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**Heritage in a Glass: Moldova's Journey  
Toward a Distinctive Wine Tourism Identity**

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## Abstract

Wine tourism represents a powerful driver for rural development and cultural recognition, particularly in emerging regions such as the Republic of Moldova. Despite its old winemaking traditions, production of high-quality wines, and the existence of several well-established wine routes, Moldova's wine tourism potential remains largely underutilized. International visibility is limited, promotion is fragmented, and academic research on the topic is still in its early stages.

This thesis explores the current state of wine tourism in Moldova, with the aim of identifying key factors that could contribute to the development of a distinctive and competitive national identity in this sector. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, drawing on interviews with key stakeholders - including representatives from leading wineries, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry, the National Inbound Tourism Association, Iter Vitis Europe, and other institutions involved in the promotion and strategic development of tourism in the country.

By analyzing stakeholder perspectives alongside existing promotional efforts, the study seeks to generate strategic insights for enhancing the visibility, appeal, and authenticity of Moldovan wine tourism. The findings are expected to inform more effective strategies and support the creation of a consistent, heritage-driven tourism brand for Moldova on the international stage. Moreover, this research could serve as a foundation for further academic and policy-oriented analyses within the broader context of rural and cultural tourism development.

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I dedicate this thesis to my family and to my country, Republic of Moldova. To my family thank you for your un-conditional love, patience, and daily encouragement. To my country - thank you for inspiring me to believe in transformation, for giving me the strength to dream of change, and for making me want to be part of that change.

“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”

— Eleanor Roosevelt

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# 1.Introduction

In the current period of tourism, where experiences are prioritized, visitors are more motivated towards places that offer unique engagement, stories, and intense life experiences rather than just incredible views. Among the many specialized forms of tourism emerging globally, enotourism or wine tourism has stamped a prominent space as a rich blend of cultural exploration, rural immersion, and gastronomic pleasure (UNWTO, 2016).

At its core, enotourism refers to tourism centered around wine and its surrounding culture. It invites travelers to vineyards, wineries, and wine festivals, offering experiences such as tastings, vineyard walks, cellar tours, and culinary pairings that connect guests to the land and the people who produce the wine (Getz and Brown, 2006). According to the UNWTO, wine tourism plays a critical role in strengthening local identity while offering a sustainable economic model that encourages year-round visitation (UNWTO, 2016). It is also a channel for cultural diplomacy and regional branding, as it allows territories to showcase not only their wines, but also their history, traditions, and hospitality (Charters, 2006).

Republic of Moldova holds a unique place in this growing narrative. Moldova, with a winemaking legacy dating back to the Roman Empire and over 120,000 hectares of vines (Wine of Moldova, 2023; OIV, 2022) is more than just a wine-producing country, it is a live wine culture. Its famed underground wine cellars at Mileștii Mici and Cricova are among the largest in the world, while celebrated wine regions such as Purcari, Codru, and Ștefan Vodă are gaining recognition for their quality, often protected under European-style(PGI) labels (Wine of Moldova, 2023). Despite its natural and cultural qualities, Moldova's enotourism business remains relatively unknown.

Key challenges such as low worldwide awareness, fragmented marketing strategies, and infrastructure limitations continue to prevent Moldova from fully realizing its enotourism potential. Still, motion is increasing. National branding efforts like the "Wine of Moldova" campaign, as well as globally promoted events like National Wine Day, are helping to reposition Moldova on the global wine tourist map (USAID Moldova, 2020). These projects not only honor Moldova's legacy but also invite the world to experience its distinctiveness.

This thesis aims to critically evaluate the present state of wine tourism in Moldova. The research will explore both the internal dynamics and external influences shaping the sector, including consumer trends, policy support, and cross-border partnerships. Through a marketing-focused approach, it will analyze promotional strategies, stakeholder involvement, and product development approaches.

Significantly, the thesis will include qualitative research via interviews with essential stakeholders and notable individuals in the Moldovan and international wine and tourism sectors. This method will provide a genuine, practical viewpoint based on personal experiences. Additionally, the research

identifies a notable deficiency in both scholarly publications and practical information concerning enotourism in Moldova. Existing studies in this area are limited, emphasizing the necessity for further exploration and evidence-driven development approaches (Guțan et al., 2023; Oltean and Gabor, 2022; Colesnicova and Iatisin, 2023). Ultimately, this research aims to offer informed, actionable recommendations to support Moldova's emergence as a fascinating and sustainable wine tourism destination.

This thesis is organized into five chapters, each addressing a key component of the research.

Chapter 2 presents the literature review, offering both international and national perspectives on wine tourism, with an emphasis on theoretical frameworks, development trends, and gaps relevant to the Moldovan context. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, detailing the case study of Moldova, the data collection methods and the analytical tools used to interpret the findings. Chapter 4 provides the core findings and discussion, including an overview of the interviews, insights from key stakeholders, and the strategic process of building a distinctive wine tourism identity for Moldova. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the study with key recommendations and reflections for future research and policy development.

## 2.Literature Review

### 2.1. Global Perspectives on Wine Tourism

#### 2.1.1. Definitions and conceptual framework

Wine tourism, often called *enotourism*, has evolved into a key segment of cultural and experiential tourism, offering a fusion of gastronomy, heritage, and rural immersion. At its essence, wine tourism refers to travel focused on wine production and consumption, where visitors engage in activities such as tastings, vineyard walks, cellar tours, harvest participation, and culinary experiences (Hall et al., 2000; Getz and Brown, 2006).

According to Hall et al. (2000), wine tourism refers to travel that is primarily motivated by experiences related to wine, such as visiting vineyards, attending wine festivals, or exploring wine-producing regions, where tasting and learning about wine are central to the visit. This definition highlights the role of both the product and its setting, aligning with a broader shift toward more meaningful and engaging tourism experiences.

Over time, the conceptualization of wine tourism has broadened to include multiple layers of economic, cultural, and psychological value. According to Carlsen and Charters (2006), wine tourism should be viewed through both macroeconomic (policy, infrastructure, branding) and microeconomic (winery-level practices, customer interaction) lenses. This dual perspective is useful for

understanding how wine tourism can influence both national strategies and small business models, especially in developing regions like Moldova.

Another important concept is the *winescape*, created to describe the full sensory, emotional, and aesthetic environment of wine-producing regions. According to Johnson and Bruwer (2007), a winescape includes elements such as vineyard architecture, landscape design, historical narratives, and even climate and seasonality, all of which shape the visitor's memory and perception. The winescape idea particularly relevant to Moldova-with its rolling hills, Orthodox monasteries, limestone cellars, and village hospitality, offers an underexplored but authentic winescape with strong emotional appeal.

In recent years, the concept of value *co-creation* has emerged as a crucial framework in wine tourism, emphasizing the interactive nature of tourist experiences and the shared role of both providers and consumers in shaping value. Campos et al. (2018) define co-creation as a collaborative process where tourists actively participate in designing their experiences, resulting in higher levels of satisfaction, loyalty, and emotional connection. Festa et al. (2020) further develop this notion within the context of wine tourism, proposing a model where sensory, emotional, and cultural dimensions are co-produced through activities that reflect the authenticity of the territory. In the context of food and wine tourism, co-creation may include participatory experiences such as grape harvesting, wine blending, cooking traditional dishes, or hands-on vineyard engagement (Festa et al., 2020; Campos et al., 2018). These interactions raise stronger memory retention, build cultural bridges, and increase the perceived uniqueness of the destination (Prebensen et al., 2013). For Moldova, this approach is particularly promising. Many of its wineries are small-scale, family-run enterprises that already offer personalized and intimate interactions. With strategic guidance and support, these interactions could be elevated into structured co-creation experiences-such as labeling one's own wine bottle, pairing indigenous grape varieties with local cuisine, or participating in seasonal agricultural rituals. Such activities not only strengthen destination loyalty but also reinforce Moldova's identity as an emerging, culturally rich wine tourism destination.

Wine tourism also overlaps significantly with sustainability. According to the UNWTO (2023), sustainable wine tourism supports environmental protection, cultural heritage, and local economies. Wineries that engage in responsible tourism practices such as organic farming, low-impact architecture, and local hiring- not only appeal to eco-conscious travelers but also reinforce long-term community resilience. Moldova's traditional low-intervention practices and indigenous grape varieties are natural strengths that can be aligned with this vision if marketed appropriately.

In summary, wine tourism is a multidimensional field encompassing cultural identity, rural development, and participatory experience. It is no longer limited to elite wine consumers but includes a wide demographic drawn to education, sustainability, and human connection. This evolution provides

Moldova with an excellent opportunity to craft its own model- one that combines its deep-rooted traditions with global realistic trends.

### 2.1.2. International development of wine tourism

Governance is a foundational pillar in sustainable tourism development. As Dredge (2006) explains, strategic alignment between national and local stakeholders is essential for coherent policy delivery in tourism networks. In this regard, several countries offer insightful case studies that illustrate the evolution and strategic growth of wine tourism under different cultural, institutional and economic conditions. Their experiences not only provide comparative value but also serve as valuable reference points for shaping a future enotourism trajectory.

Italy's prominence in the global wine industry is not only due to its diverse range of high-quality wines but also its deep cultural heritage and strategic approaches to wine tourism. The evolution of enotourism in Italy illustrates how wine production has been successfully integrated with heritage, gastronomy, and rural tourism, offering a relevant case study for Moldova as it seeks to build its own enotourism identity (Cinelli Colombini, 2015; Festa et al., 2020).

The formalization of wine tourism in Italy began in 1993 with the introduction of *Cantine Aperte* (Open Cellars), a nationwide event allowing the public to visit wineries and interact directly with producers. Organized by the *Movimento Turismo del Vino* (MTV), this initiative marked a turning point by promoting direct consumer engagement and transforming wine into a cultural and social experience (Cinelli Colombini, 2015). Events such as *Calici di Stelle* (Goblets of Stars) and *Benvenuta Vendemmia* (Welcome Harvest) followed, blending wine with local traditions and attracting a growing number of domestic and international tourists (Diacio, 2005). These initiatives were supported by both regional governments and private associations, helping to lay the foundation for a national wine tourism framework. One of the most important structural elements in this development is the legal establishment of *Strade del Vino* (Wine Roads), which map out tourist itineraries connecting wineries, agritourism sites, and cultural heritage points. These routes encourage territorial branding and collaborative marketing, serving as tools for regional development (Festa et al., 2020).

Tuscany illustrates a model of success in wine tourism development. Located in central Italy and bordered by the Tyrrhenian Sea, this culturally rich region is known for its scenic landscapes, historic medieval towns like Florence and Siena, and world-renowned wine routes (Wikipedia, 2025) . It is recognized internationally for its prestigious wines, including Chianti, Brunello di Montalcino, and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, which are enjoyed along scenic routes such as the *Strada del Vino e dell'Olio Chianti Classico* (Wikipedia, 2025). Structured itineraries in Tuscany offer tourists a holistic experience-combining vineyard tours, culinary encounters, and visits to olive groves and hilltop villages-creating an educational and sensorial journey (Assumma et al., 2022). According to

Donatella Cinelli Colombini, around 4 million people visit Tuscany's wine regions each year, engaging in a blend of tasting, cultural exploration, and gastronomy. The region's strength lies in its deep integration of small, local producers within a vibrant rural tourism ecosystem that also supports agriventures and heritage hospitality (Senese et al., 2012; ResearchGate, 2014)

Wineries often offer overnight stays, cooking classes, and direct encounters with winemakers, creating participatory and authentic experiences (Campos et al., 2018).

This model can be ideal for Moldova. The wine regions, such as Codru and Ștefan Vodă, are equally rich in tradition and could replicate Tuscany's balance of landscape, history, and hospitality by organizing themed routes and immersive stays.

Modern Italian wineries increasingly recognize the importance of architecture in shaping visitor perceptions. Notable estates like Petra and Antinori have integrated avant-garde design into their winery structures, enhancing both functionality and visual appeal. These innovations elevate the wine experience and reinforce regional identity (Assumma et al., 2022). Italy's enotourism sector has also been evaluated in terms of its dual impact on rural tourism and local economies.

Italian wine tourism caters to diverse visitor profiles, which scholars often classify into four main groups: wine enthusiasts, cultural tourists, casual visitors, and event participants (Cinelli Colombini, 2015). Each group demands tailored experiences, from educational tastings to seasonal festivals. The segmentation of wine tourists enables Italy to design specific products: exclusive cellar visits for connoisseurs, sensory workshops for cultural tourists, and open festivals for wider audiences. In Moldova, such segmentation is not yet established, but doing so would enhance tourist satisfaction and increase the appeal of our offerings. According to MTV (2020), Italy's Movimento Turismo del Vino has demonstrated how coordinated networks of wineries, events, and regional storytelling can successfully attract wine tourists and promote rural territories through immersive cultural experiences.

Italy has been proactive in using digital tools to market wine tourism. Winery websites, interactive wine route maps, online booking systems, and strong social media presence all contribute to visibility and accessibility. This digital infrastructure has proven particularly important since the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many wineries offered virtual tastings and digital storytelling (Canovi and Pucciarelli, 2019). For Moldova, where digital content is often fragmented or outdated, coordinated investment in digital marketing and online tourism platforms would help capture the attention of global wine tourists especially younger, tech-savvy audiences.

Italy's approach to sustainability is increasingly tied to wine tourism. Many wineries have adopted organic farming, energy-efficient production, and waste management programs. Moreover, rural development policies emphasize community integration, linking winemakers with local artisans, chefs, and agritourism providers (Festa et al., 2020). This inclusive model offers Moldova a template for

creating a socially conscious wine tourism framework. By partnering with local women, youth, and artisans, Moldovan wineries can foster inclusive growth and cultural preservation. In rural Moldova, Community-led tourism models could meaningfully improve livings while keeping traditions alive. Italy's enotourism sector demonstrates how wine tourism can drive rural development, cultural revitalization, and national branding. Moldova can benefit from several key lessons: build identity-based wine routes that integrate heritage, cuisine, and storytelling; segment and understand tourist profiles to design experiences suited to diverse needs; invest in architecture, aesthetics, and emotional design to elevate the visitor journey, promote digital innovation for booking, storytelling and international marketing; and foster sustainable and inclusive practices, involving local communities and preserving tradition. By adapting these lessons to Moldova's context, rather than copying them the country can create a wine tourism identity engrained in its unique terroir and traditions.

France stands as a global leader in wine tourism, faultlessly blending its rich viticultural heritage with innovative tourism strategies. The country's approach to enotourism offers valuable insights for emerging wine destinations like Moldova, aiming to develop their own wine tourism sectors.

The foundation of France's wine tourism lies in its extensive network of *Routes des Vins* (Wine Routes), established to guide visitors through the country's diverse wine regions. These routes, such as the Alsace Wine Route and the Route des Grands Crus in Burgundy, not only showcase the variety of French wines but also highlight the cultural and historical significance of each region (Van Westering and Niel, 2001). The integration of these routes into the national tourism infrastructure has been instrumental in promoting regional wines and fostering a culture of wine appreciation among both domestic and international tourists (Frochot, 2000).

Public sector involvement has been a keystone in the development of France's wine tourism. Government initiatives have supported the creation of wine routes, provided funding for infrastructure, and facilitated marketing campaigns to attract tourists. This collaborative approach between public authorities and private stakeholders has ensured the sustainable growth of the wine tourism sector (Van Westering and Niel, 2001; Frochot, 2000). FranceAgriMer (2021) emphasizes the success of France's wine tourism sector in structuring routes, enhancing regional branding, and involving stakeholders at multiple levels to promote sustainable rural development.

A notable example of France's commitment to wine tourism is the establishment of La Cité du Vin in Bordeaux. Opened in 2016, this cultural facility offers interactive exhibits, wine tastings, and educational programs, attracting over 2 million visitors by 2022 (Cité du Vin, 2022). The Cité du Vin serves as a hub for wine tourism in Bordeaux, providing a complete overview of global wine cultures and enhancing the region's demand as a wine tourism destination (Frochot, 2000). The National Wine

Road program was officially approved in 2004 as part of Regulation No. 554 (Regulation No. 554, 2004).

The digital revolution has significantly reshaped the landscape of wine tourism in France. Wineries have increasingly adopted online platforms for marketing, reservations, and virtual experiences. This shift has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated innovative approaches to engage with consumers remotely. According to Zamarreño Aramendia et al. (2021), the integration of digital tools enhances the hedonistic value of wine tourism experiences, fostering electronic word-of-mouth and brand loyalty. Furthermore, the Organisation Internationale de la Vigne et du Vin (OIV, 2023) emphasizes that digital trends such as virtual reality, immersive storytelling, and data analytics are transforming the wine tourism landscape by creating richer and more personalized visitor experiences.

Sustainability has become a cornerstone of the French wine industry's approach to tourism. Wineries are increasingly implementing environmentally friendly practices such as organic farming, energy-efficient production, and waste reduction. In the Bordeaux region, for example, local producers have adopted sustainable practices like organic farming and water conservation, which are marketed to eco-conscious travelers (Mora et al., 2021). Additionally, research by Vecchio et al. (2024) reveals that young adults in France show a strong preference for sustainable wine tourism, emphasizing environmental responsibility and social ethics in their travel choices.

France's integration of regional identity, digital innovation, and sustainable practices in wine tourism serves as an exemplary model. Moldova, with its rich winemaking history and unique grape varieties, can draw inspiration from France's approach by creating thematic wine routes that showcase its heritage and engage tourists in authentic experiences. By adapting these strategies to its unique context, Moldova can develop a distinctive and competitive wine tourism sector that celebrates its roots while embracing future innovation.

Georgia, often referred to as the "cradle of wine," boasts a winemaking history that spans over 8,000 years. The country's unique method of fermenting wine in qvevri-large clay vessels buried underground, has been recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, underscoring its significance in global viticulture (UNESCO, 2013).

The Kakheti region, located in eastern Georgia, is the heartland of the nation's wine production, accounting for approximately 70% of the country's vineyards. This area is renowned for its picturesque landscapes, historic monasteries, and a plethora of wineries that offer authentic experiences to visitors (Advantour, n.d.).

Wine tourism in Georgia has seen a significant uptick in recent years, driven by the global interest in unique cultural experiences and natural wines. Tourists are drawn not only to the wine itself but also

to the rich tapestry of Georgian traditions, including the supra, a traditional feast characterized by elaborate toasts and communal dining (Ghvanidze et al., 2022).

A study by Ghvanidze et al. (2022) highlights that the primary motivations for wine tourists visiting Georgia include the desire to experience the country's natural beauty, cultural heritage, and the authenticity of its wine production methods. It is emphasizing the importance of integrating cultural and aesthetic elements to enhance the overall tourist experience.

Moreover, wine tourism has become an essential component of Georgia's rural development strategy. It has adopted economic growth in countryside areas, provided employment opportunities, and encouraged the preservation of traditional winemaking techniques (Meladze, 2016).

The Georgian government's efforts to promote wine tourism are evident in initiatives like the development of wine routes and support for local festivals that celebrate the country's viticultural heritage. These endeavors aim to position Georgia as a premier destination for wine enthusiasts worldwide (Meladze, 2016).

Furthermore, the integration of wine tourism into the broader cultural tourism framework has been explored in comparative studies between Georgia and other countries. For instance, research comparing wine tourism in Georgia and Poland highlights the potential for leveraging wine heritage as a means of cultural exchange and economic development (Koblianidze and Sachaleli, 2021).

In addition to these developments, sustainable practices are increasingly being adopted within Georgia's wine tourism sector. Emphasizing the quality of the entire tourist experience, including the wine, landscape, routes, and local communities has been identified as crucial for the success of emerging wine regions (Wells, 2010). This general approach aligns with global trends in sustainable tourism, ensuring that the growth of wine tourism in Georgia benefits both visitors and local stakeholders. Rural areas represent over 80% of the EU's territory and are home to nearly 30% of its population, highlighting the vital importance of rural tourism initiatives across member and partner countries (European Commission, 2022).

The diverse experiences of Italy, France, and Georgia underscore the role of institutional coordination, cultural integration, and sustainable innovation in wine tourism development. Italy's structured segmentation, experiential design, and digital outreach illustrate how heritage and modernity can be harmonized to create compelling tourist experiences. France's emphasis on regional identity, public-private governance, and immersive wine education offers a model for strategic national planning. Meanwhile, Georgia's case reveals how authenticity, cultural pride, and rural revitalization can drive impactful tourism even in the absence of large-scale infrastructure. All together, these studies enrich the existing literature on wine tourism by providing grounded examples of how different countries have responded to global trends through locally adapted strategies. This comparative review not only

deepens theoretical understanding but also serves as a realistic foundation for future chapters. It frames Moldova's positioning within the global wine tourism and informs the analysis of local practices, stakeholder visions, and identity-building processes explored in this thesis.

### 2.1.3. Wine tourism and rural development

For countries like Moldova rich in viticultural heritage yet grappling with rural poverty and depopulation wine tourism presents both challenges and transformative opportunities. Rural development, understood as the process of improving life quality and economic well-being in sparsely populated areas, includes infrastructure, education, employment, environmental conservation, and social cohesion (OECD, 2020). In Moldova, over half the population lives in rural zones (World Bank, 2021), yet many villages suffer from aging populations, weak infrastructure, and economic stagnation (UNDP Moldova, 2020).

Wine tourism has become an innovative response to these challenges. It supports small and medium-sized enterprises, encourages community engagement, and is often rooted in place identity (Mitchell and Hall, 2006). Compared to mass tourism, wine tourism is more sustainable due to its seasonal and localized character, and higher per-capita visitor spending (Croce and Perri, 2022). Economically, one of its strongest contributions lies in employment generation. Wine tourism produces direct and indirect jobs from tour guides and tasting staff to transport operators and craft food producers (Torres and Momsen, 2011). It also promotes diversification, as wineries extend their services to include accommodation, food, festivals, and agritourism. In Tuscany, over 60% of wineries now earn more from wine tourism experiences than from wine sales alone (Cellini and Cuccia, 2019). Wine tourism has become increasingly important to Moldova's economy, creating employment and strengthening regional identity (Buzu, 2021).

Beyond income, wine tourism strengthens cultural identity. The revival of traditional practices, such as Georgia's qvevri winemaking has earned global attention and even UNESCO heritage recognition (UNESCO, 2013). Moldova's own traditions, aging wine in limestone cellars, cultivating *Fetească Neagră* and *Rară Neagră* grapes offer equally rich narratives. Promoting them as part of the wine experience would preserve not only the craft but also community pleasure. Meanwhile, infrastructure development is a common side benefit. France's Alsace Wine Route led to over €10 million in rural infrastructure upgrades, improving transport, signage, and digital access (FranceAgriMer, 2021). In Moldova, similar investments through tourism funds or EU partnerships could multiply benefits.

Wine tourism also advances social inclusion. Studies show that many SMEs in wine tourism are led by women, especially in South Africa, where 43% of wine tourism enterprises have female leadership (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2014). Moldova, where rural women often face underemployment, can replicate this by supporting women-led guesthouses, tasting rooms, or artisanal food production. The

global examples of Italy, France and Georgia offer Moldova a range of adaptable models. Italy's agriturismo, blending food, art, and wine in Tuscany, have revived many falling towns and offer a "slow tourism" template. France's structured wine routes offer lessons in branding, coordination, and regional storytelling. Georgia proves that even small, remote villages can attract international wine tourists if the experience is authentic.

Yet wine tourism is not a universal treatment. Rapid growth can strain natural resources, push up property prices, and dilute authenticity, as seen in parts of Spain and Italy (UNWTO, 2020). Economic leakage is another threat, when large investors profit while small producers are excluded (Mitchell and Ashley, 2010). Seasonality also presents challenges: employment and income alter sharply outside harvest periods (Telfer, 2001). Ecological pressure is another concern. Though often seen as "low impact" wine tourism can cause waste, traffic, and land conflicts if unregulated (Hall and Mitchell, 2008). There is also a risk that rural traditions become performative and lose meaning, marketed rather than lived.

For wine tourism to serve rural development in Moldova, several factors must be in place. First, support for SMEs is critical. Funding, cooperatives, and shared marketing platforms can help small wineries enter the tourism economy without needing to commercialize outside recognition. Second, Moldova must formalize its wine routes, using tools like clear signage, storytelling, and multilingual platforms, just as France has done. Third, investing in soft infrastructure such as hospitality training, service certification, and youth skills programs will elevate the tourist experience and ensure long-term success. Fourth, gender inclusion should be promoted actively. Women and young people are Moldova's most underutilized rural assets, and wine tourism offers accessible entry points for both. Fifth, Moldova must strengthen its online visibility. In a digital-first tourism economy, quality content, booking tools, and online storytelling are as important as the vineyards themselves. According to the Wine Tourist Guide of the Republic of Moldova (2021), Moldova's wine routes are structured around historical estates and modern wineries, offering thematic paths that integrate local gastronomy and rural landscapes.

Wine tourism is more than just an economic driver. It is a form of cultural recovery. In a country where rural areas are often ignored, and where young people frequently leave in search of better opportunities, wine tourism could offer a bridge between past and future. By respecting traditional practices, involving small producers, and fostering community pleasure, Moldova has the potential to shape a model of rural development that is deeply rooted in identity. From my perspective, rural development must be at the center of Moldova's national strategy. With over half of the population living in the countryside, empowering rural communities is not optional, it's essential. Wine tourism, when designed inclusively, can reveal new paths for education, employment, female entrepreneurship

and intergenerational solidarity in our villages. I believe Moldova's rural areas are not a weakness, but a strength waiting to be cultivated through thoughtful, authentic and community-based tourism.

## 2.2. Literature Gaps and Research Opportunities

Recent academic studies highlight that Moldova's enotourism landscape is still underexplored in international research, despite its strong cultural basis and rural authenticity (GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites, 2024).

Academic research plays a crucial role in guiding tourism development, particularly in niche segments like wine tourism, where heritage, identity, and rural development intersect. In countries such as Italy, France, and Australia, a wide body of literature has supported the design of effective wine tourism strategies, linking visitor behavior with branding, regional planning, and experiential marketing (Carlsen, 2013). This research foundation allows stakeholders in those countries to make evidence-based decisions, align with global trends, and foster sustainable growth.

In Moldova, however, the situation is remarkably different. While wine is one of the most significant cultural and economic assets of the country, there is a stark absence of peer-reviewed academic publications focused specifically on Moldovan wine tourism. During the writing of this thesis, there were encountered repeated difficulties in locating academically rigorous sources on the subject. Many of available materials were promotional, created by public institutions or donors, or unpublished theses from local universities. Even basic data on visitor satisfaction, tourist profiles, or stakeholder involvement were either outdated, unavailable in English, or not methodologically strong.

This lack of academic engagement presents a serious challenge not only for researchers, but also for policymakers and tourism developers. Without a strong research base, Moldova risks building its wine tourism strategy on subjective or fragmented data. Furthermore, this research vacuum means Moldova is absent from comparative analyses, scholarly conferences, and global discourse about wine tourism development despite its inclusion in the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes (IPN, 2023).

What follows in this subchapter is an analysis of the major gaps identified during the investigation ranging from the absence of academic literature to underexplored tourist motivations. These gaps are not only obstacles but also opportunities for future research to shape Moldova's tourism identity with greater clarity and confidence.

The most evident and fundamental gap is the near-total absence of peer-reviewed academic literature on Moldovan wine tourism, particularly in international journals. When searching platforms such as Google Scholar, Scopus, or ScienceDirect, the results for keywords like "wine tourism Moldova" are extremely limited. In contrast, similar searches for Italy, France, or even Georgia yield dozens, if

not hundreds, of articles examining enotourism through lenses such as regional development, experience design, and heritage branding (Carlsen, 2013; Gvantseladze, 2019).

For instance, a search on ScienceDirect with the term “wine tourism Moldova” yields zero academic articles directly analyzing the Moldovan case. Most of what is available online consists of secondary material, government statistics, donor-funded white papers, and local media coverage (Burbulea & Movileanu, 2022). Even Moldovan academic journals rarely feature methodologically rigorous articles on wine tourism. The few that do such as the work by Guțan et al. (2023) focus primarily on consumer perceptions or marketing but lack a comprehensive tourism-oriented approach.

This vacuum is especially evident in several underexplored themes:

- Wine routes and terroir identity: While Moldova has established three official PGI zones (Codru, Ștefan Vodă, Valul lui Traian), no published academic studies deeply examine how these routes are constructed, promoted, or experienced as tourism corridors.

- Historical-cultural positioning of Moldovan wine: Although the “Wine of Moldova – A Legend Alive” campaign has successfully leveraged folklore and history in branding (Wine of Moldova, 2023), no academic articles critically analyze its impact or compare it to similar narratives in countries like Georgia.

- Economic and rural impact of wine tourism: Unlike studies from France or Australia, where the economic contribution of enotourism is measured in terms of employment, tax revenue, and rural revitalization (Carlsen, 2013), Moldova has no public studies quantifying these impacts.

Moreover, Moldova’s visibility in academic conferences and international tourism forums is limited. Countries like Georgia and Croatia have actively encouraged academic publication and benchmarking to improve their tourism offers (Gvantseladze, 2019), while Moldova remains largely silent. This leaves a critical gap, not just in knowledge production but in international positioning, where academic recognition often precedes investment and visibility.

This absence creates a feeling of “academic isolation.” While writing this thesis, it was necessary to rely heavily on non-academic sources such as institutional reports (ONVV, ANTRIM), statistical snapshots (BNS, 2023), and even social media content. While valuable, these sources lack the depth, comparability, and peer review that give academic literature its authority. This makes Moldova difficult to include in regional studies, comparative research, or policy-oriented publications further marginalizing its presence on the global wine tourism map.

This situation calls for immediate academic attention. Moldova’s wine tourism sector is at a formative stage, and the lack of foundational studies is not just a reflection of the past but a threat to future strategic planning. Institutions such as Moldovan universities, ONVV, and tourism authorities should

collaborate with international research centers to stimulate publications, create joint studies, and support graduate students in developing deeper, comparative, and field-based research.

Another major shortcoming in the academic and policy discourse on Moldovan wine tourism is the lack of formal research involving key stakeholders namely, winery owners, tourism agencies, regional authorities, and local communities. While several reports from ONVV and USAID provide general overviews of the sector, they rarely incorporate qualitative insights or direct interviews that capture the strategic thinking, challenges, or aspirations of those most involved in enotourism development (USAID Moldova, 2022).

In contrast, countries like Italy, Spain, and Australia have developed extensive stakeholder-based literature that highlights how winery entrepreneurs, public tourism bodies, and regional consortia influence the direction and authenticity of wine tourism (Hall et al., 2000; Getz and Brown, 2006). These studies often use in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participatory action research methods to co-create tourism strategies grounded in local realities.

In Moldova, however, most available studies, including academic thesis and promotional documents do not include any formal stakeholder voices. The work by Burbulea and Movileanu (2022), for instance, focuses on the general promotion of wine tourism but does not feature firsthand perspectives from producers or tourism operators. Similarly, the article by Guțan et al. (2023) investigates tourist perceptions but excludes input from wineries or destination managers.

A further critical limitation in Moldova's wine tourism research and planning is the lack of detailed data on tourist satisfaction, motivations, and behavior. This type of information is essential for developing tailored visitor experiences, assessing destination performance, and refining marketing efforts (Carlsen and Charters, 2006).

In countries with more advanced wine tourism systems, such as France, Italy, and Portugal-national and regional agencies conduct regular surveys of wine tourists, capturing demographics, expectations, motivations, and satisfaction levels. For instance, Italy's Movimento Turismo del Vino regularly publishes studies on visitor profiles and trends, which are used to adapt promotional strategies and inform regional planning (MTV, 2020). France's INAO (Institut National de l'Origine et de la Qualité) also collects PGI- and PDO-level visitation data and tourist behavior statistics (Asero and Patti, 2009).

By contrast, Moldova lacks a centralized or publicly accessible database of tourist experiences and segmentation in wine tourism. The only recurring statistical insights come from BNS (Biroul Național de Statistică), and they are typically limited to general tourism flows, without disaggregation by tourism type or visitor origin (BNS, 2023). Reports from ONVV sometimes include estimates of tourist numbers at major wineries, but these are based on internal company records and vary greatly in methodology and reliability.

While the study by Guțan et al. (2023) made a notable contribution in surveying over 100 domestic wine tourists, it did not include foreign visitors, repeat travelers, or segment-based analysis. Moreover, it lacked long-term comparative data, which would allow policymakers to track trends over time. During the research, it was struggling to find any structured feedback mechanisms or satisfaction data at the wineries visited. Few had formal guestbooks or survey tools. While some monitored social media reviews, most did not track who their visitors were, what they expected, or how satisfied they were with the experience. This lack of feedback creates a dangerous blind spot, where service quality improvements are reactive rather than strategic.

Additionally, EU and donor-funded reports (such as those from USAID or EU4Moldova) occasionally mention tourist satisfaction in passing but rarely provide actionable insight or long-term analysis. Without regular data collection and evaluation, Moldova risks misaligning its tourism offer with visitor expectations and missing opportunities to strengthen competitiveness in the region.

To address this, Moldova should invest in designing and implementing a standardized tourist feedback and monitoring system, ideally integrated into the Wine and Travel app or Moldova.travel platform. This would enable wineries, tourism boards, and researchers to analyze trends and improve services in a more systematic and evidence-based manner.

Despite the evident challenges, the underdeveloped state of academic literature and tourism data in Moldova also presents a range of exciting research opportunities. Precisely because so little has been published or studied, Moldova offers a fertile ground for pioneering work that could inform not only national strategy but contribute to global wine tourism discourse.

One major opportunity lies in positioning Moldova as a case study of small-state wine branding. While much research focuses on dominant wine regions like Tuscany or Napa Valley, few studies explore how small, emerging nations craft their wine identity in a globalized market (Carlsen, 2013). Moldova, with its mix of post-Soviet legacy, ancient wine traditions, and rapid modernization, is well-suited for this type of analysis.

Another underexplored domain is post-Soviet rural revitalization through wine tourism. Georgia has received increasing attention in this area (Gvantseladze, 2019), but Moldova remains largely absent from comparative frameworks. Academic studies could examine how enotourism contributes to economic diversification, rural entrepreneurship, and community resilience in Moldova's PGI zones.

There is also a need for longitudinal tourist satisfaction research. Given the complete absence of long-term trend data, future studies could track wine tourist behavior over several years, identifying evolving expectations and the effectiveness of marketing interventions. Comparative studies between Moldova and countries with more established systems- like Italy, France, or even Georgia, could uncover what Moldova is doing differently and what lessons are transferable.

Lastly, stakeholder engagement models could be explored more rigorously. Researchers might study how local actors collaborate (or fail to collaborate) in designing wine tourism offers, and how institutional support (e.g., ONVV, ANTRIM) affects their ability to innovate or scale. This would require qualitative methodologies such as interviews, ethnographic observation, and participatory workshops.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1. Case Study Approach: Moldova

This research adopts a single-case study methodology, focusing on the Republic of Moldova as an emerging and under-researched destination in the field of wine tourism. The case study approach was chosen for its ability to explore complex, real-life phenomena within their contextual setting (Yin, 2018). Moldova provides a fertile ground for such review due to its unique combination of deep-rooted viticultural traditions, rural tourism potential, and recent institutional efforts to internationalize its wine tourism identity. Yet, despite these rich foundations, Moldova remains largely absent from the global enotourism discourse. This paradox forms the basis of the present study, which pursues to understand why a country with such authentic offerings still struggles to secure a place in the international tourism imagination.

#### 3.1.1. Historical evolution and current trends

This research adopts a single-case study methodology, focusing on the Republic of Moldova as an emerging and under-researched destination in the field of wine tourism. The case study approach was chosen for its ability to explore complex, real-life phenomena within their contextual setting (Yin, 2018). Moldova provides a fertile ground for such review due to its unique combination of deep-rooted viticultural traditions, rural tourism potential, and recent institutional efforts to internationalize its wine tourism identity. Yet, despite these rich foundations, Moldova remains largely absent from the global enotourism discourse. This paradox forms the basis of the present study, which pursues to understand why a country with such authentic offerings still struggles to secure a place in the international tourism imagination.

The history of viticulture in the Republic of Moldova is not only long-standing but foundational to the country's cultural identity. Archaeological findings reveal that grape cultivation and wine production have existed in the region for more than 5,000 years. Historical accounts by Herodotus and Strabo mention the viticultural practices of the Thracians and Dacians, ancestors of modern Moldovans. Wine served not only as a staple product but as a sacred beverage used in ceremonies and rites of passage (Iter Vitis, 2022). By the Middle Ages, Moldova's viticultural sector became increasingly knotted with the monastic system. From the 14th century onward, monasteries such as Căpriană and

Noul Neamț cultivated vineyards, producing wine for both religious and communal use. The reign of Stephen the Great (Ștefan cel Mare, 1457–1504) marked a flourishing period in Moldovan winemaking. Known for his efforts to protect and expand local culture, Stephen reportedly gifted barrels of wine to religious leaders and allies. Despite such growth, the 16th to 18th centuries posed major challenges. The Ottoman Empire, which exercised suzerainty over the region, imposed restrictive taxes on alcohol production and discouraged its consumption in Muslim areas. With the annexation of Bessarabia by the Russian Empire in 1812, Moldova's wine industry entered a new developmental phase. The Russian authorities introduced French and German viticultural techniques and encouraged the establishment of noble estates that blended local terroir with imported varieties like Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc (Iter Vitis, 2022). Moldovan wines gained international recognition by the late 19th century, winning awards at expositions in Vienna, Paris, and Moscow. However, the industry remained largely artisanal. A dramatic shift occurred after 1944, when Moldova was absorbed into the Soviet Union. Under central planning, Moldova became one of the USSR's top wine producers, supplying more than 60% of the wine consumed across the Soviet bloc by the 1980s (ONVV, 2023). Nonetheless, this era brought significant investments in viticultural infrastructure, much of which is now central to wine tourism. The limestone galleries of Cricova, founded in 1952, and Mileștii Mici, established in 1969, were initially created as large-scale wine storage facilities. Alongside infrastructure, the Soviet regime also invested in scientific research. The Institute of Viticulture and Oenology in Chișinău focused on fermentation science, soil mapping, and pest control. Overall, the evolution of Moldovan viticulture reflects a remarkable journey of continuity and adaptation. From ancient ceremonial practices to Soviet industrialization and today's heritage-based tourism, each historical layer contributes to the rich narrative that shapes Moldova's contemporary wine identity (Arhip, 2024)."

### 3.1.2. Present-Day Wine Tourism in Moldova: Key Regions and Experiences

In recent years, the landscape of wine tourism in the Republic of Moldova has experienced a significant transformation, reflecting both the revitalization of its wine industry and a larger shift towards experiential tourism. As Moldova positions itself within the European and global tourism framework, wine tourism has emerged as a strategic sector, helping to elevate the country's international image while supporting rural development, cultural preservation, and local entrepreneurship (ONVV, 2023). Today, Moldova's enotourism offering is not only about tasting wine but also about discovering stories, traditions, and communities that represent its national identity.

One of the most visible indicators of this shift is the integration of Moldovan wine tourism into international cultural circuits. In 2023, the "Wine Route of Moldova" was officially included in the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes program, joining other emblematic routes such as the Camino de

Santiago and the Champagne Trail (IPN, 2023). This inclusion is not only symbolic, but it also brings with it a framework of standards and cooperation that encourages sustainable tourism, cross-border marketing, and EU-wide visibility. Such recognition was made possible through consistent institutional efforts led by the National Office of Vine and Wine (ONVV), which has championed Moldova's branding as "The Grape Country" and promoted wine regions through campaigns and digital platforms such as Wine Of Moldova (Wine of Moldova, 2023).

The center of this enotouristic revival lies in the reinvention of Moldova's wine regions as destinations of immersive rural experiences. The main routes, Codru, Ștefan Vodă, and Valul lui Traian are no longer seen simply as production zones but as cultural territories where wine is intertwined with heritage, gastronomy, and local life (Arhip, 2024, pp. 41–45). The following figure illustrates the official wine tourism routes of Moldova, highlighting the three key PGI, along with their associated wineries and tourist attractions.

**Figure 3.1. Wine Routes of Moldova: Codru, Ștefan Vodă, and Valul lui Traian**



Source: Moldova Travel, 2024, available at: <https://moldova.travel/en/wine-holidays>

The map highlights both established wineries and emerging destinations, reflecting the country's growing investment in rural and wine tourism infrastructure (Moldova Travel, 2024). Each of these regions embodies a distinctive terroir and cultural identity, and they form the backbone of Moldova's enotourism strategy promoted under the national "Wine of Moldova" brand launched in 2014 (Wine of Moldova, 2023). The Codru wine route, located in central Moldova, is the most historic and traditionally developed viticultural area. Its moderate climate, forested hills, and fertile soils are particularly favorable for producing aromatic whites and sparkling wines. This region has been at the basis of Moldovan winemaking since the 15th century and was favored historically by noble families and monastic communities for its ideal natural conditions and underground cellars (Arhip, 2024, pp. 42–44). Today, Codru includes Moldova's most famous wine destinations: Cricova and Mileștii Mici, both of which attract significant domestic and international tourism. Cricova's underground labyrinths, stretching over 120 km, are not only wine storage spaces but also serve as state-level cultural venues and official diplomatic sites (ONVV, 2023). These cellars host millions of bottles and offer themed tasting halls that fuse Soviet heritage with modern storytelling techniques.

Mileștii Mici, which holds the Guinness World Record for the largest wine collection in the world, has similarly embraced its role in promoting wine tourism and national identity (Guinness World Records, 2024). According to data from ONVV, the Codru region hosts over 60% of Moldova's wine tourists, largely due to its proximity to Chișinău (the capital of Moldova) and its concentration of both historical and newly modernized wineries (ONVV, 2023). Castel Mimi, located in Bulboaca village, has become a key site for high-end tourism and cultural events. Originally built in 1893 and fully restored in the last decade through private and EU investment, it now includes a hotel, fine dining restaurant, wine museum, and multi-purpose cultural space (Wine of Moldova, 2022). Castel Mimi's transformation from neglected heritage to luxury destination reflects Moldova's shift from bulk production to premium, experience-driven tourism.

The Ștefan Vodă wine route, located in the southeast, is defined by a drier, sunnier climate and sandy soils ideal for full-bodied reds and structured whites. The region gained PGI status in the early 2010s and has become known for its high-quality viticulture and revival of indigenous varieties such as Rară Neagră and Feteasca Albă (ONVV, 2021). Its flagship winery is Purcari, established in 1827 and awarded multiple international medals. Purcari has invested in extensive tourism infrastructure including lakefront villas, a museum, and elite wine tastings. According to their tourism data, they welcomed more than 25,000 visitors in 2023 alone, many of them from Poland, Romania, and China (Purcari, 2023). The region also benefits from its inclusion in the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes Program, which reinforces cross-border cooperation, European visibility, and heritage-based tourism (IPN, 2023). What makes Ștefan Vodă especially compelling from a touristic perspective is its blend

of viticultural prestige and rural simplicity. Many wineries here integrate traditional gastronomy and folklore into their visitor experiences, creating an authentic and emotionally resonant journey. In interviews with local winemakers conducted during my research, several noted that tourists increasingly ask not only about wine, but about the story behind it the village, the family, the tradition. Digital transformation trends in wine tourism are increasingly shaped by user-oriented web platforms, which enhance the storytelling dimension of winery websites (Zamarreño Aramendia et al., 2021).

In the south, the Valul lui Traian wine route represents one of the most promising yet underutilized assets in Moldova's enotourism development. Named after the Roman defensive wall ("Trajan's Wall") that once marked this territory, the region has a hot, dry climate and limestone soils ideal for structured, mineral-rich reds and whites (Arhip, 2024, pp. 44–45). It gained PGI status as part of Moldova's post-2005 wine sector modernization. What distinguishes this route is its multicultural character: it is home to Gagauz, Bulgarian, and Ukrainian minorities, and this diversity is reflected in the cuisine, festivals, and guest hospitality available to tourists (ONVV, 2023). Among the standout wineries in this region is Château Vartely, which despite being geographically situated closer to Codru, sources grapes from southern vineyards and integrates southern elements into its wine portfolio. The winery offers luxurious lodging, educational tastings, and panoramic tours, and has increasingly featured in Moldova's international promotional materials (Wine of Moldova, 2023). Smaller but equally dynamic producers such as Et Cetera and Vinuri de Comrat are also drawing attention through their organic practices, family-run models, and engagement with international enotourism platforms. Another remarkable achievement for the region came in 2022, when Făutor Winery's *Ne-gre 2017*—a blend of Fetească Neagră and Rară Neagră—was named the Best Red Wine in the World at the Concours Mondial de Bruxelles. Selected from over 5,000 international entries, the wine's success brought global attention to Moldova's indigenous varieties and validated the potential of the Valul lui Traian PGI as a premium wine-growing zone (Concours Mondial de Bruxelles, 2022). According to ONVV (2023), tourist visits in Valul lui Traian grew by 45% between 2019 and 2023, indicating growing interest in the southern region's offerings.

The recognition of these three routes as central pillars of Moldova's wine tourism was not spontaneous. It emerged from a structured reform and branding process initiated by ONVV and international partners such as USAID. Starting in 2010, detailed terroir mapping and quality assurance programs laid the foundation for route designation, with official route launches occurring in 2014–2015 under the "Wine of Moldova" campaign (USAID Moldova, 2015). These routes were then promoted through brochures, digital maps, and wine festivals, aligning Moldova with EU tourism quality standards. Johnson and Bruwer (2007) argue that regional brand image significantly influences consumer

perception of wine quality. In Moldova's case, strengthening the connection between place identity and wine image is essential for building a trusted and recognizable wine tourism brand.

The strategic value of these wine routes lies not only in their economic or tourism potential, but in their power to narrate Moldova's evolving identity. Codru represents the classical heart of Moldovan winemaking steeped in tradition, elegant, and rooted in national pride. Ștefan Vodă offers a bold narrative of revival and aspiration, demonstrating how quality and storytelling can elevate a region's global image. Valul lui Traian, meanwhile, invites a more intimate exploration of Moldova's diversity, offering unexpected richness to visitors who seek cultural depth. Together, these routes serve as more than tourism corridors they are curated journeys through Moldova's past, present, and future.

### 3.1.3. Tourism Dynamics: Data and Festive Landmarks in Moldova's Wine Sector

According to ONVV statistics, Moldova now attracts over 200,000 wine tourists annually, with a growing share from Western Europe, the US and Asia (ONVV, 2023). This figure marks a considerable increase compared to a decade ago, when international visibility was minimal and most tourists were either locals or visitors from neighboring Romania and Ukraine.

At the grassroots level, wine tourism has become a vehicle for rural resilience. Villages in the IGP Valul lui Traian and Ștefan Vodă regions, which suffered from depopulation and limited economic opportunity, are now hosting guesthouses, artisanal workshops, and culinary festivals that generate income and cultural pride. Recent transformations in Moldova's wine tourism industry demonstrate a shift toward structured experiences, strategic planning, and service diversification aimed at aligning with international tourism models (Cosciug, 2012). In June 2025, Chișinău will become a focal point for international wine tourism by hosting two major events: the Street Food & Wine Festival (June 13–15) and the 46th World Congress of Vine and Wine (June 16–20). These events aim to attract both local and global audiences, promote Moldovan wines, and foster industry innovation and exchange (Moldova Travel, 2025; Vinetur, 2025).

The current state of wine tourism in Moldova is marked by both growth and ongoing structural transformation. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (BNS), Moldova recorded over 178,000 foreign visitors in 2023, out of which an estimated 20% engaged in rural and wine-related activities, especially during key tourism months such as May and October (BNS, 2023). While exact segmentation is limited, data from the National Office of Vine and Wine (ONVV) indicates that more than 200,000 wine tourists both domestic and foreign visited Moldovan wineries in 2022–2023, with a visible increase in Western European, Polish, Baltic, and Asian visitors (ONVV, 2023). The growth is fueled by an integrated marketing approach, the development of digital platforms such as the "Wine of Moldova" website and continued international exposure through wine fairs and cultural events.

The impact of this growth is particularly evident in the countryside. Over the past decade, Moldova has observed a notable expansion of rural accommodations linked to wine tourism, from family-run agro-pensions to eco-lodges within vineyards. According to the Moldova Competitiveness Project, funded by USAID, there were more than 150 guesthouses and rural tourism facilities registered in wine regions by 2022, with more planned under regional development initiatives (USAID, 2022). These facilities are not only places of rest but also of cultural interaction, where visitors can experience local food, music, and winemaking traditions. In my experience visiting several of these locations, the genuine hospitality and simplicity of the rural experience are often what leave the most lasting impact on tourists. Unlike highly commercialized Western models, Moldova's eco-wine tourism retains a raw authenticity that appeals strongly to travelers seeking deeper connection.

One prominent example is the Etno-Cultural Complex "Vatra", which, although not a winery itself, collaborates with wine producers to host festivals and wine-themed events. Located near Chişinău, it offers an immersive experience that blends wine tasting with folk concerts, artisan markets, and traditional Moldovan cuisine. This model exemplifies the multidimensional character of wine tourism in Moldova one that extends beyond the cellar and into the living culture of the region (Wine of Moldova, 2023).

Festivals play an essential role in the country's wine tourism identity. The National Wine Day, held annually in October in Chişinău and across major wine regions, is the flagship event of Moldova's wine tourism calendar. The 2023 edition welcomed over 70,000 attendees, including more than 10,000 foreign tourists, generating significant economic activity for the hospitality and retail sectors (IPN, 2023). The festival, coordinated by ONVV and supported by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, features open-air wine tastings, guided tours, masterclasses, and performances by traditional music groups. It also provides an opportunity for small and medium-sized wineries to showcase their products to a national and international audience. According to the Moldova Investment Agency, festivals like this contribute up to €3 million annually in direct and indirect tourism revenues (Invest Moldova, 2023).

**Figure 3.2.** *National Wine Day Celebration in Chişinău, Moldova*



**Source:** Wine of Moldova, Ziaua Națională a Vinului 2019. Available at: <https://winetravelawards.com/nominee/the-national-wine-day-of-moldova-2/>

Another growing attraction is the DescOperă Festival, a unique open-air classical music and wine event held in the Butuceni area of Orheiul Vechi, one of the country’s UNESCO-listed cultural landscapes. The festival combines Moldova’s natural beauty with cultural refinement and is increasingly featured in regional tourism packages. Attendance figures reached over 6,000 in 2023, marking its role as a key alternative to traditional wine celebrations (Arhip, 2024). Events like these demonstrate Moldova’s ability to creatively blend culture, heritage, and wine, setting it apart in the Eastern European tourism market.

Rural areas, particularly those in PGI regions like Ștefan Vodă and Valul lui Traian, have benefited greatly from this synergy between wine and festivals. For example, local authorities in Căușeni and Taraclia have initiated wine and food trail initiatives, often funded by EU rural development grants, to attract tourists beyond the peak festival season (EU4Moldova, 2023). These programs aim to create year-round economic activity and help address the issue of seasonality, which remains a major challenge for the sector. According to stakeholders interviewed during the research, wine tourism traffic drops significantly between November and March, with most wineries reducing tour schedules and staffing. The development of indoor cultural programming, wellness retreats, and winter culinary events is seen as a possible solution, but this requires greater coordination and investment.

The profile of visitors coming to Moldova for wine tourism is also changing. Based on ONVV's 2023 market research and feedback from the “Wine of Moldova” campaign, the typical wine tourist is between 25 and 45 years old, well-educated, and seeking authentic, off-the-beaten-path experiences (ONVV, 2023). Many are interested in combining wine tourism with outdoor activities such as hiking in Orheiul Vechi or visiting monasteries along the Nistru River. Tourists from Poland, Romania, and

Germany represent the largest European market segments, while interest is growing in Japan, Korea, and the United States thanks to Moldova's rising visibility on travel blogs, wine tourism platforms, and social media (Buzu, 2021). The branding strategy coordinated by ONVV, including the internationally promoted slogan "Wine of Moldova: A Legend Alive," reflects an effort to emotionally connect with foreign consumers and enhance national identity (Meininger's Wine Business International, 2022).

The digital transformation of the wine tourism offer is also contributing to the sector's modernization. The development of apps such as Wine and Travel, digital booking systems for wineries, and integrated marketing via Instagram and TikTok have allowed smaller producers to reach international audiences without heavy advertising budgets (Wine of Moldova, 2023). Still, as highlighted by respondents in the 2023 stakeholder survey conducted by the Moldovan Tourism Association, many rural wine businesses lack the skills or infrastructure to fully capitalize on digital tools. This remains a barrier to inclusivity in the sector's growth.

This is where Moldova's competitive advantage lies: in the intimate scale of its wine routes and the emotional warmth of its people. According to national tourism assessments, Moldova has recorded gradual growth in domestic and international visitation to wine-related sites (Ministerul Culturii, 2023). From a strategic standpoint, Moldova's integration into European tourism structures offers real promise. The Wine Road of Moldova (Regulation No. 554/2004) and inclusion in the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe (2023) position the country not only as a niche player, but as part of a larger narrative of European heritage and rural revival (Official Monitor, 2004; IPN, 2024). Continued collaboration with the EU, USAID, and international partners can help Moldova attract investment, standardize quality, and build the brand equity needed to compete with more established wine destinations.

### 3.1.4 Institutional Efforts and Marketing

The development of Moldova's wine tourism sector has been strongly supported by strategic coordination from key institutions, particularly the National Office for Vine and Wine (ONVV) and the National Inbound and Domestic Tourism Association of Moldova (ANTRIM). These organizations, in partnership with donors like USAID and the EU, have helped transition Moldova from a bulk wine exporter to an emerging destination for premium wine tourism (ONVV, 2023). Established in 2013, ONVV functions as a public-private body financed through the National Wine and Vine Fund. It manages Moldova's PGI and PDO schemes, implements the national brand "Wine of Moldova – A Legend Alive" and supports winery participation in international exhibitions (Wine of Moldova, 2023). This brand, featuring the iconic stork symbol and launched with USAID and EU support, has helped over 60 wineries promote Moldova's wine culture globally (Meininger's Wine Business

International, 2022; UNWTO, 2019). One of ONVV's key achievements is the development of digital tools like the "Wine and Travel" app, guiding tourists through Moldova's main wine routes: Codru, Ștefan Vodă, and Valul lui Traian (USAID Moldova, 2015). These efforts have improved visitor navigation and created accessible, story-rich experiences; international partnerships have also been instrumental. Programs like the USAID Moldova Competitiveness Project and EU4Moldova co-financed infrastructure, training, and branding initiatives, including the certification of PGI zones and wine route development (USAID, 2022; ANTRIM, 2020; IPN, 2023). ANTRIM, founded in 2015, complements ONVV's work by positioning wine tourism within Moldova's broader experiential tourism strategy. Through campaigns like "Be Our Guest" and platforms such as Moldova.travel, ANTRIM has enhanced the country's visibility and emotional appeal (ANTRIM, 2023; 2024). Digital marketing innovations have played a key role in reaching younger audiences. Social media campaigns, influencer collaborations, and storytelling content have broadened Moldova's appeal. Initiatives such as the AI Wine project exemplify Moldova's efforts to combine heritage with innovation (Wine of Moldova, 2023). The synergy between ONVV and ANTRIM illustrates how coordinated institutional efforts can transform a sector. Moldova's story-driven marketing, integration into European cultural routes, and support for rural actors demonstrate a sustainable model rooted in authenticity, resilience, and national pride.

### 3.1.5. Current Challenges and Structural Limitations in Moldova's Wine Tourism Sector

Yet despite these gains, several challenges remain. The sector still suffers from seasonality, with peaks concentrated around autumn festivals like "Ziua Națională a Vinului" (National Wine Day) and spring events such as "DescOperă." Infrastructure gaps persist, particularly in road quality, multilingual signage, and public transport access. Moreover, the lack of a unified national tourism information platform and limited international marketing budgets hinder Moldova's competitiveness against better-known wine tourism destinations like Georgia. At the same time, Moldova faces the challenge of balancing growth with sustainability. As enotourism develops, there is a risk of over-commercialization or cultural dilution especially if driven only by short-term economic gain. Ensuring that wine tourism remains rooted in local culture, supports small producers, and contributes to landscape conservation must remain a priority. From my perspective, this is one of the most important reflections to carry forward: Moldova has the chance to do things differently by asserting a distinct, place-based identity where wine becomes a medium of cultural expression, not just a product. Recent academic studies highlight that Moldova's enotourism landscape is still underexplored in international research, despite its strong cultural basis and rural authenticity (GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites, 2024). As Moldova seeks to modernize its tourism infrastructure, wine tourism continues to stand out as a

viable alternative that leverages local culture and rural assets to stimulate sustainable economic growth (Rotaru, 2010).

Many rural wine regions suffer from poor road quality, lack of public transportation, and insufficient multilingual signage (Rotaru, 2019). This makes independent travel difficult and limits the reach of wine tourism to those using organized transport. Although recent EU projects have aimed to improve rural access, much of the work remains unfinished or dependent on local government initiative (EU4Moldova, 2023). Moreover, Moldova still lacks a centralized digital platform for wine tourism, with fragmented information scattered across websites, social media, and offline brochures a point frequently criticized by tourists in feedback forums and confirmed during my interviews.

Another major challenge is the shortage of trained personnel, especially in rural areas. Many wineries, particularly boutique ones, rely on family labor or part-time staff with limited hospitality training. According to Cosciug (2012) and Burbulea (2021), Moldova faces a gap in specialized education for wine tourism professionals including tour guides, sommeliers, and digital marketers. While institutions like the Technical University of Moldova have begun integrating oenotourism content into their programs (Sturza et al., 2023), industry-wide progress remains uneven.

Many small producers worry that large investments from corporate entities could marginalize traditional practices and community-based tourism. Moldova's enotourism future depends on striking a balance: embracing innovation and professionalization while protecting the soul of rural Moldova its hospitality, biodiversity, and slow rhythm of life.

The gap between quality and recognition is precisely what makes Moldova an ideal case study. As a Moldovan student pursuing a master's degree in Italy, I have been exposed to the strategic and cultural importance of wine tourism in shaping national identity, rural resilience, and international perception. Italian regions such as Tuscany have successfully translated their wine heritage into world-renowned tourism experiences (Cinelli Colombini, 2015; Festa et al., 2020). Inspired by these models and the academic context of my studies, it was important to investigate how Moldova, with its authentic wine culture, could follow a similar trajectory adapted to its own context.

The choice of Moldova is also supported by a clear research gap. Most scholarly attention in wine tourism remains focused on traditional destinations like France, Italy, Spain, and emerging ones like South Africa, Georgia, and Argentina (Hall et al., 2000; Carlsen and Charters, 2006). Moldova is rarely featured in international tourism journals or databases, and very few empirical studies have examined the enotourism sector from either a supply-side or demand-side perspective (Guțan et al., 2023; Oltean and Gabor, 2022). This lack of academic literature, combined with scarce promotional content in major tourism platforms, reinforces the country's invisibility. However, this invisibility should not be mistaken for lack of potential.

Methodologically, this case study enables a contextualized exploration of how national identity, rural tourism, and wine culture intersect in a transitional economy. The research draws on both qualitative and secondary data sources to triangulate findings. This includes semi-structured interviews with stakeholders (winemakers, tourism officials, marketers), document analysis (policy papers, tourism reports, websites), and academic sources. The purpose is to capture not only institutional and structural developments, but also the lived experiences, perceptions, and aspirations of those involved in the wine tourism ecosystem.

Finally, this case study is also personal. As a Moldovan citizen who has experienced both the richness and the gaps in this country's tourism offerings, I bring an insider's empathy combined with an outsider's analytical lens shaped by my academic training in Italy. Moldova's story deserves to be told, not just in economic or statistical terms, but as a narrative of resilience, heritage, and untouched potential. This research is my attempt to contribute to that storytelling and, hopefully, to a broader recognition of Moldova's rightful place in the global wine tourism landscape.

### 3.2. Data Collection Methods

To gain a nuanced understanding of the current landscape and development potential of wine tourism in the Republic of Moldova, this study employed a qualitative data collection approach, combining semi-structured interviews with desk research and secondary data analysis. This dual strategy allowed for both the depth of insider perspectives and the extensiveness of contextual information.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary qualitative tool due to their flexibility in capturing individual experiences while maintaining consistency across participants. Compared to structured interviews, which follow a rigid questionnaire, semi-structured interviews use a predefined set of questions while allowing space for probing, follow-ups, and contextual diversions (Dredge, 2006). This approach is particularly well-suited to exploratory research in under-documented fields, such as Moldova's wine tourism sector, where stakeholder narratives offer invaluable insights beyond statistical data.

In total, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with key figures in the Moldovan wine and tourism ecosystem. These included: the director of Cricova Winery, one of the country's most iconic wine cellars; the owner of Gitana Winery, a globally recognized producer without accommodation services; the owner of Crama Mircești, a leading boutique winery with integrated lodging; a university professor specializing in tourism and rural development; a representative from the Wine of Moldova national brand office; General Manager in Italy of the Iter Vitis cultural route of the Council of Europe; the director of ANTRIM (National Association for Inbound Tourism of Moldova); and the Secretary of State at the Ministry of Agriculture. Each participant offered a distinct perspective, contributing to a multifaceted view of the sector.

The interviews were based on a set of 13–14 core questions, which explored topics such as infrastructure challenges, tourist profiles, marketing strategies, and the role of tradition in enotourism development. Additionally, 2–3 customized questions were posed to each interviewee to explore issues relevant to their specific institution or role. Open-ended responses were encouraged to allow for rich narratives, and conversations often evolved into broader discussions beyond the initial prompts revealing themes of resilience, identity, and authenticity in Moldova’s wine tourism development. The conversations with stakeholders were conducted with their full consent and took place throughout the month of March 2025. Each discussion was audio-recorded with permission, transcribed, and subsequently subjected to thematic analysis to extract key insights relevant to Moldova’s wine tourism landscape.

In parallel to the interviews, an extensive desk research phase was carried out. This included the review of official reports, books, institutional documents, news articles, tourism websites, and academic publications relevant to the Moldovan wine and rural tourism sectors. Key sources included publications by the National Office of Vine and Wine (ONVV, 2023), the Ministry of Culture, the Wine of Moldova campaign, and international development partners such as USAID and EU4Moldova. Information was also obtained from sector-specific reports such as the Wine Tourist Guide of the Republic of Moldova (2021), the Moldova Competitiveness Project reports (USAID, 2022), and statistics published by the Biroul Național de Statistică (2024).

A unique contribution to this research came from internal documents and exclusive materials shared by Wine of Moldova representatives, which are not publicly available online but were provided during the research process. These materials included unpublished performance indicators, internal SWOT analyses, and international branding strategies used during wine fairs and cultural promotions. Additionally, books accessed at the library of the Technical University of Moldova, such as the recent publication by Arhip (2024), offered theoretical grounding for the Moldovan context that is often absent in broader European studies.

Lastly, visual and promotional content from winery websites, festival programs, and digital booking platforms were analyzed to understand the online narrative and experiential positioning of Moldova’s wine tourism sector. This cross verification of data sources ensured that the study was grounded in both lived experience and systemic documentation.

The combination of insider interviews and exhaustive secondary research was crucial for revealing the gaps in academic literature and the unexpressed potential of Moldova’s wine tourism identity. While statistical data helped quantify progress, it was through direct dialogue that the emotional and cultural dimensions of the sector truly emerged validating the need for a more human-centric development model in future policy and promotion efforts.

### 3.3. Analytical methods

The analytical framework used in this research was designed to enable both in-depth qualitative interpretation and a structured strategic evaluation of Moldova's wine tourism sector. Given the multifaceted nature of the topic, encompassing cultural identity, rural development, marketing, and institutional strategy, it was necessary to adopt a dual analytical approach: thematic analysis and SWOT analysis. These methods, widely used in qualitative social research and tourism studies, provided complementary lenses for understanding the subjective experiences of stakeholders and identifying the broader strategic position of Moldova's wine tourism landscape. Thematic analysis (TA) is a widely accepted method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. It offers a flexible yet systematic approach that is particularly well-suited for exploring perceptions, meanings, and experiences in social settings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In this research, thematic analysis was applied to interpret the data gathered through eight semi-structured interviews with key figures in the Moldovan wine tourism industry, including winery directors, policymakers, association leaders, and academic experts. Thematic analysis was selected for its ability to offer rich, detailed, and complex accounts of qualitative data without being tied to a specific theoretical framework (Braun, Clarke, and Rance, 2014). As the study aimed to reflect multiple perspectives, ranging from popular entrepreneurs to institutional stakeholders, TA allowed for flexibility in examining both convergences and divergences across participant narratives. This was especially important given the exploratory nature of the study, which sought not to confirm predefined hypotheses but to generate insights grounded in real-world experiences. The six-phase model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Interview transcripts were manually coded, and themes were iteratively refined through constant comparison. Patterns were identified in the way participants spoke about institutional support, authenticity, rural integration, digital visibility, and sustainability. Through this approach, it was possible to construct a nuanced understanding of how wine tourism is being shaped by both internal dynamics and external pressures in Moldova. Moreover, TA aligns with the interpretivist paradigm that guided the overall research philosophy. It acknowledges the subjectivity of meaning and the importance of context in shaping social phenomena (Nowell et al., 2017). In the Moldovan context, where wine tourism is a relatively recent development and institutional documentation remains limited, capturing lived experiences and insider perspectives was essential. Thematic analysis thus served as a powerful tool to give voice to stakeholders whose insights might otherwise remain underrepresented in academic and policy speech.

To complement the thematic insights, a strategic SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis was conducted. The SWOT model is a strategic planning tool that facilitates the identification of internal and external factors that can affect the success of a project or sector (Leigh, 2010). This framework is particularly useful in the field of tourism, where environmental conditions and stakeholder dynamics are constantly evolving. The rationale for using SWOT in this study was twofold. First, it allowed for the synthesis of the rich qualitative findings from thematic analysis into a structured format suitable for decision-makers and policy stakeholders. Second, it enabled the researcher to position Moldova's wine tourism sector within a strategic landscape, identifying areas for growth, vulnerability, and innovation. According to Benzaghta et al. (2021), SWOT analysis is most effective when integrated with qualitative data sources, such as interviews and case studies, as it allows for contextualization of each element. In this study, the internal dimensions (strengths and weaknesses) were drawn primarily from interview findings—such as the presence of authentic wine experiences, emerging digital tools, and infrastructural challenges—while the external dimensions (opportunities and threats) were informed by desk research and global tourism trends.

The choice of SWOT also reflects its adaptability and clarity in cross-sectoral research. As a non-prescriptive method, SWOT does not assume causality but rather provides a snapshot of a sector's current position and its strategic horizons (Panagiotou, 2003). For Moldova, where wine tourism is evolving and lacks a robust dataset, this method offered a realistic and manageable way to frame sectoral development. SWOT's role in this research was therefore not to present final answers but to organize complex information into an accessible format that can inform future planning. It serves as a bridge between the descriptive richness of thematic analysis and the actionable direction needed by stakeholders in government, business, and civil society.

In conclusion, the combination of thematic analysis and SWOT analysis provided both depth and structure to the investigation. Thematic analysis allowed for an insider, grounded understanding of stakeholders' experiences and aspirations, while SWOT enabled an etic, strategic overview that contextualizes Moldova's wine tourism within a broader development framework. This dual approach not only enhanced the credibility of the research but also ensured its practical relevance to those involved in shaping Moldova's wine tourism future.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1.1. Interview Overview and Participant Profiles

To fully grasp the complexity and authenticity of the topic, it was essential to go beyond online sources and secondary literature. While there are some useful articles and official reports, many aspects of Moldova's wine tourism are still under-researched or only low described. That's why there

were conducted a series of in-person interviews with key people involved directly in the sector winery owners, tourism professionals, institutional actors, and those shaping policies. The best way to discover real insights is simply to ask the right questions to the right people. Having a face-to-face conversation allows not only for a deeper exchange but also for spontaneity, honesty, and context that no written source can fully deliver. Many of the interviewees are experienced professionals who might not share their views openly online, but they were generous in discussing openly when approached in person. During the meetings, I was able to notice things beyond the words themselves like tone, emotion, body language which added meaning and subtlety to their responses. It is essential to have the possibility to guide the conversation in real time, follow up with additional questions, or clarify doubts, something that would be much harder through surveys or emails. These personal discussions gave the chance to explore themes that were not even visible in the literature, and they shaped the understanding of wine tourism in Moldova in a much deeper and more personal way. Scholars such as Irvine et al. (2013) and McGrath et al. (2019) have also highlighted the strengths of in-person interviews, especially when it comes to building trust and collecting rich, detailed data. In this case, the method proved to be not only effective but also truly rewarding on a human level. It confirmed that sometimes the most valuable information comes not from documents, but from genuine conversations with people who live and shape the realities we are trying to study.

The stakeholders were selected for this research not only based on their institutional roles, but also because I truly believe they are the people who live and breathe the wine and tourism sectors in Moldova. First, it is the director of Cricova, because he has been working in this sector, and at this winery, for over 20 years. He is not just a director, he is someone who lives this work every single day, and his insights into how Moldovan wine tourism evolved over time are invaluable. Then I selected the director of Wine of Moldova, because she is the first person who comes to mind when talking about wine and wine tourism in Moldova. She knows every detail, she works with Wine of Moldova, and she is present at every important meeting, both nationally and internationally. She represents the voice of modern Moldovan wine diplomacy. I also interviewed a representative from AN-TRIM because this is the official national association for tourism development, and if someone knows the real situation on the ground, it is them. Then, the General Manager of Iter Vitis Europe was another essential voice, having someone from the European network who understands Moldova's potential and position is very important. She has worked a lot in Italy and studied at Italian universities, so I felt deeply honored to speak with her. Her insights are not only professional but very strategic. The owner of Crama Mircești Winery was also a key person in my research. He is one of the newer wine producers, with a boutique winery and a hotel that reflects beauty and elegance. From my perspective, he makes some of the best wines in Moldova, and what touched me most is that he works

from the hear not just for profit. I spoke with the director of Gitana Winery, which is one of the most luxurious wine brands in Moldova. Their wines are sold in various countries and command higher prices compared to others on the market. But interestingly, they do not offer winery tours or accommodations, and I found it very important to understand why. Then I included in my interviews the director of the National Association for Tourism Development in the Republic of Moldova. I considered him a key figure because he has a broad view of national strategies, challenges, and opportunities. His role is crucial for connecting government initiatives with private and regional tourism actors, and he helped me see how wine tourism fits into Moldova’s broader vision for sustainable tourism and rural development. Including his voice in this research gives depth and legitimacy to my work, because he understands both the policy and the reality behind tourism in Moldova. And finally, I included a professor from the University of Moldova, who is also known for his presence on Eco Radio, as an academic expert in rural tourism, his insights are essential for providing a scholarly perspective on the connection between wine tourism and sustainable rural development. The following table provides an overview of the interviewed stakeholders, summarizing their roles, affiliations, and relevance to this study.

**Table 4.1.** Stakeholder Profiles and Institutional Affiliation

<b>Nr.</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Sector</b>
1	Sorin Maslo	Director	Cricova Winery	Public
2	Diana Lazar	Senior Director and Tourism Expert	Wine of Moldova, USAID	Public
3	Elena Stepanov	Executive Director	ANTRIM (National Inbound Tourism Association)	Public
4	Emanuela Panke	International Expert	Inter Vitis-Council of Europe	International NGO
5	Sergiu Gherciu	General Secretary	Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry	Public
6	Arcadie Fosnea	Owner	Mircesti Winery	Private
7	Svetlana Dulgher	Owner	Gitana Winery	Private
8	Viorel Miron	Director	Association for Tourism Development in Moldova	Public
9	Alexandru Nisteriuc	Professor	Technical University of Moldova /ECO Radio	Academic/Research

**Source:** Compiled by the author (2025)

This table presents the whole list of stakeholders interviewed for this research, including their names, positions, organizational affiliations, and sectoral representation. These individuals were selected for their strategic relevance to Moldova’s wine tourism development, including both public and private

actors, institutional representatives, and sector experts. Throughout the thesis, stakeholders will be referenced by their assigned number (e.g., Stakeholder 1, Stakeholder 2) for clarity and consistency in presenting their views, especially in Chapter 4.

#### 4.1.2. Wineries and Institutional Backgrounds

Understanding the institutional and organizational landscape of Moldova's wine tourism sector is essential for contextualizing the perspectives presented later in this chapter. Wineries, public agencies, and intermediary institutions play a decisive role in shaping both the practical and strategic dimensions of wine tourism development. Their visions, operational capacities, and collaborative networks not only define the visitor experience but also influence policy, funding allocation, and international positioning. As argued by Getz and Brown (2006), stakeholders in wine tourism, particularly wineries and destination management organizations-are not passive beneficiaries of tourism flows but active architects of tourism experiences, branding narratives, and regional development pathways. This subsection provides an overview of the most relevant actors represented in this study, including large-scale wineries like Cricova and Gitana and smaller boutique operations such as Crama Mircești, as well as key institutions such as the National Office for Vine and Wine (ONVV), AN-TRIM, Technical University of Moldova, USAID, Inter Vitis and the Ministry of Agriculture. By outlining their organizational roles and strategic importance, this chapter aims to give the reader a clearer understanding of why these stakeholders were selected for interviews and how their insights contribute to Moldova's emerging wine tourism identity.

Starting with **Cricova Winery**-one of Moldova's most iconic wine producers, manages an impressive area of over 1,000 hectares of vineyards, making it the largest vineyard holder in the country. These are distributed across several regions, including Cricova and Criuleni in central Moldova, and Găvănoasa and Lucești in the south (Cricova, 2025). Situated approximately 15 kilometers north of Chișinău, It stands as one of Moldova's most iconic wine producers and a cornerstone of the nation's wine tourism industry. Established in 1952, Cricova is renowned for its extensive underground wine cellars, which stretch over 120 kilometers of labyrinthine tunnels carved into limestone. These cellars, situated at depths reaching 100 meters, maintain a constant temperature of 12–14°C and humidity levels of 97–98%, creating ideal conditions for wine aging and storage (Cricova, 2025.). The subterranean complex, often referred to as an "underground city," features streets named after grape varieties, such as Cabernet, Chardonnay, and Feteasca.

**Figure 4.1.** *Underground Cellars of Cricova Winery*



**Source:** Photo taken by the author (2025)

Within this vast network lie tasting rooms, a wine museum, an underground cinema, and even a chapel, offering visitors a unique and immersive experience (Wine Travel Awards, 2023). Cricova's cellars house a remarkable collection of over 1.3 million bottles of wine, including rare vintages like the "Jerusalem of Easter" from 1902 and wines seized from Hermann Göring's collection during World War II (Cricova, 2025). As the first Moldovan winery to produce sparkling wines using the traditional French "Méthode Champenoise," Cricova has established itself as a leader in quality and innovation. The winery's sparkling wines, such as the "Cricova Pinot Noir Blanc de Noirs," have garnered international acclaim, including a Gold Medal at the "Effervescents du Monde" competition in 2020 (MoldoWein, 2023). In recent years, Cricova has embraced sustainable practices by investing in renewable energy sources.

**Figure 4.2.** *Tasting Room at Cricova Winery*



**Source:** Photo taken by the author (2025)

The winery has reduced its energy costs by 25% through the installation of solar panels and improved insulation, aligning with Moldova's broader shift towards sustainability and reduced reliance on Russian energy (Financial Times, 2023). In February 2025, the underground wine city of Cricova, was included in UNESCO's Tentative List, marking a significant step towards potential World Heritage status. This recognition underscores the wineries' cultural, architectural, and environmental significance, representing an exceptional adaptation of industrial heritage for winemaking and tourism (Moldpres, 2025).

**The USAID Rural Competitiveness and Resilience Activity in Moldova** is a strategic initiative aimed at enhancing the competitiveness of rural producers and promotion economic resilience. By focusing on market diversification and sustainable agricultural practices, the program pursues to empower small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in rural areas to respond effectively to new and expanding market opportunities (USAID, 2016). Through technical assistance, capacity building, and access to finance, the activity contributes to the development of a more robust and inclusive rural economy in Moldova

**ANTRIM** (The National Inbound and Domestic Tourism Association of Moldova) is a key facilitator of Moldova's wine tourism development. As a public-private partnership, it promotes the country's tourism image through the national brand, Moldova. Travel, and supports initiatives like wine routes, digital campaigns, and training programs for local stakeholders (ANTRIM, 2023). With international

backing from USAID and the EU, ANTRIM strengthens the connection between rural tourism and the wine sector (USAID Moldova, 2024).

**Iter Vitis** is one of the certified cultural routes of the Council of Europe, established to promote the heritage of wine-growing territories across the continent. Moldova officially joined this network in 2020, marking a strategic step in aligning with European standards in wine tourism and cultural valorization (Council of Europe, 2020). The initiative encourages sustainable tourism, preservation of wine traditions, and cross-border cooperation. Moldova's participation has helped elevate its visibility on the international wine tourism map and connected its wineries to a broader European narrative (Iter Vitis, 2024). Through Iter Vitis, institutions like Wine of Moldova and key stakeholders engage in shared projects, conferences, and cultural exchanges to position Moldovan wine heritage as part of Europe's living culture (Iter Vitis Europe, 2024).

**The Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry (MAFI)** of the Republic of Moldova plays a central role in shaping national policies related to agriculture, viticulture, and rural development. It is a key institution overseeing the strategic direction of Moldova's wine sector, supporting modernization, sustainability, and international market integration (MAFI, 2024). Through collaboration with the National Office of Vine and Wine (ONVV) and international donors, the Ministry facilitates infrastructure development, offers grant schemes, and ensures alignment with European Union standards. Recent programs have included support for vineyard restructuring, subsidies for certified wines, and technical assistance for wine tourism infrastructure (Government of Moldova, 2024). As Moldova prepares to host the OIV Congress in 2025, MAFI's leadership is pivotal in promoting the country as a serious player in global viticulture and wine tourism (ONVV, 2025).

**Crama Mircești** is a boutique winery located in the village of Mircești, Ungheni district, in the central-western part of Moldova. Founded by Arcadie Fosnea, a visionary entrepreneur and former diplomat, the winery exemplifies the new wave of Moldovan wine producers who focus on terroir expression, authenticity, and integrated tourism experiences (Crama Mircești, 2024). The estate includes a modern winery, a fine-dining restaurant, and a small hotel with panoramic views over the Codru wine region, making it a destination for premium wine tourism.

**Figure 4.3.** *Landscape View of Crama Mircești Winery*



**Source:** Photo taken by the author (2025)

Positioned at higher altitudes than many Moldovan vineyards, the estate benefits from cooler microclimates and clay-rich soils, which contribute to the structure and aromatic finesse of its wines. Crama Mircești cultivates both international and local grape varieties, including Feteasca Regală and Feteasca Neagră, and has gained critical acclaim for its small-batch, high-quality wines that are frequently awarded in international competitions (Wine of Moldova, 2024).

**Gitana Winery**, located in the south of Moldova near the village of Filipeni in the Valul lui Traian PGI zone, stands out as one of the country's most prestigious and high-end wine producers. The winery is owned by the Dulgher family and has gained widespread recognition for its dedication to artisanal methods, terroir expression, and premium wine quality. Gitana cultivates approximately 360 hectares of vineyards and is known for a meticulous approach to viticulture that combines traditional Moldovan techniques with modern oenological innovation (Gitana Winery, 2023). The estate is particularly esteemed for producing elegant red wines, aged in large oak barrels brought from the Caucasus, as well as amphora-fermented white wines, underscoring its commitment to natural expression and authenticity (WineTravelAwards, 2024).

**Figure 4.4.** *Traditional Wine Barrels Inside Gitana Winery's Cellars*



**Source:** Gitana Winery (<https://www.gitanawinery1953.com/ro/lupi-si-la-petite-sopfie-amprente-ale-caracterului/>)

Despite not offering traditional wine tourism services like guided tours or accommodation, Gitana's global positioning remains strong, thanks to international awards, luxury branding, and exports to several high-end markets, including Japan, the USA, and Germany. The winery has received medals in prestigious competitions such as Mundus Vini and Concours Mondial de Bruxelles, consolidating its reputation as a benchmark for Moldovan winemaking excellence (Gitana Winery, 2023). The decision to not yet develop an enotourism component may be strategic, reinforcing its exclusivity and elite market appeal. From a tourism development perspective, Gitana presents an interesting case of a winery whose reputation thrives internationally without depending on classic tourist infrastructure highlighting a niche path within Moldova's broader wine tourism ecosystem.

**The Association for Tourism Development in Moldova (ATDM)** is a non-governmental organization dedicated to enhancing sustainable tourism practices and promoting Moldova as a competitive travel destination. Through partnerships with international programs such as the DONAURE-GIONEN+ initiative, ATDM has actively contributed to regional planning and development, focusing on waterways, lakes, and rivers to boost eco-tourism and cultural heritage projects in Moldova (ATDM, 2025). By collaborating with local and international stakeholders, ATDM plays a crucial role in fostering tourism growth and regional cooperation.

**The Technical University of Moldova (UTM)**, established in 1964 in Chişinău, is the country's premier institution for technical education and research, offering a wide array of programs across

various faculties (Technical University of Moldova, 2025). Among its postgraduate offerings, UTM provides a master's program in Oenology, Wine Tourism, and Wine Markets, conducted in Romanian, with admissions in both spring and fall semesters (RocApply, 2025). This program is designed to equip students with comprehensive knowledge in viticulture, enotourism, and the dynamics of wine markets, thereby supporting Moldova's growing wine tourism sector and contributing to rural development initiatives.

#### 4.1.3. Interview Structure and Questions

A central goal in developing the interview format was to ensure that all stakeholders responded to a consistent set of questions thus providing a concrete foundation for identifying patterns and contrasts while also offering space for tailored questions based on each participant's background, institutional association, and relevance to the field. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), semi-structured interviews are particularly valuable in qualitative research because they allow for thematic flexibility while maintaining a guided structure. This flexibility is especially useful in tourism studies, where stakeholder perspectives can vary widely depending on their sector, experience, and role in the value chain (Kallio et al., 2016; Veal, 2017). The core of the interview guide consisted of questions, formulated to explore strategic themes such as Moldova's wine tourism development over time, current challenges, regional potential, sustainability efforts, and international positioning. These questions were asked to nearly all participants, enabling a coherent comparative analysis across different categories from government representatives and public /private associations to winery owners and international experts. However, it was equally important for me to personalize the interviews in order to extract deeper insights. Each stakeholder brought a unique professional and institutional perspective: for instance, officials from Wine of Moldova and the Ministry of Agriculture offered input on policy and certification mechanisms, while winery owners like Arcadie Fosnea of Crama Mircești shared hands-on experiences regarding rural revitalization and boutique tourism. Representatives of AN-TRIM and Inter Vitis added institutional and international perspectives, and the academic stakeholder offered valuable theoretical framing. Therefore, in addition to the core set of questions, I designed a second layer of tailored questions adapted to each stakeholder's expertise, allowing for an exploration of more specific themes. This dual structure, combining consistent core questions with supplementary ones, gave me the necessary framework to uncover both broad patterns and granular insights. In my view, this approach was more effective than relying only on online data or literature, which in Moldova's case is still limited or outdated. Speaking face to face with experts, especially those who are directly involved in the field, provided far more detailed, reliable, and contextually rich information than could be found in most secondary sources.

In the tables below, I present the structure of the interview questions, including both the common core questions addressed to all participants and the personalized questions tailored to each stakeholder's background and expertise

**Table 4.2.** Core Questions Used in Semi-Structured Stakeholder Interviews

<b>Core questions</b>	
<b>1.</b>	How has Moldova's wine tourism evolved over the past decade?
<b>2.</b>	What are the biggest challenges Moldova faces in developing wine tourism on an international level?
<b>3.</b>	How does Moldova compare to other emerging wine tourism destinations in Eastern Europe?
<b>4.</b>	How does Moldova manage to preserve its rural charm while developing large-scale tourism, and what is the role of tourism in the national economy?
<b>5.</b>	Can you share any recent statistics on wine tourism in Moldova, such as the number of visitors, revenue, or growth trends?
<b>6.</b>	Are there government incentives or funding programs available to support wineries in expanding their tourism services?
<b>7.</b>	What can Moldova learn from the success of wine tourism in countries like Georgia, Italy, and France?
<b>8.</b>	Are you familiar with the process through which wines are registered with Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), and where does the Republic of Moldova currently stand in this process?
<b>9.</b>	How do PGI (Protected Geographical Indication), organic, and biodynamic certifications help improve Moldova's reputation in the global wine market, and what is the current situation?
<b>10.</b>	Do you think Moldova's wine industry should focus more on sustainability and eco-tourism? Why or why not?
<b>11.</b>	What regions of Moldova do you see as having the greatest untapped potential for wine tourism development?
<b>12.</b>	How can Moldova better position itself to attract both regular tourists and high-spending or luxury wine travelers?
<b>13.</b>	What is your long-term vision for Moldova's wine tourism industry, and where do you see it in the next 10 years?

**Source:** Author's elaboration based on the research objectives

**Table 4.3.** Additional Questions Used in Semi-Structured Stakeholder Interviews

<b>Additional questions</b>	
<b>Position</b>	<b>Questions</b>
<b>Cricova Director</b>	<p>1. What strategies does Cricova use to maintain its position as a top wine tourism destination?</p> <p>2. How do you see the future of wine tourism in Moldova over the next 5–10 years, and what role will Cricova play?</p> <p>3. How does Cricova balance heritage and innovation to keep the visitor experience engaging while preserving tradition?</p>
<p><b>Director USAID,</b></p> <p><b>Director ANRITM,</b></p> <p><b>Professor UTM,</b></p> <p><b>Director ATDM,</b></p> <p><b>Director INTER VITIS</b></p>	<p>1. How does "Wine of Moldova" position Moldovan wine in international markets, and what marketing strategies are used?</p> <p>2. What role does digital marketing and social media play, and how do you engage with the international audience?</p> <p>3. Can you share examples of successful campaigns that increased Moldovan wine tourism visibility?</p>
<b>Secretary Ministry</b>	<p>1. How does the Government of the Republic of Moldova collaborate with international organizations and external partners to promote wine tourism globally and enhance Moldova's visibility as a wine destination?</p>
<b>Owner Crama Mircești</b>	<p>1. How does Crama Mircești contribute to changing the public image of Moldovan wine, and what is its socio-cultural impact at the local and national level?</p> <p>2. How did tourism influence the development of Crama Mircești since its opening, and what challenges have you faced in recent years?</p> <p>3. What are the main obstacles and opportunities for developing wine tourism in Moldova's northern and western regions, and how can collaboration with local producers and the state improve the situation?</p>

<p><b>Owner Gitana Winery</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Although Gitana Winery produces some of Moldova’s most premium and internationally recognized wines, it does not currently offer on-site tourism services such as a hotel or guided winery tours. Could you share why this decision was made, and whether you envision such services being developed in the future?</li>   <li>2. In your perspective, what would be the benefits and potential challenges of integrating wine tourism experiences — such as tastings, vineyard walks, or accommodation — into Gitana’s business model?</li>   <li>3. Gitana is known for its close collaboration with Italian winemaking consultants. Why have you chosen to work primarily with Italian specialists rather than local Moldovan experts, and how does this influence your brand identity and wine style?</li> </ol>
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**Source:** Author’s elaboration based on the research objectives

The tables above (4.2;4.3) outline the core questions that served as the foundation for all semi-structured interviews conducted in this study. These core inquiries were designed to ensure consistency across interviews while addressing essential themes such as stakeholder roles, strategic involvement in wine tourism, perceptions of Moldova’s enotourism evolution, and future sectoral outlooks. In addition to these standardized questions, a variable number of additional, personalized questions were included depending on each participant’s professional background and expertise. For instance, institutional representatives were asked more about policy frameworks and marketing strategies, whereas winery owners were probed on visitor experiences, infrastructure, and sustainability practices. This flexible structure allowed for deeper insights tailored to each stakeholder's perspective, ensuring that the data collected aligned with the study’s research objectives and reflected the diversity of Moldova’s wine tourism ecosystem.

## 4.2. Stakeholder Perspectives

This section presents the findings from the nine stakeholder interviews conducted as a central part of this research. While the profiles and institutional backgrounds of the participants were already

introduced earlier in the thesis, here the focus shifts entirely to the content of their perspectives, reflections and lived experiences regarding the current state and future of wine tourism in Moldova. These individuals, ranging from winery owners and government officials to tourism association leaders and international consultants, represent a carefully selected cross-section of voices from within the wine and tourism ecosystem. The interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, as outlined in the methodology chapter, allowing key patterns and frequent ideas to emerge while also acknowledging the uniqueness of each voice. This qualitative data provided a value and authenticity that would have been impossible to obtain through desk research alone. In fact, many of the insights shared in these conversations were more informative, concrete, and up to date than what is currently available in published literature or on institutional websites. Some participants even offered verified figures, clear references to projects, or reflections based on decades of direct experience in the field. What makes this segment especially valuable is its originality. To my knowledge, no previous academic study in Moldova has collected and synthesized such a wide array of professional views on wine tourism within a single research effort. And perhaps one advantage of Moldova being a smaller country is that it allowed to gain direct access to key decision-makers and experts who are shaping the development of this sector in real time. While there are moments of difference among the stakeholders, driven by their diverse roles, regions, or strategies, there is also a strong agreement: Moldova has unexploited potential, and wine tourism can become one of its most promising identity markers internationally. This chapter is organized into thematic parts, each capturing a different layer of insight. Conducting these interviews was one of the most enriching parts of this thesis journey. Hearing directly from such dedicated and experienced professionals confirmed that this topic is not only academically relevant, but also practically meaningful for Moldova's future.

#### 4.2.1. Views on Moldova's wine tourism sector

This section presents the perspectives of key stakeholders on the current state of wine tourism in Moldova. Their insights offer a valuable mix of local knowledge and international expertise, helping better understand both the strengths and the gaps in the sector. The inclusion of voices from outside Moldova, such as representatives from European institutions, adds complexity and comparative vision to the national context. One of the most internationally situated perspectives came from the General Manager of Iter Vitis Europe, a branch of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe. With years of experience in Italy and a deep familiarity with European tourism standards, the stakeholder stressed that Moldova must “move away from the idea that it is just a wine-producing country” and begin to fully structure its destinations. She stated: “There is enormous potential, I see it clearly. But potential must be translated into tourist programs, sustainable plans, and territory management.

Moldova must make wine tourism part of its national branding.” Her input is particularly valuable given her dual positioning: both within a prestigious European network and in close contact with Moldovan actors. Stakeholder (4) also noted that many EU projects could support this transition, but the effort must come from within “You already have beautiful wine, now you need beautiful storytelling around it”. At the national level, Executive Director of ANTRIM, emphasized how the domestic tourism ecosystem has improved, with the number of wineries visits steadily increasing. “In 2023, we had over 45,000 wine tourists in Moldova, with the majority visiting during seasonal festivals,” she explained. Yet she highlighted infrastructural gaps, noting that many regions, especially in the north, remain underdeveloped in terms of touristic services and road accessibility. Meanwhile, boutique winery owner of Crama Mircești brought a grounded, rural voice to the table. His message was clear: “A winery cannot develop without tourism. For us, it’s not just about profit. We are rebuilding the image of a forgotten village and maybe, of Moldova itself.” The director of Cricova Winery offered a deeply rooted and institutional perspective on the current state and development potential of wine tourism in Moldova. With decades of experience in the sector, he emphasized the long-standing tradition of Moldovan winemaking and the strategic efforts undertaken by Cricova to position itself not only as a producer of high-quality wines but also as a flagship wine tourism destination. “Our aim is not just to sell wine, but to create an experience around it,” he noted during the interview. He highlighted how Cricova combines heritage, infrastructure, and professional services to attract both domestic and international visitors, receiving tens of thousands of tourists annually. Stakeholder (1) acknowledged the importance of consistent government support, but he also stressed the proactive role of the private sector in innovating tourism offers: themed underground tours, events, and cultural experiences. His vision aligns with the belief that Moldova can stand out through authenticity and immersive storytelling, especially given Cricova’s historical underground cellars and its symbolic status in the country. “Wine tourism is not a secondary activity, for us, it is a key channel for communication, visibility, and long-term sustainability.” The Secretary General of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry provided a public policy-oriented perspective. He recognized the achievements of Moldova’s wine industry and its link to tourism but pointed out the need for more integrated policymaking between agriculture, culture, and tourism ministries. According to him, Moldova’s wine identity should be better anchored in the country’s brand, both for export and for tourism attraction. He noted that the government has supported several initiatives, including the creation of regional wine routes and the financial support of wineries investing in tourism infrastructure. However, he acknowledged that bureaucratic and legal obstacles still hinder the development of the sector. “There is potential, but we must unlock it through smart policies and better coordination with private actors,” he said. His insights underline the state’s intention to align with EU development models, particularly

by promoting rural revitalization through viticultural tourism. A central figure in Moldova’s wine and tourism industry, Stakeholder (2), reinforced the idea that wine tourism has become a strategic pillar in the country’s international image. Known for her active involvement with Wine of Moldova and international wine diplomacy, she underlined how the past decade transformed Moldova’s wine identity from "cheap Soviet wine" to a cultural and economic asset. "People no longer come to Moldova just for wine tasting, they come for stories, landscapes, and cultural connections," she explained. She highlighted the importance of professionalization in tourism services and the growing number of initiatives aimed at improving infrastructure and storytelling across wineries. In her view, Moldova has made significant progress, but there is still a long way to go. "We have the passion, and we have the land, but we must work harder on positioning and consistency," she stated. Stakeholder (2) also emphasized the need for continuous education, marketing expertise, and international benchmarking to stay competitive. Her voice reflected both pride and critical awareness, advocating for a more refined, narrative-driven, and experience-focused model of wine tourism development in Moldova.

The following table presents a synthesis of key statistical insights derived directly from stakeholder interviews, offering up-to-date quantitative data that reflects recent developments in Moldova’s wine tourism sector. Key Performance Indicators of Wine Tourism in Moldova (2023–2024)

**Table 4.4.** Overview of Wine Tourism Visitor Estimates Provided by Interviewed Stakeholders

Indicator	2023	2024	% Change
Foreign Tourists	1,0 million	1,5 million	+50%
Tourists via Agencies	43,500	67,600	+55%
Wine Attraction Rate	20%	25%	+5%
Sector revenue (MDL)	4.2 billion	4.62 billion	+10.4%
Contribution to GDP	~4,5%	~4,5%	=
Visitor Satisfaction	-	94%	NEW

**Source:** Author’s elaboration

The data presented in this table was collected directly through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in the Moldovan wine tourism sector. It reflects a range of statistical insights referring to tourist arrivals, growth trends, economic contributions, and levels of visitor satisfaction in 2023–2024. The final row represents a calculated average based on the individual estimates shared during the interviews. By summarizing these key figures, the table helps to contextualize the recent

evolution of wine tourism in Moldova and supports the broader story regarding its strategic role in rural development and national branding.

The next infographic, that was elaborated by the author with information provided during the interview with Stakeholder (2), illustrates the main financial instruments currently supporting the wine sector. It highlights three distinct programs, the Sustainable Wine Program, the WESA Grant Program, and government viticultural donations, emphasizing their respective funding sources, grant sizes, and target beneficiaries. The figure reinforces the role of coordinated support between donors and government in advancing the infrastructure and sustainability of Moldova’s wine tourism ecosystem.

**Figure4.5.** *Grant Funding Accessed by Stakeholders in Moldova’s Wine Tourism Sector*

**Wine Industry Grant Programs in Moldova**

Characteristic	Sustainable Wine Program	WESA Grant Program	Viticultural Subsidies
Funding Source	USAID and RRCP	Ukraine-Moldova Fund	Government
Grant Size	300,000-700,000 MDL	Up to 800,000 MDL	100,000-120,000 MDL/ha
Beneficiaries	Wineries	Wineries	Grape growers

**Source:** Elaborated by the author.

Figure 4.5 presents a comparative overview of the grant amounts received by different stakeholders interviewed in the research. The data reflects both the diversity of financial sources and the variability in accessibility. The sums listed indicate that larger wineries and national institutions have benefited from significantly higher funding, often exceeding tens of thousands of euros while grape growers often under €10,000 or none. This difference underscores a disparity in grant absorption capacity. The relevance of these funds is substantial: they are commonly used for infrastructure upgrades, digital promotion, international visibility campaigns, training of staff, and developing wine

tourism infrastructure such as tasting rooms or visitor trails. Consequently, the figure not only quantifies support but also reveals which actors are more integrated into Moldova’s wine tourism development strategy.

In recent years, Moldova has undertaken a series of strategic marketing campaigns and branding initiatives aimed at promoting its wine tourism sector both domestically and internationally. These efforts are not only designed to raise awareness of Moldovan wines as high-quality, origin-controlled products but also to position the country as a compelling destination for experiential rural tourism. The campaigns below have been coordinated by institutions such as the National Office for Vine and Wine, ANTRIM, and international donors, and they reflect a growing synergy between storytelling, terroir branding, digital innovation, and cultural diplomacy. The following table outlines some of the most impactful initiatives identified during stakeholder interviews.

**Table 4.5.** Key Campaigns and Initiatives Supporting Wine Tourism Development in Moldova

<b>Campaign /Initiative</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Impact / Objective</b>
<b>National Wine Day</b>	Annual open winery celebration with tastings, music and traditional food.	Attracts 50000+ visitors annually; central to national wine branding.
<b>WineRuns</b>	Wine-themed marathons organized in vineyards across Moldova.	Engages local and foreign tourist; promotes active tourism .
<b>DescOpera</b>	Classical music Concerts in openair winery settings, blending art and viticulture.	Creates emotional bounds.
<b>VinOpera</b>	Opera performance in vineyards, offering high end cultural experiences.	Targets premium cultural tourists.
<b>#Beour Guests</b>	Digital storytelling campaign inviting visitors to experience Moldovan wine.	Strengthens Moldova’s image through digital content.
<b>Tree of Life</b>	Umbrella branding platform promoting Moldova’s cultural and rural tourism.	Supports rural development unifies many products under one identity.

**Source:** Elaborated by the author

In Table 4.5 above, the main campaign initiatives that have contributed to the development of wine tourism in Moldova are outlined, based exclusively on data collected from stakeholder interviews. Each initiative is accompanied by a brief description, its core objective, and its reported or perceived impact. These campaigns were selected because they represent strategic milestones in how Moldova's wine sector has been positioned both nationally and internationally. Their importance lies not only in marketing and visibility but also in shaping stories, building institutional trust, and promoting emotional connection with tourists. By linking tradition with innovation, these initiatives demonstrate how targeted communication and collaborative branding efforts can directly influence tourist behavior and sectoral growth. The data presented also highlight how stakeholders perceive these efforts as essential to Moldova's identity as an emerging wine destination.

As a concluding perspective in this section, it is valuable to explore how Moldova's wine tourism sector is viewed in comparison with well-known international models. Several stakeholders emphasized that Moldova has a unique identity but can still benefit significantly from adapting best practices seen in countries such as France, Italy, and Georgia. According to Director of Cricova Winery, Moldova should work on developing strong, coherent branding, similar to France and Italy, where wine is not just a product but a lifestyle. He notes that Moldova must better define its uniqueness and destination image to stand out on the global stage. He also emphasizes the importance of improving infrastructure, investing in clearer wine routes, and enhancing digital connectivity for tourists. Stakeholder (2) highlights Moldova's strength in authenticity and affordability compared to Georgia and Balkan destinations. (2) believes Moldova offers a mix of modern technology and traditional charm that is rare in Eastern Europe. (2) desires the development of integrated packages, vineyard walks, cooking workshops, and cultural visits, to build experiences rather than simple tastings. The stakeholder (2) also mentions that Moldova could benefit from regional branding, as seen in Italy (e.g., Tuscany or Piedmont), by promoting the uniqueness of its wine zones like Codru or Ștefan Vodă. The ANTRIM director stresses that Moldova should focus on emotional storytelling and multisensory experiences, inspired by the success of France and Italy. She believes collaboration is key: Moldova needs to better integrate guesthouses, wineries, tour operators, and artisans into a unified offer. From Georgia, he suggests learning how to maintain a genuine, community-based charm that is non-commercial and emotionally engaging. The president of Iter Vitis Europe adds a critical voice from outside Moldova. In the president's view, Moldova has "all the ingredients" to succeed in wine tourism like rich traditions, hospitality, and local identity, but must understand that wine tourism is "not just about the wine, it's about culture, identity, and emotion." She believes Moldova is well-positioned to integrate best practices while remaining true to its distinct personality. Her emphasis on

building a European-level narrative that blends wine with art, landscape, and storytelling is especially timely, as Moldova positions itself more strategically in global tourism circuits.

Together, these perspectives converge on a shared vision: Moldova must remain authentic while becoming more strategic, more collaborative, and more focused on combined experiences.

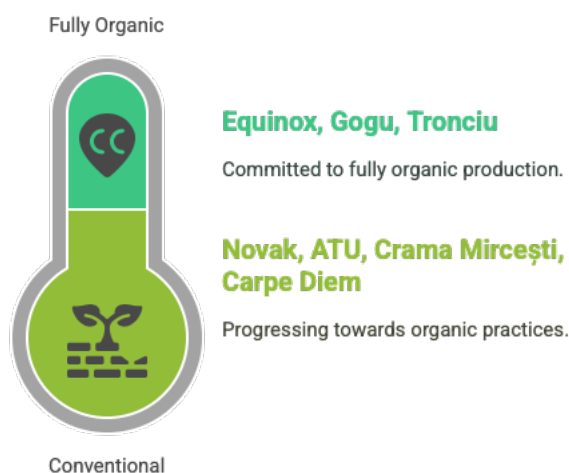
#### 4.2.2. Strategic Insights: Needs, Priorities, and Directions

As Moldova chases to position itself as a competitive and distinctive wine tourism destination, the insights of key stakeholders offer guidance for defining strategic directions. This subchapter concentrates their expert perspectives into a set of priorities, based on their professional experience and daily involvement in the field. Across public institutions, private wineries, and international networks, a shared understanding emerges: the sector requires not only greater visibility and organization but also deeper structural arrangement with international standards. The following sections will outline the major themes expressed during the interviews, including the urgent need for territorial certification systems (such as PGI/PDO), terroir branding, improved infrastructure, coordinated partnerships, and professional education. Sustainability, both environmental and economic also emerged as a unifying concern across different stakeholder groups. These reflections will be discussed and supported by a table summarizing the most relevant recommendations by each stakeholder. This synthesis aims to inform future interventions and policy frameworks while strengthening that Moldova's wine tourism potential can be fully realized only through systemic, comprehensive, and forward-looking strategies. Stakeholders highlighted the strategic role of certifications in enhancing Moldova's wine tourism credibility, especially through schemes like PGI, PDO, organic, and biodynamic labels. These certifications serve as tools not only for international market differentiation but also for structuring quality, sustainability, and authenticity within the wine tourism experience. Moldova currently boasts four officially recognized PGI wine regions like Codru, Ștefan Vodă, Valul lui Traian, and Divin, which were repeatedly mentioned during interviews as foundational pillars for Moldova's positioning in global wine markets (Stakeholders, (1;2;3;5;)). According to Stakeholder (1), these PGIs were the result of long-term efforts involving the drafting of technical specifications and regulatory alignment, and they provide crucial credibility in demanding markets. Beyond recognition, however, stakeholders highlighted the need for greater integration of PGI into branding and tourism circuits. As Stakeholder (5) noted, Moldova has "laid the groundwork" but must now reinforce its efforts through better origin-based marketing and PDO development. The sentiment was echoed by the owner of Crama Mircești, who emphasized that although his winery is located within the Codru PGI region, they do not use the label, considering it does not reflect the full complexity and excellence of their terroir.

The figure 4.6. illustrates the level of commitment of Moldovan wineries to organic practices. This visual was created by the author based on qualitative insights gathered during interviews. All nine stakeholders interviewed were aware of which wineries in Moldova produce fully organic wine, consistently citing Equinox, Gogu, and Tronciu as leaders in certified organic production. Additionally, several wineries such as Novak, ATU, Crama Mircești, and Carpe Diem were recognized as actively progressing toward organic certification or integrating sustainable viticultural techniques. This figure synthesizes that collective perception to highlight the sector's current state of ecological transformation.

**Figure 4.6.** *Wineries' Commitment to Organic Practices in Moldova*

Understanding wineries' commitment to organic practices in Moldova.



**Source:** Elaborated by the author

All nine stakeholders interviewed during this research emphasized the growing importance of organic certification in Moldovan wine tourism. According to their insights, there is a clear shift in market expectations, with consumers, especially from Western Europe and Asia-seeking transparency, sustainability, and healthier production methods. Stakeholders (2;5;8;9) noted that even wineries not yet fully certified are increasingly motivated to produce at least one organic or low-intervention wine, both for environmental reasons and as a marketing advantage. This collective movement suggests that organic practices are no longer a niche trend but are becoming a standard component of Moldova's evolving wine identity.

The strategic role of these schemes is not limited to export reputation. As highlighted by stakeholders (1;2;3;), certified wines serve as authentic products within the wine tourism value chain, helping to

build trust among visiting tourists. PGI and organic symbols are increasingly becoming signifiers of premium quality and sustainability, both key motivators for international wine travelers.

Moreover, certification can support the development of integrated rural tourism experiences. The Wine of Moldova director emphasized that PGIs and traditional Moldovan agri-food products (like rose petal jam, herbal teas, and artisanal brandies) could be knitted into tourism routes and tasting circuits, enhancing visitor engagement and strengthening local economies. In this way, Moldova may leverage its certification ecosystem to differentiate itself from competitors such as Georgia, whose wine tourism relies more heavily on folklore than on quality control schemes. As a final note, the experts agreed that Moldova should not only expand its certification organization but also professionalize its use ensuring alignment with branding, storytelling, and regional identity. As the Director of Inter Vitis suggested, PGI and organic frameworks are not just technical mechanisms; they are branding tools with emotional and cultural resonance. Their strategic use, combined with the country's growing commitment to sustainability, can help Moldova appear as a trusted, distinctive, and competitive player on the global wine tourism stage.

As Moldova's wine tourism sector continues to grow in visibility and structure, the perspectives of stakeholders interviewed in this study shed light on its potential trajectory over the next ten years. While each respondent offers a distinct viewpoint shaped by their background, role, and vision, there is a shared belief that wine tourism can become a defining asset for Moldova's cultural diplomacy, rural economy, and international brand identity. What follows is a synthesis of their expectations, ambitions, and recommendations for where Moldova should be headed combining strategic foresight with optimism and revealing how both public and private actors imagine the sector's evolution. The Director of Cricova Winery visualizes Moldova's wine tourism becoming a strategic pillar of the national economy and international image. He emphasizes the country's growing attractiveness due to its authenticity and the efforts of both private and public stakeholders. "Wine tourism has strong potential for growth," he states, "and Cricova will remain a leader and role model, continuing to raise standards and support the broader industry's evolution." His optimism is grounded in past performance Cricova has already tripled its number of visitors compared to pre-pandemic years and a forward-looking commitment to excellence. Stakeholder (2), a long-time advocate for Moldova's wine sector and sustainable tourism expert, shares a vision where Moldova becomes a top-tier European boutique destination. She projects a future built around authenticity, sustainability, and multisensory experiences. "In ten years," she says, "Moldova should be recognized as a storytelling terroir, where visitors discover artisanal wines, vibrant traditions, and genuine hospitality far from the paths of mass tourism." Stakeholder (3) foresees the doubling of wine and rural tourism numbers, the creation of

new thematic wine routes, and the full integration of eco-certifications and luxury experiences, such as wine retreats and curated gastronomy.

From the National Inbound and Rural Tourism Association (ANTRIM), the Director outlines a similar yet strategic roadmap. Over the next decade, they expect Moldova becoming “a niche European destination recognized for its combination of rural charm, high-quality wines, and heartfelt hospitality.” The sector, in their vision, will mature into a robust economic contributor, anchored by strong networks of wineries, guesthouses, cultural actors, and service providers. They stress the need for cross-sector collaboration, diversified offers for various tourist profiles, and ongoing education of the international public all rooted in a national vision that blends heritage with innovation. The President of Iter Vitis Europe brings a critical external perspective. As a European cultural tourism expert, her forecast carries weight for Moldova’s international positioning. “I see Moldova as Europe’s best-kept secret,” she shares. “A sanctuary for those seeking genuine connection with land, heritage, and people. Wine tourism will be the lifeblood of rural Moldova, celebrated for its humanity, resilience, and profound sense of place.” Her remarks affirm Moldova’s unique appeal not through replication of global trends, but by cultivating its emotional and human identity, creating deep, lasting connections with visitors. From a policy perspective, the Secretary of State at the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry, emphasizes the importance of long-term strategic planning and financing mechanisms. He outlines three core priorities: “First, develop and implement a national wine tourism strategy with a long-term horizon. Second, increase financial support through grants, subsidies, and tax incentives and third, attract European investment to upgrade infrastructure and winery facilities.” His vision is practical and structural, aimed at building the institutional backbone that will allow the wine tourism sector to thrive. The owner of Crama Mircești, offers a rural perspective focused on deepening local engagement. He believes Moldova must go beyond simply inviting tourists to wineries “people should have more to do in the villages near the wineries,” he notes. His vision includes developing rural experiences and attractions, ensuring that wine routes don’t just connect wineries but also engage with the wider local community. For him, revitalizing rural zones through tourism is essential for long-term sustainability. The owner of Gitana Winery (now rebranded as Dulgher Family Estate) also looks toward growth, hinting at future development of visitor experiences such as winery tours. While the winery currently focuses on premium wine production and export (with markets in Japan and Switzerland), she acknowledges that direct tourism development “is important and worth considering,” especially given Moldova’s shift toward a more European model of wine branding and hospitality. Finally, a university professor of tourism and oenology, interviewed for this research, adds a critical perspective on education and innovation. He emphasizes that the future of wine tourism in Moldova also depends on the academic sector. “It is crucial,” he says, “to create opportunities for

students to work with international professors, to gain exposure to best practices, and to be trained as future leaders of this sector.” He argues that universities must evolve to reflect the real needs of Moldova’s growing tourism industry, integrating applied knowledge, case studies, and partnerships with both local and global actors.

To consolidate the rich collection of perspectives gathered during the interviews, the table below summarizes the key strategic recommendations offered by each stakeholder. These insights highlight both shared priorities and distinct visions across various sectors of Moldova’s wine tourism ecosystem. The recommendations reflect the practical needs and long-term aspirations of the interviewed experts, ranging from institutional improvements to marketing, infrastructure, and educational reform. Together, they offer a roadmap for building a more sustainable, competitive, and experience-driven wine tourism model.

**Table 4.6.** .Key Recommendations from Stakeholders for the development of wine tourism in Moldova

Stakeholder number	Key Recommendations
1	Enhance PGI usage, develop terroir branding ,foster public-private collaborations.
2	Integrate traditional products into tourism, promote sustainability and premium offerings.
3	Develop integrated experiences, diversify for different tourists segments.
4	Focus on authenticity, storytelling ,and emotional connection.
5	Providing funding mechanisms, attract EU investments
6	Develop rural tourism infrastructure around wineries.
7	Exploring guided winery tours for all producers.
8	Introduce international academic partnership, focus on wine tourism professionalization.
9	Improve accessibility.

**Source:** Elaborated by the author

The table 4.6 above presents a synthesis of the most valuable recommendations provided by the interviewed stakeholders regarding the future development of wine tourism in Moldova. While each perspective brings forward unique and practical suggestions, a common thread unites them all -the pressing need for enhanced collaboration. From infrastructure improvement to educational initiatives and branding strategies, the collective message is that sustainable progress can only be achieved if winemakers, tourism professionals, institutions, and policymakers work together toward a shared vision. This spirit of cooperation and unity is seen by participants as the key to Moldova's long-term success as a competitive and authentic wine tourism destination

#### 4.2.3. Analysis and Synthesis

As the interviews unfolded, it became increasingly clear that the perspectives gathered reflect more than just professional opinions, they offer a layered, humanized understanding of Moldova's wine tourism sector. This final subsection aims to synthesize the most relevant insights, contradictions, and personal observations drawn from nine in-depth stakeholder conversations. It is not only a summary, but a reflection on the shared visions, divergent perspectives, and strategic implications that emerged throughout the research. What unites all voices, despite differences in sector, background, or priorities, is the belief that wine tourism in Moldova is both a powerful tool for rural revitalization and a strategic channel for cultural diplomacy. The reflections presented below offer a critical lens through which to understand these findings and lay the foundation for the SWOT analysis that follows in Chapter 4.3.

To better illustrate the strategic themes that appeared from the interviews, the following figure synthesizes the most frequently mentioned development priorities for Moldova's wine tourism sector. These insights were drawn directly from the voices of key stakeholders representing government bodies, wineries, associations, and international experts. The visualization created by the author, helps identify the foundational pillars upon which a more competitive and resilient wine tourism sector can be built.

**Figure 4.7.** *Moldova's Core Priorities Identified by Stakeholders*



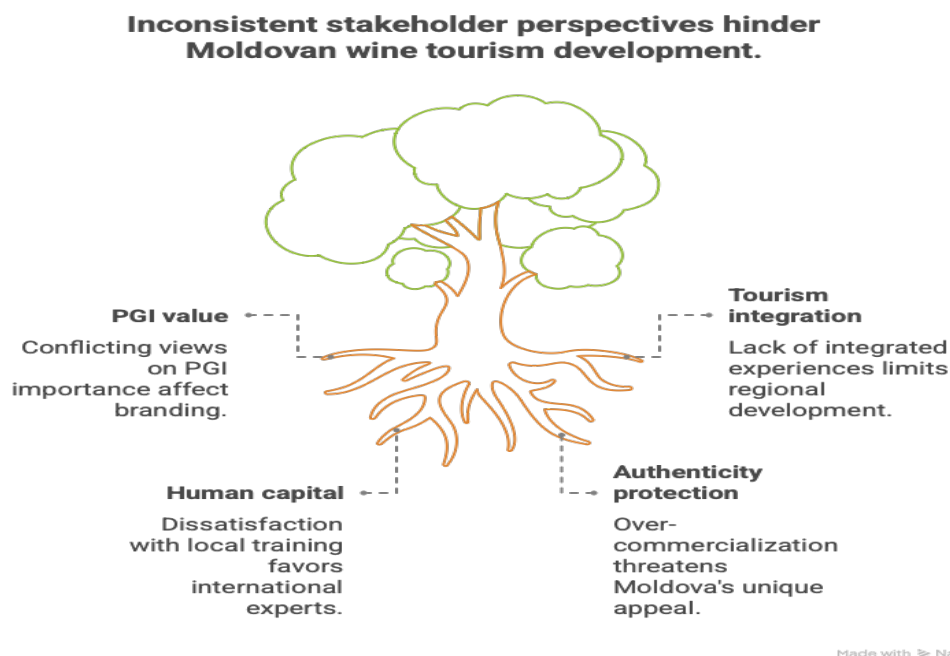
**Source:** Elaborated by the author

Figure (4.7) captures six interconnected priority areas articulated by stakeholders: education and professionalization, regional identity-building, institutional support, authenticity, hospitality, and cultural integration. These categories reflect both individual and collective visions for Moldova's future, highlighting the need to balance traditional values with modern demands. The chart demonstrates the multi-dimensional nature of wine tourism development and serves as a conceptual bridge toward the SWOT analysis in the following chapter.

Despite the many areas of arrangement among stakeholders, the interviews also revealed several notable contradictions and unexpected insights. One of the most striking discrepancies appeared in the perceived importance of Protected Geographical Indications (PGIs). While institutional stakeholders and representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture emphasized the strategic value of PGIs for market positioning, quality assurance, and tourism identity, some winery owners, most notably from Crama Mircești expressed unwillingness to use the PGI label, believing their wines exceed the classification and would be better represented under a more prestigious PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) system. This divergence illustrates a tension between national policy frameworks and individual branding strategies. Another subtle yet important surprise emerged in the discussion about the role of tourism infrastructure and regional development. While officials stressed the importance of national investment in tourism routes and public-private cooperation, several private stakeholders, emphasized the lack of integrated regional experiences beyond the winery visit itself. The need for a broader ecosystem, featuring artisan producers, culinary attractions, and nature-based tourism was

presented as both an urgent necessity and a current weakness in Moldova’s offer. In terms of human capital, views also differed. While public actors like ANTRIM and the Ministry highlighted the existence of capacity-building programs, some private stakeholders, such as the Gitana Winery representative, expressed dissatisfaction with local training and demonstrated a preference for working with international experts particularly Italians due to their specialized education. This points to a deeper challenge in Moldova’s educational system: the need to align wine and tourism training with international standards while maintaining local relevance. Lastly, a surprising agreement arose around the emotional power of Moldova’s authenticity. Even international voices, such as President of Iter Vitis Europe, described Moldova as a place where “wine is about people, land, and story.” This external validation reinforces the domestic belief that Moldova’s strength lies in its sincerity and uncommercialized charm. Yet, the surprise lies in the determination to protect this quality from the risk of over-commercialization as the sector grows. The desire to balance wine tourism without losing its soul was a shared, but not easily resolved concern across all stakeholder types. The figure below combines the most pressing contradictions revealed across stakeholder interviews, illustrating how divergent views act as invisible “roots” that challenge Moldova’s cohesive wine tourism development.

**Figure 4.8.** *Fragmentation in Stakeholder’s Perspectives*



**Source :** Elaborated by the author

Figure 4.8. highlights the four main areas of tension identified during stakeholder interviews, all of which delay unified wine tourism development in Moldova. Divergent perspectives on PGI importance, dissatisfaction with local workforce training, risks of over-commercialization, and lack of cross-sector integration emerge as structural challenges. These underlying issues, illustrated metaphorically as the “roots” of the system, suggest that long-term success requires deeper alignment and collaborative solutions among public institutions, private actors, and community-based initiatives. These interviews represented the most valuable experience throughout the development of this thesis. Speaking with directors, experts, and representatives from both the public and private sectors including international voices permitted to gather veridical, timely, and often unpublished information that would not have been available elsewhere. It gave depth and realism to this research that no secondary source could have offered. Through these discussions, there was the opportunity to clearly understand both the strengths and the gaps in the current wine tourism ecosystem in Moldova. It became obvious that no matter how well-designed a strategy may look on paper, its success depends on a diversity of perspectives and the ability to connect them significantly. One of the most important realizations was that there is no single solution to all the problems. Every stakeholder brings their own experience, vision, and background, from small boutique wineries to national tourism bodies and European experts. Their opinions sometimes differ, their priorities vary, and their needs are shaped by their specific realities. However, despite these differences, they all move in the same direction. What connects them is a shared purpose: to make Moldova a stronger, more visible, and more competitive wine tourism destination. Each stakeholder, in their own way is contributing to a bigger goal: to promote, diversify, and professionalize wine tourism in Moldova. This collective mindset, although not without its tensions, gives hope and energy for the future. This rich blend of insights will serve as a solid foundation for the SWOT analysis in the following chapter. The complexity of views is not a limitation, but rather an essential resource for building more realistic and adaptable strategies in the future. These interviews helped not only understand the sector better but also see that Moldova’s greatest asset may well be the people who believe in its potential.

### 4.3. SWOT Analysis

By drawing on both desk research and the insights obtained through semi-structured interviews with nine key stakeholders in Moldova’s wine tourism ecosystem ranging from winery owners and institutional actors to international observers, this SWOT analysis aims to provide a comprehensive strategic mapping of Moldova’s wine tourism sector. The dual-source approach ensures both academic depth and sectoral relevance, highlighting not only documented realities but also lived, experiential knowledge held by experts on the ground. This methodology is particularly appropriate given

Moldova’s positioning as a growing, yet still emerging, wine tourism destination. While reports and national strategies often highlight macro-level aspirations (ONVV, 2023; ANTRIM, 2022), stakeholder voices add a detailed and up-to-date perspective on barriers and accelerators of growth. The SWOT analysis thus becomes a bridge between theoretical positioning and practicality, allowing for a structured yet flexible way to identify focus areas for future interventions. Moreover, the data collected during interviews revealed differing but complementary viewpoints, showcasing that while the sector shares a unified vision of Moldova as an authentic, sustainable, and high-quality wine tourism destination, the paths to achieving this vision differ among actors. This justifies the use of SWOT as a participatory strategic tool that can accommodate and integrate multiple perspectives, rather than prescribing a one-size-fits-all solution. The results of this analysis will also serve as a foundation for the final conclusions and recommendations outlined in Chapter 5, as well as a launchpad for future studies that pursue to measure implementation impact or replicate Moldova’s strategic approach in similar regions. The table below presents a synthesized SWOT analysis of Moldova’s wine tourism sector, compiled from stakeholder interviews, desk research, and field observations conducted throughout this thesis.

**Table 4.7.** SWOT Analysis of the Moldovan Wine Tourism Sector

<b>STRENGTHS</b>	<b>WEAKNESSES</b>
<b>-Deep-rooted Wine Heritage and Historical Continuity</b>	<b>-Fragmented Tourism Infrastructure and Limited Regional Access</b>
<b>-Legal Recognition and Structure of Wine Routes (PGI/PDO)</b>	<b>-Lack of Consistent Quality in Visitor Experiences</b>
<b>-Integration into the Council of Europe’s Cultural Routes</b>	<b>- Low International Recognition and Weak Global Branding</b>
<b>-National Wine Brand: “Wine of Moldova – A Legend Alive”</b>	<b>- Limited Academic and Market Research Data</b>
<b>-Authentic Rural Hospitality and Boutique Experiences</b>	<b>- Dependence on Donor Projects and External Support</b>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>-Emotional Storytelling and Local Roots Create Connection</b></li> <li><b>-Events That Reinforce Identity and Stimulate Demand</b></li> <li><b>-Revival of Indigenous Varieties as a Differentiator</b></li> <li><b>-Rising International Prestige and Awards</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>- Insufficient Trained Human Resources in Tourism Services</b></li> <li><b>- Bureaucracy and Administrative Delays</b></li> <li><b>- Seasonal Concentration of Tourist Activity</b></li> <li><b>- Insufficient Engagement with Younger Audiences</b></li> </ul>
<b>OPPORTUNITIES</b>	<b>THREATS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>-Growing Global Demand for Authentic, Undiscovered Wine Destinations</b></li> <li><b>-Increased Interest in Cultural and Rural Tourism in Europe</b></li> <li><b>-Potential for Cross-Border Regional Partnerships</b></li> <li><b>-Development of Digital Marketing and Storytelling Platforms</b></li> <li><b>-Utilizing Moldova’s Native Grape Varieties as a Unique Selling Proposition</b></li> <li><b>-Youth Involvement and Return Migration to Rural Projects</b></li> <li><b>-Strengthening Moldova’s International Reputation Through Awards and Wine Shows</b></li> <li><b>-Expanding Off-Season Tourism and Thematic Experiences</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>-Climate Change and Environmental Pressures on Viticulture.</b></li> <li><b>-Global Economic Uncertainty and Rising Costs.</b></li> <li><b>-Competition from Established Wine Tourism Regions</b></li> <li><b>-Risk of Over-Reliance on Donor Funding.</b></li> <li><b>-Tourist Perceptions of Insecurity Despite Actual Safety</b></li> <li><b>-Uncertain Policy Continuity and Institutional Volatility</b></li> <li><b>-Depopulation of Rural Areas.</b></li> <li><b>-Growing Risk of Greenwashing and Overcommodification</b></li> <li><b>-Limited Crisis Management Preparedness in the Tourism Sector.</b></li> </ul>

<p><b>-Enhanced Institutional Collaboration Between Tourism and Wine Sectors</b></p>	
<p><b>-Growing Diaspora and International Communities as Wine Ambassadors-</b></p>	

**Source:** elaborated by the author

The SWOT analysis presented in Table 4.7 provides a structured overview of the strategic landscape surrounding wine tourism development in the Republic of Moldova. Each quadrant of this framework—strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats—reveals essential insights not only about the sector’s current performance, but also about its future trajectory, challenges, and potential leverage points. When examined together, these factors form an interdependent system, where strengths can be mobilized to overcome weaknesses, opportunities can be harnessed to mitigate threats, and overall strategic coherence can be built around Moldova’s unique identity and positioning. Moldova’s *strengths* as a wine tourism destination are deeply anchored in its historical, cultural, and emotional assets. The country’s 5,000-year-old viticultural heritage serves as a foundational narrative that resonates with culturally motivated travelers and wine connoisseurs alike. The legal structuring of PGI/PDO wine routes, combined with the inclusion in the Council of Europe’s Cultural Routes, offers a rare level of legitimacy and European alignment for a country outside the EU. Branding initiatives such as “Wine of Moldova – A Legend Alive” further cement this identity, framing wine not merely as a product, but as a living story. Perhaps even more crucially, Moldova’s boutique wineries, rural charm, and family-run ethos create an environment that modern enotourists increasingly seek personal connection, authenticity, and unfiltered experiences. Moreover, the synergy between public and private stakeholders, as represented by ONVV and the FNVV model, demonstrates an institutional maturity not often seen in post-Soviet tourism sectors. The role of festivals and indigenous grape revival adds further value, emotionally engaging visitors and cultivating both curiosity and loyalty. These strengths serve as strategic capital that can be nurtured and scaled. Despite the impressive strengths, the *weaknesses* in Moldova’s wine tourism sector are not only numerous, but also deeply structural. The fragmented and underdeveloped infrastructure continues to limit access to many regions, while the quality of visitor experiences remains inconsistent across wineries. There is also a lack of coherent international branding, and Moldova often suffers from low name recognition abroad. From an academic and managerial perspective, perhaps one of the most critical gaps is the absence of detailed research and data, whether on visitor profiles, spending patterns, or satisfaction levels. Strategic decisions are often made without robust evidence, weakening the efficiency of

marketing and development programs. Additionally, Moldova remains heavily dependent on external donor funding, which, while beneficial, raises sustainability concerns. A key vulnerability is the shortage of trained personnel in rural hospitality and wine tourism services, leading to uneven experiences and missed revenue opportunities. Another overlooked issue is the fact that several of Moldova's most prestigious wineries, such as Gitana -do not yet offer tourism services, thereby losing high-value exposure. Administrative delays, seasonal tourism concentration, and the challenge of engaging younger audiences complete a portrait of weaknesses that must be urgently addressed if Moldova is to compete with destinations like Georgia or Italy. The *opportunities* available to Moldova are numerous and highly compatible with both its strengths and the broader trends shaping global tourism. There is a rising global appetite for undiscovered, authentic destinations, an appetite that Moldova is perfectly positioned to satisfy. European interest in sustainable, cultural, and rural travel creates fertile ground for Moldova to expand its enotourism offer in ways that go beyond tastings-toward experiences rooted in place, community, and creativity. One of the most promising opportunities lies in the cross-border potential with Romania and Ukraine, through joint itineraries and regional tourism circuits. Digital storytelling and influencer marketing offer another path forward, enabling Moldova to amplify its voice globally without requiring enormous budgets. Highlighting indigenous grape varieties, involving diaspora communities as informal ambassadors, and supporting youth-driven rural initiatives are all viable ways to ensure long-term vitality. Perhaps most importantly, Moldova can diversify its offer and extend the seasonality of wine tourism through thematic events, wellness retreats, and educational packages. These opportunities are not hypothetical, they are already beginning to take shape, as noted in interviews with winemakers and tourism officials. The key lies in strategic coordination and investment to turn these ideas into scalable realities. Despite the positive outlook in the opportunities section, several *threats* pose a serious challenge to Moldova's long-term success in wine tourism. Environmental instability due to climate change is a growing concern, particularly for a sector that depends on seasonal agricultural outputs. Economic volatility and rising costs may dampen both supply and demand, as wineries face higher operational expenses and tourists reduce discretionary travel. International competition is also a major threat. Moldova is still relatively unknown compared to France, Italy, or even Georgia, and it lacks the institutional backing and reputational capital of these destinations. A more subtle but equally dangerous threat is over-reliance on donor programs, which creates a vulnerability when funding cycles end. Moreover, the psychological effects of geopolitical proximity to Ukraine's conflict may impact Moldova's perceived safety, regardless of actual conditions. Institutional volatility and lack of continuity in government strategies also undermine progress. As emphasized by several stakeholders, without stable leadership and policy follow-through, Moldova risks losing the energy it has built in recent years. Depopulation in rural

areas poses a long-term structural threat, reducing the human capital needed to support tourism. Finally, the rise of inauthentic or “greenwashed” experiences, aimed merely at capitalizing on wine tourism trends, threatens to erode Moldova’s competitive advantage-its raw, real, and emotional appeal.

Taken together, the SWOT analysis illustrates the complex, dual reality of Moldova’s wine tourism sector: one of immense promise and equally significant obstacles. The strengths and opportunities are clearly aligned-historical depth, emotional storytelling, cultural richness, and a growing international reputation are all assets that resonate with market trends. However, the weaknesses and threats reveal internal fragmentation and external instability that could stall or even reverse progress. The key lies in strategic leverage. Moldova must use its strengths-such as the ONVV’s institutional capacity, the authenticity of its wine culture, and the flexibility of its private sector, to compensate for its weaknesses. At the same time, seizing opportunities will require greater coordination, data-informed planning, and resilience-building against threats. The future of Moldovan wine tourism will depend not only on wine, but on collaboration, creativity, and courage to carve out a distinct space on the global stage.

#### 4.4. Building a Distinctive Wine Tourism Identity

One of the central aims of this research was to understand how Moldova can construct a wine tourism identity that is both competitive internationally and deeply rooted in its unique heritage. This section brings together the insights obtained from interviews with key stakeholders, secondary data, and comparative analysis with international cases, particularly Italy, France, and Georgia-to propose a strategic reflection on Moldova’s current trajectory and potential future.

The international case studies presented earlier in this thesis, demonstrate the importance of aligning landscape, wine heritage, infrastructure, and emotional storytelling in developing a coherent wine tourism identity. In all three countries (France, Italy, Georgia), institutional governance, protected geographical indications, and structured visitor experiences have played a vital role in creating destinations that are both authentic and professionally managed. France and Italy excel in long-term planning and institutional branding. Georgia, although more modest in size, shows the powerful impact of positioning itself around authenticity, ancient traditions, and emotional connection.

Moldova has a wealth of cultural and historical capital in viticulture, as demonstrated by its 5,000-year-old winemaking legacy, Orthodox monastic influences, and integration into the Council of Europe’s Cultural Routes. However, the difference lies in how this heritage has been structured into a visitor experience. Compared to Tuscany’s wine roads or Georgia’s institutional focus on ancient qvevri methods, Moldova’s wine tourism ecosystem is still in a consolidation phase. The country has

the raw materials-grape varieties, passionate producers, emotional narratives, but these need to be strategically unified under a coherent identity. The findings from this research indicate that Moldova's greatest assets lie in its authenticity, hospitality, and emotional storytelling. Interviewees repeatedly emphasized the emotional impact of visiting a family-run winery, of hearing a winemaker's personal story, or of tasting wines tied to rare indigenous grapes. Unlike some more commercialized wine destinations, Moldova offers unfiltered, personal encounters that are especially attractive to experience-seeking travelers. However, as the SWOT analysis revealed, these experiences vary significantly in quality and availability, pointing to a need for capacity building, consistent branding, and improved infrastructure.

To build a distinctive identity, Moldova must avoid replicating others' models. Instead, it should cultivate its strengths by placing emotion, storytelling, and rural authenticity at the center of its strategy. Several interviewees, highlighted the need to balance tradition with innovation, ensuring that Moldova's charm does not get lost in commodification. Rather than focusing solely on large-scale infrastructure or international medals, Moldova's identity should be shaped by the stories people tell, winemakers, local hosts, returning youth, and tourists who have felt something genuine in their visit. Among the key recommendations emerging from this chapter is the importance of a step-by-step approach. Moldova cannot become a world-class wine tourism destination overnight, but it can consolidate its identity by aligning policies, narratives, and experiences across its wine regions. This includes supporting wineries in turning informal visits into structured programs, investing in multilingual training for staff, and developing seasonal and thematic events (e.g., winter retreats, storytelling nights, or vineyard yoga).

The thesis also suggests greater involvement of local communities and diaspora in promotion. Moldovans abroad often act as unofficial ambassadors, and their personal stories could add value to Moldova's image. Furthermore, the integration of rural zones beyond Codru and the exploration of lesser-known wineries can open new thematic and geographic frontiers in wine tourism.

Moldova stands at a promising crossroad. The findings of this study offer both affirmation and guidance. While challenges remain in branding consistency, infrastructure, and international visibility, the passion of its people, the richness of its land, and the emotional depth of its wine experiences position Moldova to craft a truly unique identity in global wine tourism. This chapter offers a starting point for deeper future studies, including more comprehensive stakeholder mapping, rural tourism inclusion, and the development of localized identity frameworks based on Moldova's specific values and goals.

## 5. Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore Moldova's journey toward establishing a distinctive wine tourism identity, guided by the core objectives of understanding the historical evolution, current practices, stakeholder perspectives, and strategic potential of the sector. Through a blend of literature review, in-depth interviews, and case-based analysis, this research has shown that Moldova is at a critical intersection where its ancient winemaking heritage, growing tourism momentum, and local passion converge with modern demands for authenticity, sustainability, and narrative-driven travel experiences. Wine tourism in Moldova is no longer a peripheral activity but a strategic opportunity to position the country as a niche, emotional destination on the global tourism map. Unlike established wine tourism giants like Italy or France, Moldova's strength lies not in scale but in its ability to offer raw, personal, and unfiltered encounters with tradition, people, and place. The insights gathered through this thesis, particularly from key stakeholders, reveal a shared belief in Moldova's potential, but also a recognition of systemic gaps, from fragmented infrastructure to inconsistent visitor experiences.

To support this development, several short-term actions should be prioritized. First, the creation of structured and participatory visitor experiences at boutique wineries -including grape harvesting, traditional cooking workshops, and storytelling evenings would greatly enhance tourist engagement. Additionally, professional training in wine tourism hospitality, such as multilingual guiding, sommelier knowledge, and cultural interpretation, is essential to raise service standards across the sector. Moreover, domestic wine tourism should be actively encouraged, especially by engaging young Moldovans and diaspora communities as informal ambassadors who can share their experiences and bring attention to the country's viticultural assets. In the long term, more substantial efforts will be required to create the conditions for sustainable growth. Investment in infrastructure, particularly in rural zones, is crucial to facilitate regional access and elevate the visitor experience. Moldova should also aim to integrate wine tourism into broader rural development plans, fostering synergies with local craftsmanship, agro-tourism, and environmental initiatives. Research must be expanded to include consistent tourist profiling, visitor satisfaction tracking, and comparative studies with regional benchmarks such as Georgia or Romania. Additionally, long-term efforts should focus on consolidating Moldova's national wine tourism brand into an emotionally resonant and coherent narrative, one that is not only visually appealing but deeply rooted in local stories and the lived experiences of its people.

This thesis is not a final verdict but a foundational contribution to a broader national dialogue. The findings can inspire future research projects, tourism development strategies, and academic investigations that examine deeper into regional differences, seasonality, consumer expectations, and long-

term sustainability. A promising continuation of this research could involve mapping and integrating additional wineries, exploring underrepresented rural zones, and developing tools to measure the economic and cultural impact of wine tourism in Moldova.

Ultimately, the value of this thesis lies in its ability to capture a moment of transformation-when Moldova is defining not just how it makes wine, but how it tells the world about it.

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