

Bridging Heritage and Innovation: Communicating Wine Tourism in a UNESCO-Protected Region

It's an honor to be here today, discussing such a vital topic for our region and our industry. As a fifth-generation member of the Symington family, I feel deeply connected to the Douro Valley and its long history of wine production. My family has been producing wine in the Douro for five generations, and over time, we've come to appreciate the delicate balance between preserving our rich heritage and embracing innovation. Today, I'll be sharing some reflections on how we, as wine producers, can effectively communicate the cultural, historical, and environmental value of our region to the growing number of tourists interested in wine and eco-tourism experiences.

Let me begin by speaking about **our rich foundation**: the Douro Valley. This region is one of the oldest demarcated wine regions in the world, and its recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site is not just a badge of honor—it's a testament to centuries of dedication, craftsmanship, and respect for the land. For those of us involved in wine production, the valley is more than just a place of business—it's a living museum, where each terrace, vineyard, and riverbend tells a story.

Wine tourism is not just about tasting wine; it's about understanding the profound connection between the product and its place of origin. Visitors come to the Douro not only to drink our wines but to experience the history and beauty of a region that has shaped the wine for centuries. This interplay between heritage, history, and landscape is a powerful tool in how we communicate our wine tourism offerings.

For instance, at Symington Family Estates, we always emphasize the role that the land itself plays in the production of our wines. Our visitors often walk through our vineyards, learning about the distinct characteristics of the schist soil, the terraced slopes, and the unique microclimates that shape the flavor of our wines. This is not just an informative exercise—it's a way to connect them emotionally to the land, making their experience, and our wines, much more meaningful.

The UNESCO designation of the Alto Douro Wine Region, where our vineyards are located, provides us with an unparalleled advantage. It elevates the Douro to a global stage, instantly associating our region with cultural and environmental significance. But how do we translate this status into something meaningful for the tourists who visit us?

The UNESCO brand signals quality and authenticity, and for modern tourists—particularly the eco-conscious “4.0 tourists”—it adds an extra layer of trust. By communicating that the Douro Valley is not only producing world-class wines but also preserving a landscape that has been cultivated for over 2,000 years, we appeal to their desire for authenticity, sustainability, and responsible tourism.

For us, associating with the UNESCO brand is not just a matter of prestige—it's a responsibility. It reminds us that every action we take must be mindful of the heritage we are protecting. In our communication, we emphasize this point. Whether through our marketing materials, our website, or in conversations with visitors, we always bring attention to the fact that wine production in the Douro is not just about crafting a product, but about safeguarding a cultural and natural heritage for future generations. – sustaining it- “for the next generation”. Sustainability beyond environmental it's social, cultural and economic.

While we are immensely proud of our heritage, we also know that to stay relevant in today's world, we must innovate. The challenge is to do so in a way that complements our traditions rather than detracts from them. This is particularly true when it comes to sustainability, which is at the forefront of many visitors' minds today.

At Symington Family Estates, sustainability is not just a marketing tool—it's central to everything we do. We've transitioned a significant portion of our vineyards to organic farming, managing all of our vineyards with minimal intervention, reduced our carbon footprint by investing in renewable energy, and are working towards achieving carbon neutrality. Why is this important in the context of wine tourism? Because today's tourists are not just looking for a product—they are looking for an experience that aligns with their values.

Sustainability, in many ways, is the modern extension of heritage. By protecting our land, we are ensuring that future generations can continue to produce wine here. In our communication, we always stress this point: that the land we care for today is the same land that has supported wine production for centuries. By aligning the preservation of our heritage with modern, sustainable practices, we are not only protecting the past but also securing the future.

Now, how do we communicate all of this effectively to a global audience?

At the heart of any successful wine tourism strategy is storytelling. People don't just buy products—they buy stories, and wine, more than most products, is wrapped in narrative. From the tale of how our vineyards were first planted to the personal stories of the families who have lived and worked in the region for generations, these stories are what create an emotional connection with visitors.

In our case, we focus on telling the story of the Douro Valley as a place of both heritage and innovation. When visitors tour our estates, they don't just see vines—they hear stories about the centuries-old terraces, the traditional methods of foot-treading grapes, and how these practices coexist with cutting-edge winemaking technology today such as our modern automated lagares. We've found that when

people can see the balance between old and new, they leave with a much deeper appreciation of both.

But we also live in a digital age, and part of our communication strategy is taking these stories beyond the valley. Social media and websites allow us to reach a global audience, sharing the beauty of the Douro and the excellence of our wines with people who may never visit in person. Our digital strategy is not about replacing the in-person experience but about enriching it, allowing potential visitors to form a connection with the region before they even set foot in it.

No winery, no matter how historic or renowned, can communicate the story of a region on its own. This is why collaboration is so important. At Symington, we work closely with local tour operators, other wine producers, and regional tourism boards to create a cohesive and compelling narrative for the Douro Valley.

By pooling our resources and knowledge, we can offer visitors a more comprehensive experience, one that highlights the full diversity of what the region has to offer. And as we look to the future, these collaborations will be even more essential in ensuring that the Douro continues to thrive as a premier wine tourism destination.

To conclude, we in the Douro Valley—and in wine regions around the world—have a unique opportunity. We have the ability to offer visitors not just a product, but an experience that connects them to history, heritage, and the land. Our challenge is to communicate this experience in a way that honors the past while embracing the future.

By telling our stories, preserving our landscapes, and innovating in ways that respect our traditions, we can ensure that the Douro remains not just a great wine region, but a world-class wine tourism destination. Thank you.