

Embracing sustainable practices would help some winery tasting rooms stand out

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About 85% of survey participants indicated that they were willing to bring empty wine bottles to a winery for recycling. Credit: Brett Levy, Flickr

Wineries in the mid-Atlantic region should consider recycling and encouraging their customers to bring bottles to their tasting rooms for

refilling to distinguish their businesses from so many others, according to a team of wine-marketing researchers who surveyed consumers.

With competition to attract visitors stiff and still growing among the hundreds of wineries in the region, connecting a winery's brand to [sustainable practices](#) would attract more visitors to its tasting room, according to Kathleen Kelley, professor of horticultural marketing and business management in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences. The strategy, researchers believe, would especially appeal to environmentally conscious younger customers.

"We see that millennials seem to be more concerned with the environment, so a way for wineries to stand out from the crowd with younger wine consumers is to encourage recycling bottles and perhaps offer refillable growlers," she said. "The question is, how do we motivate people to return to wine-tasting rooms? Using recyclable containers is one way."

The purpose of the research, recently published in the *British Food Journal*, was to investigate consumers' wine preferences, recycling attitudes and behaviors, and socio-[demographic data](#) in an effort to build market-segment profiles of those willing to bring wine bottles back to wine-tasting rooms to be recycled. The study also looked at consumer attitudes toward glass-alternative packaging and various cork-alternative bottle closures.

To learn consumer preferences, researchers administered a detailed online survey to 714 wine consumers residing in the mid-Atlantic region—Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey—and the researchers analyzed their responses using a special method that allowed [market segments](#) to be identified. About 85% of survey participants indicated that they were willing to bring empty wine bottles to a winery for recycling.

Collectively, 77% of participants were members of just three of the eight market segments developed, with 90% percent of participants in those segments willing to bring empty wine bottles to a winery tasting room to be recycled. These three segments were comprised of millennials, born between 1980 and 1994; members of Generation X, born between 1965 and 1979; and Baby Boomers, born between 1944 and 1964.

"We know from all the available data that tasting-room traffic is still very important to wineries, even though there are so many other outlets where consumers can buy wine," Kelley said. "Consumers still seek the experience of visiting a winery tasting room, and it drives sales. A winery being seen as sustainable offers consumers a reason to visit more frequently."

Over time, younger consumers as they age become increasingly important to businesses such as winery tasting rooms. Although [baby boomers](#) and Gen Xers have more discretionary income to spend because they are older and presumably better established, Kelley noted that millennials are making up a fast-growing portion of tasting-room traffic.

And while so-called generational marketing is wise, in this case it would be foolish to believe that only individuals in the younger group care about sustainability or that only people in the older group can afford to buy wine, Kelley pointed out. And a sustainability-linked image is not for all wineries. Still, she suggested, mid-Atlantic winemakers should consider their younger customers' behavior and purchasing habits.

"We are finding that younger millennials give more thought and pay more attention to experiences rather than products," she explained, so wineries should consider appealing to these patrons' environmentalism and preference for sustainability in tasting rooms and operations.

"Our data indicates that recycling is a key issue that will motivate many consumers who are likely to travel to winery tasting rooms, so recycling wine bottles or allowing them to refill their growlers with a certain varietal in a promotional offer makes good business sense," she said.

"We can describe that consumer both in their demographics and their behaviors, and that allows the winery tasting rooms to develop promotional materials and offer experiences and products to appeal to these consumers."

In a follow-up study related to marketing sustainability in mid-Atlantic region winemaking, Kelley's research group is surveying [consumers](#) about whether they would be willing to pay a bit more for wine produced from grapes grown sustainably with cover crops as a way to control weeds and insects.

More information: Kathleen Kelley et al, Wine consumers' willingness to adopt environmentally friendly packaging practices at tasting rooms, *British Food Journal* (2019). DOI: 10.1108/BFJ-04-2019-0229

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