experiences, based on local resources, heritage and people, yielding sustainable local and regional development. It assumes the perspective of co-created tourism experiences, and accordingly distinguishes rural tourism experiences as: a) experiences lived and shared by visitors; b) experience opportunities developed and managed by destinations/agents of supply; c) experience opportunities developed and managed in partnerships and articulated governance structures. These three perspectives also define the structure of this special edition.

The first four papers provide an analysis of **rural tourism experiences** related to distinct food and wine products – wine and salt –, local culture, landscapes and local people. These papers also offer insights on how to improve these experiences, for example by integrating the products with their regional attractions and communities, addressing distinct visitor groups with differentiated experience provision, or by making use of recent and immersion-enhancing technologies. Cunha, Grilo, Alves and Kastenholz's (2023) study, undertaken on the **experiences lived in three wine regions of the Central Region of Portugal – Bairrada, Dão and Beira Interior** –, reveals the globally very positive experiences reported by visitors of the wine-producing territories, mainly at the sensorial and hedonic levels, primarily based on cultural heritage, nature and landscapes, with adequate maintenance and access to attractions and services also identified as crucial aspects for a positive experience. Nevertheless, it also reveals that, despite differences between the regions, wine is still not the main protagonist in many of the experiences lived in these rural territories. Permitting more active visitor engagement, as well as combining experiences of wine with elements of culture, people and nature, targeting distinct, more or less wine-involved visitor groups, are important challenges in this scope. Malerba, Kastenholz and Carneiro's (2023) research point at a particular, often **neglected market in wine tourism: the group of families with children**. After a conceptual and evidence-based debate on this market and its potential, the authors present a study of visitor reports, posted on *TripAdvisor*, regarding experiences at 26 family or child-friendly wineries identified in seven countries. They assess most important and distinctive winescape dimensions and attributes. Additionally, differences are identified regarding the most important winescape elements, according to the children's age ranges, visitors' origin and the winery's location. Results suggest the pertinence of addressing this special market, showing a range of relevant future topics for both research and management.

Moving from wine to the **most well-known salt tourism destinations of Portugal**, Silva and Carneiro (2023) present a netnographic study and complimentary data analysis, that permit characterising the dimensions of the salt tourism experiences. They also show that various experience dimensions – behavioural, hedonic and escape – and other factors – such as specific attractions associated with salt and interaction with staff – are likely to have a positive influence in the overall evaluation of salt tourism experiences, highlighting the relevance of these aspects, but also emphasising the unexplored potential of others. Passing on to recent technological opportunities for enhancing tourist experiences, Jorge et

al. (2023) discuss the **potential role of virtual reality** in creating more immersive and memorable wine tourism experiences, also leading to higher levels of visitor loyalty. The authors, accordingly, develop a set of hypotheses integrated in a conceptual model, and present methodological recommendations to validate it. They also discuss VR's potential to overcome seasonality, accessibility and, even, personal constraints, highlighting additional avenues of future research in the field.

The **second part** of this special issue offers insights on new products, approaches and paradigms that **suppliers and regions adopt to provide** co-creating sustainable rural tourism experiences with food and wine, local culture, landscapes, and people. The first case presented by Ramírez García, Gago García, Serrano Cambronero, Babinger, & Santander del Amo (2023) refers to **lavender tourism in Spain**, which they classify as being at an emerging stage in several regions. The authors discuss the potential role of creativity and experiential activities in promoting lavender tourism, also describing the structure of existing tourism products associated with Spanish lavender fields and discussing their importance for economic diversification in rural areas, which are partly threatened by severe rural exodus. In the next paper, Dias, Almeida and Hemsworth (2023) present **slow food**, an alternative agri-food system, and discuss it as relevant for innovation in both food tourism experiences and regional destination development. The authors explain that the slow food system is anchored on three interrelated principles - 'Good', 'Clean' and 'Fair' -, and provide a more in-depth perspective on the first principle. Using the Delphi method (with experts from the food industry, academia and public administration), they analyse how the 'good principle' of slow food is characterised regarding the dimensions 'Happiness and pleasure', 'Sensory aspects' and 'Health', while also revealing connections to the value of local embeddedness of these products. Last but not least, Araújo, Kastenholz and Santos (2023) discuss sustainability practices in terms of **water conservation amongst wineries within their wine tourism** operations, i.e. in businesses that combine very water-sensitive wine production with sometimes quite water-intensive tourism operations. Based on a qualitative, exploratory and in-depth approach, via interviews with owner-managers of wine companies that offer wine tourism experiences in Portugal, most relevant activities and services are identified, as well as respective means of water conservation. Water conservation practices were found to be mainly low cost and focused on mitigating water waste and reducing consumption, while other available measures are underused, possibly revealing a lack of knowledge or sensitivity regarding the topic.

The importance of the **regional or macro-level approach** when addressing sustainable development through rural tourism experience co-creation, based on local resources, products, landscapes, culture and people, calls for an articulation of supply and a better understanding of both their interdependencies and of their visitor market that is attracted by more than one supplier, namely interested in exploring the entire territory, its villages, small towns, attractions, landscapes and services. This leads us to the final and not less important part of this special issue, discussing the challenges related to developing appropriate collaboration structures and coordination approaches, namely through **networks and regional governance** structures (Bachinger, Kofler, & Pechlaner, 2023; Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). In the first paper, Dolci, Silva, Cristovão and Souza (2023) discuss and analyse **institutional incentives and constraints to the development of wine tourism** in the regions of two different countries - the Alto Douro (Portugal) and Vale dos Vinhedos (Brazil). The study found that managers of wineries tend to perceive still relatively high levels of competition among wine businesses, evaluating the existing cooperation as rather informal. Although some restrictions that limit wine tourism development are identified (e.g., lack of strategies, poor consistency of signposting), various incentives provided by

institutions are recognised to enhance the destination's value, namely financial incentives, construction of facilities and infrastructure, development of routes. This study from Portugal and Brazil is complemented by the second paper, written by Partalidou and Tilkeridou (2023), which sheds light on **reasons for nonparticipation in wine routes**, focusing the particular case of the Wine Route of Dionysus in Northern Greece. Factors related to human resources, institutional issues, lack of infrastructure that often leads to isolation, and specific characteristics of wine roads of Northern Greece, present some of the constraints identified by the authors for not adhering to this wine route. Focusing on market communication, Duque and Martins (2023) analyse the **use of social networks by Regional Wine Commissions in Portugal**, and show that all commissions (which are often part of wine routes) use digital networks, not only to provide information on their wines, but also to promote events and the tourism resources of the destination, thus clearly revealing the opportunity of linking wines with regional culture and social events. Nevertheless, the study identified different levels of impact of promotional activities and diverse use and of promotion of events and resources amongst the various commissions. More dynamic commissions in terms of posts and giveaways on social networks apparently generate more followers. Last but not least, Salvado, Kastenholz, Cunha and Cunha's (2023) article on the here suggested **stakeholder-entrepreneur value-co-creation pyramid in wine tourism** discusses the complexity of the wine tourism entrepreneurial ecosystem combining the grape production, wine making, and tourism sectors. They suggest a, conceptually developed, stakeholder-entrepreneur value-co-creation pyramid, which they validated with data collected through 44 in-depth interviews with respective agents from the Bairrada wine route in Portugal. Results unmask a rather individualist and functional/ transactional attitude towards partners, revealing little relational/ truly collaborative/ societal engagement, hardly stimulating partners' co-creative potential, suggesting action needed to enhance the relational quality of the network. The model provides an analytical framework for assessing the degree of cooperation and potential of innovative value-co-creation within the wine tourism ecosystem, reflecting stakeholders' relational maturity, and their ability to boost sustainable regional development through value-creating network dynamics.

We believe this special issue adds interesting and relevant evidence, ideas, concepts and models to the debate on rural tourism experience co-creation based on local resources and competences and its potential for enhancing sustainable regional development, while revealing multiple avenues of future research in the field.

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