



Executive Summary

Wineries are a vital, but understudied, component of Wisconsin's food and tourism industries. The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the relationships between wineries and local food producers. Specifically, we wanted to know why winery owners choose, or don't choose, to use local produce and/or other local foods for their businesses. Also, we wanted to build a stronger understanding of what the term "local" means to participants, since the term has been loosely defined in previous research related to local food systems.

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"I guess I think of 'local' as being close by, so a local food is something produced in my community, in my region, by people I know."

– Fox Valley winery owner

What is local?

All of the participants spoke of "local" as a geographical concept. About half of the participants defined a local food as a food that is produced in the same state or region as their respective wineries—for example, southeast or northeast Wisconsin. Within that half, two participants quantified "local" by mileage (For example, "A local food is something that is grown 40 miles from us."). The other half more broadly defined a local food as being produced within the state of Wisconsin.

Who is buying local?

All of the wineries sold grape and fruit wine (meaning the wine is made of fruit(s) other than grapes). The most commonly reported types of fruit wine were cranberry, apple, and pear.

All but one of the participants reported that their business used self-grown or locally grown grapes to make wine. However, these were not the only grapes that these businesses used; the participants reported that they also import grapes from other states, specifically California,

Methods and Participants:

We selected wineries for this study from the Wisconsin Winery Association's (WWA) directory of 44 members. Five wineries were randomly selected from each of the five WWA regions:

- ▶ Door County
- ▶ Driftless Region
- ▶ Fox Valley
- ▶ Glacial Hills
- ▶ Northwoods

After the random selection, interviews were solicited from winery representatives. Twenty-five phone interviews were completed. Interviews ranged from 5-20 minutes (See Appendix for interview questions). All of the participants were owners and/or managers of their wineries.

Michigan, and New York. Their reason for doing this was that their businesses could not produce enough wine using only Wisconsin-grown grapes.

All but one of the participants reported that their wineries sold food items. These foods were available to customers either through retail or as a snack-like compliment to a wine tasting (none of the wineries had full/commercial kitchens). The most commonly reported foods were artisan cheeses, sausages and mustards. All but one of the wineries that sold food reported that Wisconsin vendors produced their foods.

“We try to use as much local produce as possible. We hang paintings by local artists on the walls. Local musicians play here on the weekends... I’m really trying to make ‘local’ the foundation of this business. I believe in supporting my community.”

– Door County winery

Reoccurring themes

The following themes emerged throughout the interviews:

- **Quality:** Product quality was mentioned the most by participants. There was a shared belief that they can produce better wines from fresher grapes and fruits, and that it was easier to get fresh grapes and fruits in their communities, regions and state than by shipping them in from other places in the country.

- **Relationships:** Most of the participants stated that buying local allows them to build valuable relationships with (grape, fruit and food) vendors. Through these relationships, they can promote and support each other more effectively, which helps their businesses remain economically viable.
- **Cost:** Most of the participants said that it was more cost effective for them to buy local fruits (not including grapes), compared to buying them from another state.
- **Environment:** Most of the participants said that buying local was more eco-friendly than purchasing from another state. They were aware that buying locally required less transporting and packaging to get from the vendor to them, which resulted in a lighter environmental footprint.
- **Trendiness:** Most of the participants were aware that buying and eating local was “in.” Several stated that local appealed to “foodies” and that they were trying to cater to them.
- **Ideology:** Eight of the participants stated that they “believed in” buying local. They felt that it was important to invest in one’s community and state by supporting neighboring businesses. These beliefs were motivated by community pride.
- **Pride:** Six of the participants stated that wineries are tourist attractions, and that out-of-state visitors want to go someplace where they can “experience Wisconsin.” Selling local foods, and wines made with local grapes and fruits, is one way to promote Wisconsin’s food culture. These participants said that they were proud of their state and saw their wineries as an opportunity to showcase what it has to offer.

“A lot of people come here looking for a “Wisconsin” wine. It’s the same as how people come to Wisconsin wanting the cheese and beer... People want to drink wine that is unique, that you can’t get anywhere else. So we try to cater to that.”

–Driftless region winery owner

We recommend that Wisconsin wineries:

- Make the “local” concept a visible component of their brand (e.g., the Travel Green Wisconsin and Something Special from Wisconsin programs), in order to attract potential partners, tourists, and food and wine enthusiast who are seeking to support localness.
- Actively promote the benefits that they have experienced from using local agriculture within their industry, with the intention of their “success stories” influencing other wineries to adopt additional localness into their business models.

Conclusions

There appears to be several benefits to Wisconsin wineries that buy and sell locally. It allows the wineries to connect to their communities, both professional and culturally. In the case of fruit wines, it also allows them to make better quality products for cheaper prices. Finally, it allows them to attract customers with artisan products that are unique to the state.

Overall, the participants did not offer much when asked about obstacles to buying and selling locally. The major concern was the weather, which is out of their control. Almost every participant stated that weather was a major obstacle to growing all of their own grapes and fruits, or purchasing them locally. The unpredictable Wisconsin weather makes it difficult for them to go “completely local.”

Recommendations

Based on preliminary findings, buying local seems provide economic, environmental and social benefits to Wisconsin wineries. The practice of buying local makes the wineries marketable to customers, and it helps wineries become more culturally and economically relevant within their communities, regions and in the state.

We recommend that Travel Green Wisconsin:

- Put localness at the forefront when recruiting new members from the wine industry. An overwhelming majority of participants’ wineries use local agriculture, and likely qualify for TGW membership. Inform these wineries that they may already utilize practices that are in accordance with the program.
- Capitalize on the information provided about localness being a culinary trend. TGW could market wineries already in the program as spots that “foodie” tourists should patronize if they want to have a unique, diverse culinary experience during their time in Wisconsin.

Limitations of research

A few limitations of this research should be addressed. First, the information regarding the wineries’ sourcing practices was self-reported, not observed. Also, we only sample from one organization, the WWA, which only represents a portion of the wineries in the state. While we believe the interview data is informative, additional research that collected observational data would provide more reliable insights into the wineries’ purchasing habits.

Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview questions

Note: Interviews were conducted in an open-ended format and questions varied based on content of individual conversations.

- What does the term “local foods” mean to you?
- What do you see as potential benefits or drawbacks of using local foods for your business?
- Do you grow your own grapes or other fruits to make your wines? Do you use local grapes (or other fruits) grown by others to make your wines?
 - If so, why? OR
 - If not, why?
- Do you serve foods during your wine tastings? Are the foods you serve local?
 - If so, why? OR
 - If not, why?
- Do you sell retail food to customers at your winery that they can take home with them? If so, are any of the foods local?
 - - If so, why? OR
 - - If not, why?
- How does sourcing local fruits and foods fit (or not fit) into your business model?
- What could be done to make locally sourcing easier/more effective for you?
- How much of a factor is cost when sourcing locally?
- If you were aware of a program that rewards you for sourcing locally, would you be inclined to become a member?

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