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**Integrating Sustainability into Wine Tourism: Exploring the
Gap Between Certification and the Visitor Experience**

FINAL MASTER PROJECT

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Abstract

Wine tourism has grown into a significant economic force, accounting for approximately 25% of winery revenue globally. Yet despite the wine sector's growing commitment to sustainability, and despite tourism's own well-developed sustainability frameworks, no existing standard addresses how sustainability is communicated or experienced during a winery visit. This thesis investigates that gap. Drawing on a benchmark of 65 winery partners on WineTourism.com, coded using an original four-category typology of sustainability communication, and interviews with representatives of Sustainable Winegrowing New Zealand and the Good Travel Institute, this study finds that 81.5% of wineries in a sustainability-leaning sample either communicate no sustainability information at all in the materials a prospective visitor can discover before or during booking, or communicate it only in production terms, with no visible connection drawn to the tourism experience on offer. Only 9.2% visibly integrate sustainability into the visitor experience as communicated through these public channels, despite 58.5% of the sample holding at least one formal sustainability certification. Both framework interviews confirmed that no existing standard in either the wine or tourism sector is designed to assess or incentivize this kind of visitor-facing integration. In response to these findings, and in collaboration with WineTourism.com through my internship, I developed the Sustainable Choice designation: a four-section, tiered scoring framework that gives wineries practical criteria for integrating and communicating sustainability across environmental responsibility, social and local integration, visitor experience communication, and commitment and proof of practices. The study contributes an empirical mapping of the visitor-facing sustainability gap in wine tourism, institutional evidence from two major framework organizations confirming its structural basis, and a practical applied output with direct implications for platforms, certifying bodies, and wineries seeking to advance sustainability within the tourism experience.

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1. Introduction

The wine and tourism industries have each developed substantial sustainability agendas over the past three decades, yet they have done so largely in parallel, rarely intersecting in any meaningful or structured way. In the wine sector, sustainability has become a defining concern for producers globally, giving rise to a range of certification programmes and industry protocols that address environmental practices such as water use, energy efficiency, biodiversity management, and waste reduction. In tourism, sustainability frameworks have developed along a different axis, focusing on destination-level governance, responsible visitor management, cultural preservation, and community engagement. Both fields have generated significant institutional infrastructure around sustainability. What neither has adequately addressed is the space where wine and tourism actually meet: the winery visit itself.

Wineries increasingly operate not only as producers but as tourism providers, offering tastings, tours, accommodation, and experiential activities to a growing global visitor market. According to the Global Wine Tourism Report 2025, a study conducted by Hochschule Geisenheim University in partnership with UN Tourism, the International Organisation of Vine and Wine, the Great Wine Capitals Global Network, and WineTourism.com, wine tourism now accounts for approximately 25% of total winery revenue worldwide, rising to 32% for non-European producers, and 88% of wineries globally offer some form of tourism activity (Hochschule Geisenheim University et al., 2025). Despite this scale, no existing certification or framework, whether wine-specific or tourism-specific, addresses how sustainability is communicated or experienced during a winery visit. The same 2025 report found that 67% of wineries considered sustainability important or very important for their tourism operations, yet the infrastructure to support or assess that integration simply does not exist.

This thesis argues that this absence is not a peripheral oversight but a structural blind spot. Sustainability systems in the wine sector were built to govern production, not experience. As a result, wineries that are genuinely sustainable in their farming and production practices routinely fail to make that sustainability visible, legible, or meaningful to the visitors standing in their tasting rooms. The gap is not simply a communication problem. It reflects a deeper structural misalignment between how sustainability is measured and certified in wine, and where the visitor experience actually takes place.

Research Objective

The aim of this study is to investigate the gap between sustainability certification in the wine sector and the integration of sustainability into the visitor experience at wineries. Specifically, it seeks to understand the extent to which existing frameworks address tourism activities at wineries, why sustainability practices remain largely absent from winery visitor experiences, and what factors, whether structural, institutional, or practical, shape or constrain that integration. A secondary aim is to explore what the findings might imply for the practical development of tools, such as a platform-based designation, that could support wineries and wine tourism platforms in addressing this gap.

Research Questions

Main Research Question: How can sustainability practices be effectively integrated into the wine tourism experience at wineries?

Supporting Questions:

(1) To what extent do existing sustainability frameworks and certifications in the wine and tourism sectors address tourism activities at wineries?

(2) What gaps exist between sustainability practices in wine production and their communication or integration into visitor experiences?

(3) How can experience design be used to translate sustainability practices into meaningful visitor engagement?

(4) What practical implications do these findings hold for platforms and certifying bodies seeking to support sustainability integration in wine tourism?

Research Context: WineTourism.com

This research was conducted in the context of an internship with WineTourism.com, one of the leading global platforms dedicated to wine tourism. Founded in 2018 with the mission of connecting wine lovers with wineries around the world, WineTourism.com operates as a discovery and booking platform listing winery partners across more than 54 countries and 240 wine regions. The platform's global reach and direct relationships with winery partners provided the primary access point for this study, including the sample of wineries used in the benchmark analysis and the outreach conducted for stakeholder interviews. The internship context positions this research at the intersection of academic inquiry and industry practice, and the findings are intended to be relevant both as a scholarly contribution to the emerging literature on sustainability in wine tourism, and as a practical resource for platforms and wineries seeking to address the identified gap.

Structure of this Document

This thesis is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature across three areas: sustainability in wine production, sustainability in tourism, and wine tourism as an experiential activity, identifying the gap that motivates this study. Section 3 describes the methodology, including the research design, data collection approach, analytical framework, and the

organizational context of the internship with WineTourism.com. Section 4 presents the primary findings, drawn from a benchmark of 65 winery partners on WineTourism.com and interviews with two sustainability framework organizations. Section 5 develops the practical implications of the findings, including the proposed criteria for a Sustainable Choice designation. Section 6 presents the conclusions of the study, returning to the research questions and reflecting on the contribution and limitations of the work.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews the academic and industry literature across three thematic areas that together establish the conceptual foundation for this study. The first area examines sustainability in the wine sector, including the scope and limitations of existing certification frameworks. The second reviews sustainability in tourism, covering the evolution of the concept, the frameworks that govern it, and the evidence on how sustainability labels influence consumer behavior. The third brings these two bodies of literature together through the lens of wine tourism as an experiential activity, exploring how sustainability, experience design, and visitor-facing communication intersect, and identifying the gap this study seeks to address.

2.1 Sustainability in the Wine Sector

Academic literature on sustainability in the wine sector has grown considerably since the early 2000s, though it has remained largely focused on production-side practices. The trajectory of this body of work reflects the origins of wine sustainability as a discipline: rooted in agronomic and environmental science, and developed primarily in response to pressures around pesticide use, water scarcity, and soil health rather than around the visitor experience. Montella (2017), in a review of sustainability in wine tourism published in the journal *Sustainability*, observed that research has moved from a predominantly economic focus toward a broader consideration of environmental and social dimensions, but noted that the integration of sustainability into the visitor experience remains an underexplored area. A more recent systematic literature review by Duarte Alonso et al. (as cited in Karagiannis and Metaxas, 2025) similarly identified visitor-facing sustainability communication as a gap in the existing body of work, suggesting that a decade after Montella's observation, the gap has narrowed in awareness but not in practice.

The institutional landscape of wine sustainability certifications reflects this production-side orientation. Wine-specific sustainability certifications have proliferated globally since the 1990s,

yet they share a common structural architecture: criteria address vineyard management, cellar operations, energy use, water consumption, biodiversity, waste management, and employee welfare, with no consideration of how sustainability practices are communicated or experienced during a winery visit. Sustainable Winegrowing New Zealand (SWNZ), one of the most established programmes globally, organizes its requirements across six focus areas aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals: Water, Waste, Plant Protection, Soil, Climate Change, and People. In France, the Haute Valeur Environnementale (HVE) certification, widely adopted among French wine producers, focuses on biodiversity, soil health, water management, and reduced chemical use across four levels of compliance, while the Vignobles & Découvertes designation represents a notable exception, being one of the few frameworks that explicitly addresses the wine tourism experience rather than production alone. In Italy, the Equalitas standard applies to the entire wine supply chain and covers the organization, the product, and the territory across environmental, social, and economic dimensions, while the VIVA programme, developed with the Italian Ministry of the Environment, and the National Quality System for Integrated Production (SQNPI) offer complementary production-focused frameworks with distinct verification mechanisms. In Argentina, the Bodegas de Argentina Wine and Viticulture Sustainability Protocol, launched in 2012 in partnership with the Catena Institute of Wine, covers carbon footprint, water use, waste management, and biodiversity, and has been updated to Version 4.0 in 2024. In the United States, California Certified Sustainable Winegrowing (CCSW), Salmon-Safe, and LIVE certification represent regional programmes with different geographic scopes and criteria. The Sustainable Wine Roundtable's Global Reference Framework for Sustainability in Wine, published in January 2024, represents a cross-sector effort to align these disparate frameworks under a shared set of principles rather than creating another certification, explicitly acknowledging that while considerable knowledge exists about sustainability in vineyards and wineries, much less is known about the rest of the supply chain (Stanbury, 2024).

A comparative analysis of 50 certification schemes used in the global wine industry, published in 2026, offers the most systematic academic treatment of this landscape to date. Drawing on information economics, the resource-based view, dynamic capabilities, and institutional theory, the study develops a typology of five certification families and finds that schemes prioritise different combinations of credibility, reputation, capabilities, and legitimacy, with strategic roles ranging from market signalling and competitive positioning to organisational development and institutional alignment (Valenti et al., 2026). Crucially for the present study, none of the five certification families identified in this typology encompasses the visitor experience dimension. The study confirms that the wine certification landscape, while diverse and growing, remains anchored in production-side governance, and that the tourism activities wineries increasingly offer fall outside the scope of the governance systems that have developed around wine sustainability.

The economic significance of wine tourism adds urgency to this structural gap. According to the Global Wine Tourism Report 2025, wine tourism now accounts for approximately 25% of total winery revenue worldwide, rising to 32% for non-European producers (Hochschule Geisenheim University et al., 2025). The study found that 88% of wineries offer some form of tourism activity, and that two-thirds described their tourism operations as profitable or very profitable. For small and family-run wineries, tourism can account for up to 28% of total revenue, compared to approximately 17% for larger operations, making visitor engagement central rather than supplementary to business viability (Hochschule Geisenheim University et al., 2025). Earlier research by Krajicková and Sauer (2019) estimated that wine tourism accounted for approximately 19.5% of winery revenue on average. The same 2025 report found that 67% of wineries considered sustainability important or very important for their tourism operations, yet no established certification or framework currently bridges sustainability practice with tourism

delivery. The structural gap between what producers value and what governance systems address is therefore not a matter of lack of interest but of institutional design.

2.2 Sustainability in Tourism

The concept of sustainable development was formally defined in the 1987 Brundtland Report as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Applied to tourism, this principle was further elaborated by the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), which define sustainable tourism as tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities (UNEP and UNWTO, 2005, p. 12). These three dimensions, environmental, economic, and sociocultural, have become the foundational pillars of sustainable tourism governance and are reflected in global frameworks such as those developed by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC).

As Saarinen (2006) and Bramwell et al. (2017) note, sustainable tourism remains a contested concept, but the dominant interpretation promoted by the UNWTO and national governments centers on achieving balance between these three pillars (as cited in Cottrell and Raadik-Cottrell, 2022). In recent years, the vocabulary of sustainability in tourism has expanded to include related but conceptually distinct terms. Responsible tourism, advanced particularly through the Cape Town Declaration of 2002, emphasizes the active obligations of tourists and operators to minimize negative impacts and maximize positive contributions to host communities and environments. Resilient tourism focuses on the capacity of destinations and tourism systems to withstand and recover from shocks, whether economic, environmental, or climatic. Regenerative tourism, the most recently prominent of these terms, goes further, arguing that

tourism should actively restore and improve local ecosystems and communities rather than merely minimizing harm. While GSTC has noted that many discussions of regenerative tourism represent a desire for more inspirational terminology rather than substantive change from sustainable tourism principles, arguing that the GSTC criteria have long emphasized increasing positive impacts alongside reducing negative ones (GSTC, 2025), the proliferation of these concepts signals a broader shift in the field's ambitions for what tourism's relationship with host environments and communities should look like.

The governance infrastructure for sustainable tourism has developed primarily at the destination level. The GSTC framework, widely regarded as the global baseline for sustainable tourism governance, covers four main areas: sustainable management, socioeconomic impacts, cultural impacts, and environmental impacts. It accredits certification bodies rather than certifying organizations directly, and operates alongside other established frameworks including EarthCheck, Green Key, and the Global Destination Sustainability Index (GDSI). While considerable academic and policy attention has been paid to sustainable tourism at the destination level, including the role of destination management organizations (Luthe and Wyss, 2022), less attention has been directed toward sector-specific and experience-level contexts. Sustainable tourism certifications have generally been designed for hotels, tour operators, and destination management organizations, leaving individual tourism experience providers, such as wineries, without a purpose-built governance framework.

Research on sustainability certification in the tourism sector raises a further question: whether certifications actually change behavior, or merely signal intent. A 2024 study examining the value of environmental certification labels in the tourism industry found that the primary drivers for tourism companies joining certification schemes are improving brand equity and competitiveness, while the main obstacles are the difficulty of meeting certification criteria and the costs involved (Dias et al., 2024). A 2026 study on sustainability certification and tourist

behavior found that trust in the certifying body is the key mechanism through which certifications reduce information asymmetry in tourism, and that this trust depends significantly on tourists' familiarity with and recognition of the certifying organization (Leaniz et al., 2026). Tourists who do not recognize a certification body are unlikely to be influenced by its badge, a finding with direct implications for any new designation in wine tourism. A 2024 study specifically examining the effects of sustainable hotel badges on guests' attitudes and behavioral intentions found that while badge presence increases the visibility of eco-friendly properties, its influence on actual guest choice depends heavily on whether visitors are already aware of the sustainability practices behind the badge (Godovykh et al., 2024). This finding echoes a broader pattern in the sustainable tourism literature: the attitude-behavior gap, a well-documented phenomenon in which consumers express positive attitudes toward sustainability but do not consistently translate these into booking choices (Tölkes, 2020; Li et al., 2024). Research on this gap consistently points toward communication specificity and credibility as the factors most likely to bridge it: consumers who encounter specific, verifiable, actionable sustainability claims are more likely to act on them than those who encounter a generic badge or a vague eco-label (Tölkes, 2020).

The role of sustainability labels in shaping consumer choice has been extensively studied across product and service categories. Research consistently shows that sustainability labels positively influence purchasing behavior when they are perceived as credible and specific. A large-scale field experiment involving 58,000 actual purchase decisions in an online retail context found a significant positive effect of eco-labels on consumer purchases, and further found that higher price premiums can reinforce rather than diminish the label's effect (Feuss et al., 2022). In the wine sector specifically, a cross-country study examining consumer willingness to pay for organic wine labels across seven countries found that respondents are willing to pay more for organically labelled wine regardless of country of origin, with the most important

consumer attributes being age, importance attributed to eco-certification, and likelihood to buy eco-certified wine (Maesano et al., 2022). However, the wine-specific research introduces an important nuance: some studies have found that consumers perceive a quality tradeoff with organic wine labels, and that willingness to pay for wine labelled organic can in some contexts be lower than for conventional wine (Delmas and Lessem, 2017, as cited in Schäufole and Hamm, 2017). A 2023 study on consumer behavior and willingness to pay regarding sustainable wine certification confirmed that while a meaningful segment of consumers respond positively to sustainability labels in wine, attribute non-attendance behavior, where consumers simply ignore the sustainability attribute when making a purchase decision, is present in a significant proportion of the sample (Sgroi et al., 2023). Research also indicates that the credibility and source of a label shape its effect, with externally validated labels generally preferred over internally developed ones (Parguel et al., 2024). Taken together, this evidence suggests that sustainability labels are not self-evidently effective: their impact depends on consumer familiarity, trust in the certifying body, the specificity of the claims behind the label, and the degree to which the label is integrated into the consumer decision-making process. These considerations are directly relevant to the potential development of a platform-based designation for wine tourism and inform the criteria proposed in Section 5 of this study.

2.3 Wine Tourism, Experience Design, and the Sustainability Gap

Wine tourism has been widely studied as a form of experiential tourism that integrates cultural, gastronomic, and place-based elements (Hall and Mitchell, 2002; Quadri-Felitti and Fiore, 2012). The theoretical underpinning for this body of work draws on Pine and Gilmore's (1998, 1999) experience economy framework, which argues that in a post-industrial economy, the staging of memorable experiences, rather than the delivery of goods or services, is the primary source of differentiated economic value. Pine and Gilmore identify four dimensions of experience: education, escapism, entertainment, and esthetics, and argue that experiences

which engage multiple dimensions simultaneously produce the most durable memories and the deepest customer loyalty. Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2012) applied this framework specifically to wine tourism, finding that the four realms of the experience economy map onto the winery visit with particular richness: the educational dimension is engaged by learning about viticulture and winemaking, the esthetic dimension by the winescape and sensory encounter with the wine itself, the entertainment dimension by the social and narrative aspects of the visit, and the escapism dimension by the immersive, place-based character of the experience.

Wineries function simultaneously as production sites and tourism destinations, offering opportunities for storytelling, education, and sensory engagement. Research has consistently shown that the experiential quality of winery visits, shaped by factors such as the winescape, staff interaction, co-creation of experience, and sensory elements, significantly influences visitor satisfaction and purchase intention (Sthapit et al., 2024; Alonso et al., 2023). The winescape concept captures the holistic physical, social, and cultural environment of the winery visit, encompassing the vineyard landscape, cellar architecture, tasting room design, and the human interactions that animate the visit. These elements are not incidental to the wine tourism experience: they are constitutive of it, and they are precisely the elements through which a sustainability narrative, if one exists, would be most naturally communicated.

The experiential dimension of wine tourism is particularly relevant to the question of sustainability communication. Thanh and Kirova (2018), in a netnography study of wine tourism experiences, found that authenticity and place identity are central to what visitors find meaningful, suggesting that sustainability, as an expression of a winery's relationship to its land and community, has the potential to become a powerful element of the wine tourism experience rather than remaining invisible behind the production process. This argument is reinforced by the broader literature on experience design in tourism. Montella (2017) observed that the translation of sustainability practices into visible, visitor-facing content remains rare in practice,

but argued that where it does occur, it operates through narrative and sensory engagement rather than through information transfer alone. The implication is that sustainability in the winery visit is not best communicated through a panel on the wall or a badge on a booking page, but through the design of the visit experience itself: through what visitors see, touch, taste, hear, and are invited to think about during their time at the winery.

Pine and Gilmore's (1999) concept of the transformation economy, an extension of the experience economy in which the highest-value offerings change the customer rather than merely entertain them, provides a useful frame for thinking about what a sustainability-integrated wine tourism experience could aspire to. A visitor who leaves a winery having genuinely learned something about regenerative farming, who has tasted wine whose production philosophy they now understand and value, and who has walked through a landscape managed for biodiversity rather than mere yield, has been transformed in a small but real sense: their relationship to wine, to land stewardship, and to their own consumption choices has been altered. This is the aspiration behind the concept of experiential sustainability communication, and it is what distinguishes the most advanced examples identified in this study's benchmark from the majority of wineries, which either say nothing about sustainability to visitors or mention it as a footnote.

Some examples of sustainability-integrated wine tourism experiences already exist in practice. A small number of wineries globally have developed visitor experiences that are explicitly organized around their sustainability philosophy: ecosystem walks through biodiverse farming landscapes, barrel tastings framed around minimal-intervention winemaking, or guided tours that position the farm's regenerative practices as the central narrative. These examples demonstrate that the integration of sustainability into wine tourism is both possible and capable of producing the kind of distinctive, memorable, multi-dimensional experiences that the experience economy literature associates with the highest levels of visitor satisfaction and

loyalty. The gap identified by this study is therefore not that no winery has ever done this, but that it remains rare, unsupported by any formal framework, and largely invisible to platforms, certifiers, and visitors alike.

The academic literature reflects this gap. No existing framework or certification addresses the integration of sustainability into wine tourism as a deliberate, visitor-facing practice. The wine sector's sustainability certifications address production but not the visitor experience. Tourism sustainability frameworks are not designed for the individual winery visit. The experiential literature on wine tourism, while rich on the dimensions of quality, satisfaction, and the role of place identity, has largely set aside the sustainability dimension as a design variable. This study aims to fill that gap, drawing on primary data from a benchmark of winery communications and interviews with sustainability framework organizations to develop practical criteria that could support both wineries and platforms like WineTourism.com in advancing sustainability within the tourism experience.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design, appropriate for a topic area where the phenomenon of interest is not yet well understood and where the goal is to generate conceptual and descriptive insight rather than to test a predefined hypothesis. The decision to adopt a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative or mixed-methods design reflects the nature of the research questions. The study is not asking how much sustainability integration exists across a statistically representative population, but rather why and how it does or does not occur, what structural and institutional factors explain its absence, and what a practical response might look like. These are inherently interpretive questions that call for a method sensitive to context, meaning, and institutional perspective rather than one optimized for numeric precision.

An exploratory design is appropriate given the nascent state of literature on sustainability in the wine tourism experience as a visitor-facing phenomenon. As the literature review demonstrates, the gap this study addresses has been noted but not empirically investigated in prior research. There is therefore no established theoretical model to test, no established measurement instrument to apply, and no prior dataset against which to compare findings. The contribution of this study lies in providing the first systematic empirical characterization of the gap, not in confirming or disconfirming existing theory. This positions the study within a tradition of exploratory qualitative research that aims to generate conceptual frameworks and practical implications from primary data, following the logic set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis as a method suited to exactly this kind of inquiry.

The research is conducted in partnership with WineTourism.com as part of an internship, providing access to a global network of winery partners and industry stakeholders that would not

otherwise be available to an independent researcher. The study combines two complementary data collection methods: a systematic benchmark of winery sustainability communications, which constitutes the primary empirical basis, and semi-structured interviews with representatives of established sustainability frameworks, which provide corroborating institutional evidence. The decision to combine these two methods reflects a deliberate triangulation strategy: the benchmark provides breadth across a large sample of wineries but cannot reveal the reasons behind observed patterns, while the interviews provide depth on the institutional factors that explain those patterns but cannot speak to their prevalence across the sector.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Benchmarking of Winery Sustainability Communications

A benchmark of 65 winery partners listed on WineTourism.com was conducted to assess whether, and to what degree, sustainability is communicated or integrated into their tourism offerings. The benchmark was designed to provide a descriptive mapping of current practice across a purposive sample, enabling the identification of patterns and the development of a typology of sustainability communication that could serve both as a finding in its own right and as an instrument for the Sustainable Choice framework proposed in Section 5.

The benchmarking method draws on the tradition of content analysis in social research, defined by Krippendorff (2004) as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use. In this study, the texts are the publicly available communications wineries produce about their sustainability practices and visitor experiences, and the context is the wine tourism sector's current approach to integrating sustainability into the visitor experience. Content analysis is appropriate here because it allows a systematic, transparent, and reproducible coding of large volumes of textual material against a defined set

of criteria, enabling comparison across cases and supporting the generalization of patterns across the sample.

Sampling was conducted through a two-stage purposive process. In the first stage, WineTourism.com's internal team identified an initial pool of partners with some observable sustainability profile, drawing on platform knowledge and listing content. In the second stage, the researcher and WineTourism.com's marketing director jointly selected 65 wineries from this pool, applying two criteria: first, that each winery showed some observable sustainability signal, whether through formal certification, self-declared practices, or sustainability-related content visible on their listing page or website; and second, that the sample achieved geographic spread across wine-producing regions and countries. The resulting sample spans Europe, North America, South America, Africa, and Oceania. The same 65 wineries were also used as the outreach list for interview participation, as the selection criteria ensured that each winery had sufficient familiarity with sustainability topics to engage meaningfully with the research questions.

A purposive rather than random sampling approach was chosen deliberately. The research objective is not to measure the precise prevalence of sustainability communication across the full WineTourism.com partner network, which would require a random sample, but to characterize the range of practice across wineries that already have some sustainability orientation, and to identify patterns and illustrative cases within that range. Purposive sampling is the standard approach for this kind of exploratory qualitative research, allowing the researcher to maximize variation across the sample in theoretically relevant ways (Patton, 2002).

Because wineries with no sustainability presence at all were excluded at the selection stage, the sample is biased toward the more sustainability-conscious end of the WineTourism.com partner

network. Findings should therefore be understood as conservative estimates: the gap between production-side sustainability and visitor-facing integration is likely wider across the full platform than this sample reflects.

For each winery, three publicly available sources were reviewed: the winery's WineTourism.com listing page, including tour and tasting descriptions, about text, and any certification badges displayed; the winery's own website, with particular attention to sustainability, story, and experience pages; and the winery's most active social media presence, including the account biography and the most recent 10 to 15 posts. The evidence base draws on an internal sustainability assessment made available through the internship, supplemented by the researcher's independent review of public materials. All coding judgments and the four-category typology were applied by the researcher.

Each winery was coded into one of four categories. Category A denotes no discoverable sustainability communication in any visitor-facing material. Category B denotes sustainability present in production terms only, such as organic or biodynamic farming, water management, or energy use, with no connection drawn to the tour or tasting experience. Category C denotes partial integration, where sustainability appears somewhere in visitor-facing material but incidentally, for example a certification badge displayed on the listing page or a single mention in a tour description not structurally built into the experience. Category D denotes full integration, where sustainability is structurally part of the visitor experience itself, with the tour or tasting organized around the winery's sustainability practices. Where evidence was limited or ambiguous, the lower of the two possible categories was assigned, and the uncertainty was recorded in the coding documentation.

3.2.2 Interviews with Sustainability Framework Organizations

Outreach was conducted to a range of sustainability framework and certification bodies operating in the wine and tourism sectors, including GSTC, SWNZ, the Good Travel Institute, UN Tourism, and several regional wine sustainability programmes. Two organizations provided substantive responses that are included as data sources in this study.

The choice to focus on sustainability framework organizations, rather than on wineries or visitors, as the primary interview subjects reflects the study's theoretical orientation. The central argument of this study is that the gap between wine sector sustainability practice and visitor-facing integration is not primarily a product of individual winery decisions but of a structural absence in the governance systems that frame and incentivize sustainability across the sector. Framework organizations are therefore the most appropriate interview subjects for understanding the institutional dimensions of the gap, because they are the actors with direct knowledge of what existing standards do and do not address, and the actors best positioned to speak to whether and how that might change.

The interviews were designed as semi-structured, meaning that a set of prepared questions guided each conversation but the researcher was free to pursue emergent themes and follow lines of inquiry that arose during the exchange. This format is well-suited to expert interviews with knowledgeable informants, as it provides structure sufficient to ensure comparability across interviews while allowing the depth and flexibility needed to capture nuanced institutional perspectives (Bryman, 2016).

The first interview was conducted with a representative of SWNZ in May 2026, via email. The email format was chosen in response to the respondent's preference and organizational constraints, as SWNZ is based in New Zealand and a scheduled synchronous call across time zones presented practical difficulties. Email interviewing has been recognized in the qualitative methods literature as a valid and sometimes preferable alternative to synchronous interview

formats, particularly for expert informants whose written responses can be more considered and detailed than verbal answers given under time pressure (James, 2015). The format also produced a verbatim written record requiring no transcription, which reduced the risk of interpretive error in data capture.

The second interview was conducted with Dr. D'Arcy Dornan, Director of the Good Travel Institute, via video call in June 2026, lasting one hour. The video call format was chosen because the Good Travel Institute's remit, which covers tourism sustainability at a global scale and involves complex institutional relationships, warranted a more exploratory and dialogic exchange than the email format would support. Video-based interviewing has been shown to produce data quality comparable to face-to-face interviews while enabling access to geographically distant participants (Lobe et al., 2022), and the synchronous, dialogic format is particularly well-suited to interviews with organizational leaders where emergent follow-up questions are likely to generate the most substantive insights (Irani, 2019).

Outreach was also conducted to the 65 wineries in the benchmark sample through warm channels via WineTourism.com's Chief Executive Officer and marketing director, with an incentive offered for participation. Of the 65 wineries contacted, three responded and conversations were held. Given the limited sample size and the advisor's guidance that winery interview evidence should only be included where testimony is extraordinarily salient, winery interview data is not reported as a formal data source in this study. However, the response rate itself is treated as a finding, as discussed in Section 4.

3.3 Analysis

Benchmark data was analysed descriptively to establish the distribution of current practice among the 65 wineries sampled and to produce the four-category typology. For each winery, the coding decision was recorded alongside the specific evidence that justified it, enabling both

transparency of judgment and the identification of illustrative examples for each category. Descriptive analysis of the resulting distribution provides the quantitative backbone of the findings in Section 4, while the coded evidence records support the qualitative interpretation of what each category looks like in practice.

Interview data was analysed thematically following the approach set out by Braun and Clarke (2006), a method well-suited to exploratory qualitative research that seeks to identify patterns and meanings across a small number of rich accounts. The thematic analysis proceeded through six phases: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the analysis. Given that only two framework interviews are included as formal data sources, the analysis focused on identifying convergent and divergent themes across the two accounts, with particular attention to how each interview's findings related to the patterns observed in the benchmark, and what each added to the study's understanding of the structural causes of the gap. The analysis is explicitly cross-case, reading the SWNZ and Good Travel Institute interviews against each other and against the benchmark to triangulate findings rather than treating each as an isolated account.

3.4 Positionality and Limitations

This research is conducted in the context of an internship with WineTourism.com, which provides both access to data and a practitioner perspective. This positionality warrants explicit reflection. On one hand, the internship relationship provides access that would be unavailable to an independent researcher: the ability to conduct a benchmark across 65 platform partners, to reach winery outreach through the platform's CEO and marketing director, and to conduct an interview with a senior figure at the Good Travel Institute through an existing professional relationship. These are genuine research advantages that strengthen the study's empirical

basis. On the other hand, the internship relationship creates a potential conflict of interest: the researcher has a professional stake in WineTourism.com's success, and the applied output of this study, the Sustainable Choice designation, would benefit the platform commercially if adopted. This limitation is acknowledged and managed in two ways. First, the benchmark coding was conducted by the researcher independently, without input from or review by WineTourism.com staff, ensuring that the primary findings are not shaped by organizational interests. Second, the Sustainable Choice framework proposed in Section 5 is presented as a research-informed proposal, not as a finished organizational product, and its design is explicitly grounded in academic literature and primary data rather than in platform strategy.

The benchmark sample of 65 wineries was selected in collaboration with the platform's marketing team rather than through independent random sampling, which may introduce bias toward wineries the platform considers more sustainability-oriented or commercially significant. The benchmark draws on publicly available materials and an internal evidence base provided through the internship, and does not capture sustainability practices that are not communicated externally. A winery coded as Category A or B may practice sustainability extensively without communicating it through any publicly accessible channel, which is itself consistent with the central argument of the study but means the benchmark cannot be taken as a direct measure of underlying sustainability practice. A related and distinct limitation concerns what the benchmark is able to observe. The benchmark assesses the visibility of sustainability communication through publicly available digital materials only, the WineTourism.com listing, the winery's own website, and social media, and does not capture what wineries communicate verbally during the visit itself. A winery coded as Category A or B may deliver a rich sustainability narrative in person, through a tour guide or tasting host, that is simply not reflected in its online presence. The findings of this study should therefore be read as documenting a gap in publicly discoverable, pre-visit sustainability communication specifically, rather than a comprehensive

account of what happens during the winery visit itself. Interview evidence is limited to two completed conversations with framework and certification bodies, and findings from these interviews are treated as illustrative and corroborating rather than generalizable. The low response rate from winery outreach reflects a genuine limitation in the depth of primary data available at the individual producer level, and conclusions about the reasons wineries do or do not integrate sustainability into visitor experiences are drawn from the benchmark and framework interview evidence rather than from direct winery testimony.

3.5 Research Context: WineTourism.com

WineTourism.com is an online booking and discovery platform founded in Stockholm, Sweden in 2018 with the mission of making wine tourism experiences more accessible to visitors worldwide. The platform operates as a one-stop shop for both visitors seeking wine experiences and wineries seeking to market and manage bookings. As of 2026, the platform lists more than 4,000 wineries across 54 countries, collaborating with more than 5,000 wine tour providers across more than 240 wine regions, with a monthly visitor audience drawn primarily from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Italy, France, and the Nordic countries. The platform was co-founded by Calle Nilsson, who serves as Chief Executive Officer.

Sustainability is a stated core value of WineTourism.com. The platform's published values include an explicit commitment to sustainability, stating that WineTourism.com and its partner wineries respect sustainability and care about the environment, the climate, the people, and the partners they work with. This commitment is reflected in the platform's growing focus on sustainability as a commercial and strategic differentiator, including its partnership in the production of the Global Wine Tourism Report 2025, the most comprehensive global study of wine tourism economics and sustainability to date.

This research was conducted as part of an internship with WineTourism.com, under the supervision of the Chief Executive Officer and the platform's marketing director. The internship provided access to the platform's partner network, internal data, and industry stakeholder relationships, all of which are central to the data collection approach described in Section 3. As part of the internship, the researcher also contributed to the development of an internal sustainable practices framework for the platform, work that directly informed the applied output of this study and the criteria proposed for the Sustainable Choice designation in Section 5. WineTourism.com therefore functions in this research both as the organizational context that

made the study possible, and as a potential actor in addressing the gap the study identifies, through its capacity to develop and promote visitor-facing sustainability standards across its global partner network.

4. Findings

4.1 Benchmarking Results

To establish an empirical baseline for the gap identified in the literature, a benchmark of 65 wineries listed as partners on WineTourism.com was conducted. Wineries were selected purposively to capture variation across region, estate size, and sustainability orientation, as described in Section 3. For each winery, publicly available materials were reviewed and coded into one of four categories: no sustainability communication found (Category A), production-only communication (Category B), partial integration into the visitor experience (Category C), or full integration of sustainability into the visitor experience (Category D).

Of the 65 wineries benchmarked, 3 (4.6%) were coded as Category A, showing no discoverable mention of sustainability in any visitor-facing material reviewed. 50 wineries (76.9%) were coded as Category B, meaning sustainability was present in their communications but exclusively in production terms, such as organic or biodynamic farming, water management, energy use, or the display of a certification, with no connection drawn to the tour, tasting, or visitor experience itself. 6 wineries (9.2%) were coded as Category C, where sustainability appeared somewhere in visitor-facing material but incidentally, for example a certification badge displayed on a listing page or a brief mention in a tour description. The remaining 6 wineries (9.2%) were coded as Category D, where sustainability was structurally part of the visitor experience itself, with the tour or tasting organized around the winery's sustainability practices.

Among the Category D wineries, the most illustrative example is Château Shuette, a regenerative estate in Bordeaux whose visitor experience is explicitly organized around its farming philosophy. Guided walks take visitors through the estate's biodiversity infrastructure, including a duck pond, fruit trees, and over 280 bird, bat, and owl boxes, while barrel tastings are framed around the winery's zero-intervention winemaking approach. Sustainability at

Château Shuette is not a panel on a wall or a badge on a listing page; it is the content of the visit itself. A similar pattern is evident at La Collina dei Ciliegi in the Veneto, where an on-site eco-luxury hotel and farm-to-table restaurant are explicitly designed around the estate's organic and ecological identity, and at Château L'Eperon in Bordeaux, which holds the Vignobles & Découvertes certification, one of the few existing designations that specifically addresses the wine tourism experience rather than production alone.

By contrast, a representative Category B winery is Château Roubine in Provence, a certified organic estate holding both Ecocert and HVE3 certifications, with a strong sustainability record in its production. Its visitor offering makes no reference to its sustainability credentials in any visitor-facing description. According to publicly available information, a visitor arriving to book an experience would encounter no sustainability narrative unless they deliberately navigated to the production section of the estate's website. This pattern, sustainability implemented at an operational level but invisible to the visitor, characterizes more than three quarters of the wineries in the sample.

Table 1. Typology of Sustainability Communication in Wine Tourism: Benchmark Results (n=65)

Category	Definition	n	%	Illustrative Example
A:None found	No sustainability communication discovered in any visitor-facing material reviewed	3	4.6%	Conventional producers with no sustainability references on listing, website, or social media

B:Production-only	Sustainability present in production terms only (organic certification, biodynamic farming, water or energy use); no connection drawn to the tour or tasting experience	50	76.9%	Château Roubine (Provence): certified organic and HVE3; visitor experience descriptions make no reference to sustainability practices
C:Partial integration	Sustainability appears in visitor-facing material but incidentally (e.g. certification badge on listing page, single mention in tour description); not structurally built into the experience	6	9.2%	Quinta do Portal (Douro): Hotel Rural with sustainable practices referenced in production context; sustainability not the frame of the visitor experience
D:Full integration	Sustainability is structurally part of the visitor experience; the tour or tasting is organized around the winery's sustainability philosophy	6	9.2%	Château Shuette (Bordeaux): guided ecosystem walks and barrel tastings explicitly framed around regenerative farming and minimal-intervention winemaking
Total		65	100%	

Note: Sample was purposively selected from WineTourism.com partner wineries with an observable sustainability profile. Findings represent a conservative estimate; the gap between production-side sustainability and visitor-facing integration is likely wider across the full platform.

Source: Author's own benchmark, 2026.

Taken together, these results provide direct empirical support for the gap identified in the literature review. The combined proportion of wineries in Categories A and B amounts to 81.5% of the sample. Even when including Category C wineries, where sustainability appears but only incidentally, 90.8% of the sample fails to visibly integrate sustainability into the visitor experience as communicated through their public listing, website, and social media. Only 9.2% demonstrate the kind of structural integration this study argues is both possible and commercially and environmentally valuable.

Two additional observations are worth noting. First, 38 of the 65 wineries (58.5%) display at least one sustainability certification, confirming that the gap is not primarily a gap in practice but in communication and experience design. Second, the sample was purposively selected to include wineries with some observable sustainability profile, meaning the findings likely underestimate the scale of the gap across the full platform.

A further finding emerged from the interview outreach process. Of the 65 wineries contacted for interview participation through WineTourism.com's Chief Executive Officer and marketing director, with an incentive offered for participation, only three responded, representing a response rate of approximately 5%. Given that outreach was conducted through warm, high-credibility channels and that the sample was pre-selected for having an observable sustainability profile, this low engagement rate is itself informative. It suggests that even among wineries that practice sustainability, engagement with sustainability as a visitor-facing topic

carries sufficiently low priority that they could not spare approximately 20 minutes to discuss it, even when approached by a trusted platform partner.

4.2 Framework Interviews

Two interviews were conducted with representatives of established sustainability frameworks operating in the wine and tourism sectors. Both interviews were designed to explore the extent to which existing frameworks address tourism activities at wineries, and to gather institutional perspectives on the gap identified through benchmarking. The findings from both interviews are presented together here, as they address the same research questions from complementary institutional angles and yield several convergent themes.

The first interview was conducted with a representative of Sustainable Winegrowing New Zealand (SWNZ) in May 2025. The SWNZ framework organizes its requirements across six focus areas aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals: Water, Waste, Plant Protection, Soil, Climate Change, and People. The respondent confirmed that the framework does not consider tourism or visitor-facing activities in its scope, noting that ...”it is up to our individual members to decide how they would like to use their certification in their comms, including any tourism or visitor-facing activities” (SWNZ representative, personal communication, May 2025). When asked about a dedicated wine tourism sustainability standard, the respondent was direct: a standalone/dedicated sustainability standard focused on wine tourism would work best, as wine tourism is quite different to the areas currently covered by SWNZ (SWNZ representative, personal communication, May 2025). The respondent also observed that some SWNZ members voluntarily integrate their sustainability credentials into the visitor experience, but that this is neither required nor assessed by the certification, reinforcing the benchmark finding that where visitor-facing sustainability integration occurs at all, it is ad hoc rather than systematic.

The second interview was conducted with Dr. D'Arcy Dornan, Director of the Good Travel Institute, via video call in June 2026. Dr. Dornan also referenced Green Destinations, a separate destination-level sustainability certification programme, noting that it assesses sustainability at the level of the destination and its managing entity, and explicitly does not extend to individual businesses or experience providers operating within that destination, such as wineries. This confirms that the gap identified in this study is not specific to wine-sector certifications alone, but reflects a broader structural pattern in sustainable tourism governance, in which standards are pitched at a level of aggregation above the individual visitor-facing activity.

Dr. Dornan identified the Good Travel Institute's Product and Activity Sustainability Scan (PASS) as the closest existing mechanism to an experience-level sustainability assessment, using a self-assessment scan of roughly 20 Likert-scale criteria, evaluated by trained assessors, with providers reaching a 75% threshold being recognized as a Good Travel Experience. This tool has not yet been applied specifically to wine tourism or agritourism, though Dr. Dornan saw clear applicability to the sector. This finding nuances the framing of the gap: rather than no comparable instrument existing in tourism sustainability generally, an experience-level verification model is emerging but has not yet reached the wine tourism sector specifically.

Asked directly whether certifications or verifications meaningfully influence tourist behavior, Dr. Dornan's view aligned with the nuance introduced by the wine-specific eco-label literature: badges and certifications alone do not, in his assessment, move tourists. He argued that the more durable approach is enabling providers to make specific, data-backed claims, for example a low-carbon wine tour, and surfacing these claims to travelers through filterable platforms at the point of booking. This represents an important convergence between the interview evidence and the academic literature: the effectiveness of any designation in wine tourism is likely to depend less on certification status per se and more on the specificity, verifiability, and visibility of the claims it enables wineries to communicate.

Dr. Dornan also noted that EU regulation restricting unverified sustainability claims, effective in 2026, is likely to accelerate adoption of measurable sustainability practices among wineries regardless of visitor demand. He further expressed interest in exploring collaboration with WineTourism.com on the development of a vineyard-specific sustainability verification framework.

4.3 Synthesis

Taken together, the benchmark and the two framework interviews provide complementary evidence for the central argument of this study. The benchmark establishes that the gap between sustainability practice and visitor-facing communication is widespread: 81.5% of wineries in a purposively selected, sustainability-leaning sample show little or no communicated connection between their sustainability practices and the tourism experience they publicly describe. The interviews help explain why this gap persists at a structural level. Both SWNZ and the Good Travel Institute confirmed that their respective frameworks are not designed to assess the individual visitor-facing experience at a winery. No existing standard fills this space.

The interviews also introduce an important refinement to the question of what a solution might look like. The evidence suggests that a simple badge or designation, applied without specificity or verifiability, is unlikely to meaningfully influence visitor behavior. What both the academic literature and the practitioner evidence point toward is a framework that enables wineries to make concrete, verifiable claims about specific sustainability practices integrated into the visitor experience, and that surfaces those claims to visitors at the point of discovery and booking. This insight directly informs the criteria proposed in the following section.

5. Recommendations: The Sustainable Choice Designation

5.1 Rationale

The findings of this study point toward a clear practical implication. The absence of any visitor-facing sustainability standard in the wine tourism sector represents a structural gap that platforms and certifying bodies are positioned to help address. The benchmark documented that 81.5% of wineries in a sustainability-leaning sample either communicate no sustainability information in their publicly available materials or communicate it exclusively as a production fact, disconnected from the tourism experience they describe. The framework interviews confirmed that no existing certification or standard, in either the wine or tourism sector, is designed to assess or incentivize this kind of integration.

The Sustainable Choice designation, developed in parallel with this research through the internship with WineTourism.com, is proposed as a response to this gap. It is conceived as a platform-based label that identifies wineries on WineTourism.com that not only implement sustainability practices but actively integrate and communicate those practices within the visitor experience. It is presented here not as a finished product but as a research-informed proposal whose criteria are grounded in the findings of this study and whose design reflects both the academic literature on sustainability labels and the practitioner evidence gathered through interviews.

Two design principles from the evidence base inform the proposal directly. First, the interview with Dr. Dornan and the wine-specific eco-label literature both suggest that a general sustainability badge is unlikely on its own to meaningfully influence visitor behavior. The Sustainable Choice designation is therefore designed not as a pass or fail badge but as a tiered framework that enables wineries to demonstrate specific, documentable practices across multiple dimensions. Second, the benchmark finding that 58.5% of sampled wineries already

hold at least one sustainability certification yet rarely communicate this to visitors suggests that the barrier to entry for the designation should not be the absence of sustainability practice but the absence of visitor-facing integration.

5.2 Framework Structure

The Sustainable Choice designation is organized around four sections, each with a qualifying standard, a set of basic and best practice criteria, and a gate requirement ensuring that no section can be bypassed entirely.

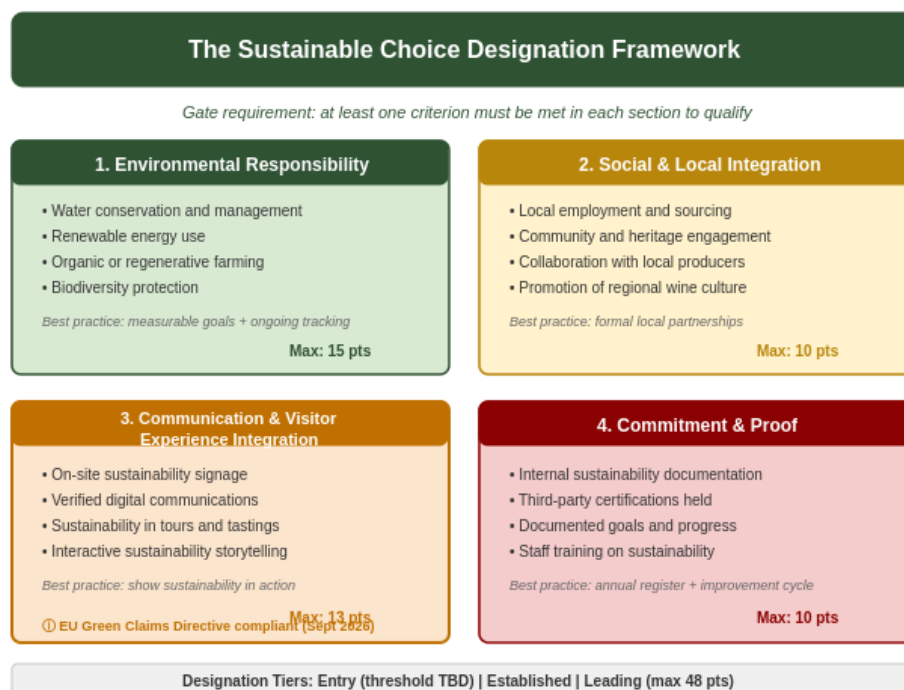


Figure 1. The Sustainable Choice Designation Framework: four sections, gate requirements, and designation tiers. Source: Author's own design, 2026.

Section 1: Environmental Responsibility

Standard: The winery implements at least one verifiable environmental practice related to resource management or ecosystem protection.

This section covers water management, energy use, land and farming practices, and biodiversity. Basic criteria include practices such as water conservation and reuse, renewable energy use, organic or regenerative farming, reduced synthetic inputs, cover cropping and composting, and the protection or creation of natural habitats. Best practice criteria include ongoing monitoring and measurement of resource use, the setting of documented environmental goals, and demonstrated progress toward lower-impact production methods. Relevant certifications include EU Organic Certification, Biodyvin, IFOAM Organics International, and the GSTC criteria for businesses.

Section 2: Social and Local Integration

Standard: The winery contributes positively to the local community, culture, and economy.

This section covers local employment, local sourcing, community and cultural heritage engagement, and visitor experience design. Basic criteria include the hiring of local staff, sourcing from local suppliers, collaboration with local producers, tastings featuring local or sustainable products, promotion of regional wine heritage, and support for local community initiatives. Best practice criteria include formal partnerships with local businesses and the deliberate integration of local storytelling into the visitor experience by design. Relevant frameworks include Fair Trade Tourism and the World Food Travel Association.

Section 3: Communication and Visitor Experience Integration

Standard: Sustainability practices are clearly and accurately communicated to visitors and are actively embedded into the design and delivery of the wine tourism experience itself.

This section is the most distinctive element of the Sustainable Choice framework relative to existing wine and tourism sustainability standards, and directly addresses the gap documented in this study. Basic criteria include on-site signage or informational materials, website or booking platform descriptions of sustainability practices using specific and verifiable language,

sustainability practices explained during tours or tastings, vineyard tours explaining environmental practices, interactive storytelling about sustainability efforts, and sustainability themes reflected in the overall brand experience. Best practice criteria include sustainability claims backed by documented evidence available on request, experiences deliberately designed to show sustainability in action rather than merely describe it, and visitors engaging with sustainability emotionally and educationally, not just informationally.

This section also carries a regulatory dimension. From September 2026, unverified sustainability claims to European consumers will be illegal under the EU Green Claims Directive (2024/825), meaning wineries operating in or marketing to European markets will be legally required to substantiate any sustainability communications. The criteria in this section are designed to be consistent with that regulatory requirement.

Section 4: Commitment and Proof of Practices

Standard: The winery provides evidence of its sustainability efforts and demonstrates ongoing commitment.

This section covers documentation, ongoing tracking, and staff training. Basic criteria include internal sustainability protocols or written practices on record, existing third-party certifications held, documented goals and progress tracked over time, and sustainability information shared with and used to train customer-facing staff. Best practice criteria include a formal sustainability register reviewed annually, a structured continuous improvement cycle aligned with a recognized framework, and a formal sustainability training module for customer-facing staff. Best practice guidance in this section is deliberately graduated to be accessible to wineries of varying resources.

5.3 Scoring and Designation Tiers

The framework operates on a points-based scoring system. Basic practice items earn one point each, while best practice items earn two points each, reflecting their higher level of ambition and verifiability. A gate requirement applies to every section: a winery must check at least one item in each of the four sections to qualify for the designation regardless of total score. This gate requirement ensures that the visitor experience integration section cannot be bypassed by a winery with strong environmental credentials but no visitor-facing communication.

The maximum possible score across all four sections is 48 points. Designation is awarded at three tiers: Entry, Established, and Leading. Point thresholds for each tier are to be calibrated against the benchmark data collected in this study, ensuring that the thresholds reflect the actual distribution of current practice among WineTourism.com partner wineries rather than being set arbitrarily.

The tiered approach makes the designation accessible to smaller producers and those earlier in their sustainability journey, while still distinguishing and rewarding more advanced integration. It creates a pathway for wineries to improve over time, with the designation functioning not only as a quality signal to visitors but as a development tool for wineries themselves.

5.4 Implications for WineTourism.com and the Broader Sector

The Sustainable Choice designation is designed primarily for implementation on the WineTourism.com platform, where it would function as a filter and label enabling visitors to identify and choose wineries that integrate sustainability into the visitor experience. Evidence from the eco-labeling literature reviewed in Section 2.2 suggests that the commercial case for such a designation is supported: sustainability labels positively influence purchasing behavior when they are perceived as specific and credible. The regulatory pressure of the EU Green Claims Directive, effective from September 2026, adds a further commercial rationale for

wineries to adopt a framework that helps them substantiate rather than merely assert their sustainability credentials.

Beyond the platform context, the SWNZ interview confirmed that the sector's existing production-focused certification bodies have not considered visitor experience integration within their scope and see potential value in a dedicated wine tourism sustainability standard. The Good Travel Institute expressed active interest in collaborating with WineTourism.com to explore a vineyard-specific verification framework building on its PASS methodology. These signals suggest that the institutional appetite for a solution to the gap this study identifies is present, and that the Sustainable Choice designation could serve as a foundation for a more widely adopted sector standard in the medium term.

6. Conclusions

6.1 Summary of the Study

This study set out to investigate the gap between sustainability certification in the wine sector and the integration of sustainability into the visitor experience at wineries. Drawing on a benchmark of 65 winery partners on WineTourism.com and interviews with two established sustainability framework organizations, it has documented the nature and scale of that gap empirically, explored the structural reasons it persists, and proposed a practical framework for addressing it. This concluding section returns to each of the four research questions, synthesizes the contribution of the study, reflects on its limitations, and considers how its findings might generalize beyond the specific context of wine tourism.

6.2 Answers to the Research Questions

Main Research Question: How can sustainability practices be effectively integrated into the wine tourism experience at wineries?

The evidence gathered in this study suggests that effective integration requires two conditions that are currently absent for the large majority of wineries. The first is intentionality in experience design: sustainability must be built into the structure and narrative of the visitor experience rather than mentioned as a peripheral fact or displayed as a badge. The second condition is a supporting framework that gives wineries practical guidance on what visitor-facing integration looks like, how to document and communicate it credibly, and how to develop it progressively over time. Neither condition is currently met at scale. The Sustainable Choice framework proposed in Section 5 is designed to provide the second condition, with the expectation that doing so will, over time, help more wineries meet the first.

Supporting Question 1: To what extent do existing sustainability frameworks and certifications in the wine and tourism sectors address tourism activities at wineries?

The answer is: very little, and in most cases not at all. Wine-specific certifications are oriented entirely toward production inputs and do not consider how sustainability is communicated or experienced during a winery visit. Tourism sustainability frameworks operate at the destination level and do not extend to individual tourism experience providers such as wineries. The one partial exception identified in this study is the Good Travel Institute's PASS verification, which operates at the experience level, but this tool has not yet been applied to wine tourism and remains in early rollout. The gap is therefore not a matter of degree but of structural absence: no framework currently addresses the intersection of wine, tourism, and visitor experience as an integrated domain.

Supporting Question 2: What gaps exist between sustainability practices in wine production and their communication or integration into visitor experiences?

The benchmark provides a direct empirical answer. Among 65 wineries purposively selected for having some observable sustainability profile, 76.9% communicated sustainability only in production terms in their publicly discoverable materials, with no connection drawn to the visitor experience, and a further 4.6% showed no sustainability communication at all. Only 9.2% visibly integrated sustainability into the visitor experience as described in these materials, despite 58.5% of the sample holding at least one formal sustainability certification, confirming that the gap is not primarily a gap in practice but a gap in communication and experience design. The low winery interview response rate of approximately 5% from 65 pre-selected, sustainability-oriented wineries further suggests that visitor-facing sustainability integration carries sufficiently low priority among winery operators that it does not register as a topic worth engaging with.

Supporting Question 3: How can experience design be used to translate sustainability practices into meaningful visitor engagement?

The benchmark examples and the interview evidence together point toward several principles. Sustainability becomes meaningful in the visitor experience when it is embodied rather than described: when visitors walk through a biodiverse farming landscape, taste wine whose production philosophy is explained as they encounter it, or encounter staff who can speak fluently about what the winery does and why. The literature on experiential wine tourism reinforces this point, finding that authenticity and place identity are central to what visitors find meaningful. The Sustainable Choice framework proposed in this study attempts to operationalize these principles into a practical checklist that wineries can use to audit and develop their own visitor experience integration.

Supporting Question 4: What practical implications do these findings hold for platforms and certifying bodies seeking to support sustainability integration in wine tourism?

The findings have three practical implications. First, platforms like WineTourism.com are well positioned to drive adoption of visitor-facing sustainability standards, because they sit at the point of discovery and booking where visitor choice is made. Second, existing certification bodies in both the wine and tourism sectors should consider whether their frameworks can be extended or complemented to address the visitor experience dimension, either by developing experience-level criteria internally or by partnering with platforms and specialist bodies to do so. Third, any designation or framework developed in this space must prioritize the specificity and verifiability of underlying claims over the presence of a badge, as both the academic literature and the practitioner evidence indicate that generic sustainability labels are unlikely to meaningfully influence visitor behavior without credible, documentable substance behind them.

6.3 Contribution of the Study

This study makes three contributions to the existing body of knowledge. First, it provides, to the best of the author's knowledge, an empirical mapping of the gap between wine sector sustainability certification and visitor-facing sustainability integration, drawing on a purposive benchmark of 65 wineries across 54 countries. While the existence of this gap has been noted in passing in the academic literature, this study is the first to document its scale and character through systematic primary data collection. Second, it contributes institutional evidence from two sustainability framework organizations confirming that the gap exists not only in practice but in the design of the governance systems that are supposed to address sustainability in both the wine and tourism sectors. Third, it proposes and details the Sustainable Choice designation, a practical framework developed in collaboration with WineTourism.com that translates the research findings into actionable criteria for wineries and a deployable tool for platforms.

6.4 Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. The benchmark sample of 65 wineries was purposively selected from a single platform's partner network and included only wineries with some observable sustainability profile, meaning the findings likely underestimate the scale of the gap across the wider industry. Coding was based on publicly available materials, specifically the WineTourism.com listing, the winery's own website, and social media, and therefore captures what a prospective visitor can discover before or during booking rather than what is actually delivered on-site. A winery coded as Category A or B could still communicate sustainability extensively through an in-person tour or tasting narrative that never appears in any digital material, a possibility the benchmark is not designed to detect; the findings should accordingly be read as documenting a gap in publicly discoverable, pre-visit communication rather than a comprehensive account of the on-site visitor experience. The interview evidence is limited to two completed conversations with framework and certification bodies, and conclusions about the reasons individual wineries do or do not integrate sustainability into visitor experiences

cannot be fully explored from this dataset alone. The Sustainable Choice framework proposed in Section 5 is a working draft whose scoring thresholds remain to be calibrated against a larger dataset, and its effectiveness in influencing visitor behavior and winery adoption has not yet been empirically tested.

6.5 Generalizability and Future Research

While this study is grounded in the specific context of wine tourism, its core finding, that sustainability systems built to govern production do not automatically translate into visitor-facing experience, is likely to apply across other forms of agritourism and experiential food and beverage tourism. Olive oil producers, craft breweries, artisan food producers, and similar operations face an analogous gap: rich sustainability stories embedded in their production processes that rarely reach the visitors who come to experience their products. The framework developed here, and the methodological approach of benchmarking visitor-facing sustainability communications against a typology of integration, could be adapted for use in these adjacent sectors.

Future research might usefully address three gaps left open by this study. First, a larger scale benchmark drawing on a random rather than purposive sample would provide a more representative picture of the prevalence and character of the gap across the global wine tourism industry. Second, visitor-side research exploring whether and how sustainability integration in the winery visit influences visitor satisfaction, loyalty, and willingness to pay would provide the demand-side evidence base that this study's supply-side focus does not capture. Third, a longitudinal study tracking the adoption and impact of a designation such as Sustainable Choice following implementation would provide the empirical evidence needed to assess whether platform-based sustainability labels can effectively shift winery practice and visitor behavior in this sector.

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