

The Heurigen: a Viennese Institution facing new challenges due to changing ways of consumption

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Abstract

Vienna is a city with 1.8m inhabitants on the Danube with a long and important wine history. Today vineyards cover 612 hectares on Viennese' hills. The Heurigen, Viennas' traditional wine taverns, have played and still play an important role in both the Viennese wine&food culture and wine marketing i.e. sales. Traditionally Austrian wine taverns firstly use their own facilities to sell their wine, secondly are mostly run by family members and thirdly pay no additional taxes on their off-trade sales. These three factors make it possible that in a Heurigen wine and food can be offered at much lower prices than in a restaurant. However, changing ways of living, in general, and of consumption, in particular, seem to be affecting the Heurigen and its culture. According to the Regional Chamber of Agriculture, Vienna counted more than 500 wine-taverns in the 1960s, in the 1980s a little more than 250, and in 2011 "only" 125.

Research Goals – The aim of the paper is to investigate whether or not changing ways of consumption play a role in the decrease of Heurigen wine-taverns in Vienna. Moreover, we want to find out which issues are of importance for the Heurigen to survive and flourish in the 21st century.

Approach – To find answers to our research questions a qualitative research design was chosen. The interviews focus on changing ways of consumption and how wine-tavern owners and/or managers may or may not meet new challenges connected with it.

Results –Critical factors concerning peoples' nutrition and recent food trends in the "western world" such as the globalisation of food products, low versus high calorie diets, reduced consumption of alcohol, the desire for a healthy lifestyle and the fast food trend are part of our findings and discussed in detail

Résumé

Vienne est une ville de 1,8 millions d'habitants située sur les bords du Danube avec une riche et longue histoire viticole. Aujourd'hui, le vignoble de 612 hectares s'étend sur les collines viennoises. L'Heurigen, qui est la taverne viennoise traditionnelle continue de jouer un rôle majeur dans la vie gastronomique et culturelle de Vienne et représente aussi un débouché commercial important pour les vins autrichiens. Traditionnellement les autrichiens utilisaient leur installation viticole pour vendre leurs vins en direct, souvent gérés familialement, ils ne payaient pas de taxes supplémentaires sur les ventes directes permettant ainsi de proposer des prix plus attractifs que les restaurants. Les changements de mode de vie et plus particulièrement de consommation affectent cependant la réussite commerciale des Heurigen. Selon la Chambre Régionale d'Agriculture, le nombre d'Heurigen serait passé de 500 en 1960 à un peu moins de 250 dans les années 80, et enfin 125 en 2011.

Objectifs de la recherche – L'objectif de ce papier est d'analyser les changements des modes de consommation ayant entraîné un déclin du nombre d'Heurigen à Vienne et de comprendre les leviers permettant de maintenir un dynamisme des Heurigen pour affronter les enjeux du 21^{ème} siècle.

Méthodologie – Une approche qualitative a été retenue. Les interviews de propriétaires des Heurigen ont été orientées vers la compréhension des changements de consommation et la mise en évidence des stratégies développées par les tenanciers des tavernes pour réagir face aux changements.

Résultats – Les éléments mis en lumière concernent les modifications d'attitude face à l'alimentation, la recherche d'une nourriture plus saine, moins calorique, la réduction de la consommation d'alcool, l'évolution du rythme de vie et la recherche de praticité et rapidité dans un contexte de globalisation des habitudes alimentaires.

Introduction

“Old” and “new” ways of food and drink consumption differ significantly. Globalisation, technical innovations in nutrition processing and recent food trends in the Western world make it ordinary for us to consume foods which our parents at that age did not have or know about. Factors for these changes are numerous and include changes which have economic, political, health-related, animal welfare and environment protection backgrounds. The industrialisation and globalisation of foods in contrast to “old” locally grown and consumed produce, the availability of sugar and fat at all times, low versus high calorie diets, reduced consumption of alcohol, the desire for a healthy lifestyle, the fast food trend, the avoidance of red meat or the avoidance of meat altogether are some of the developments connected to these changes and express “old” vs. “new” ways of consumption.

Due to the very limited number of scientific studies in this field, this paper deals with a relevant topic in times of food and drink globalisation: *managing traditional offers in today’s rapidly changing consumption environment* and will contribute to expand the academic body of knowledge. While analysing the example of the traditional wine taverns called *Heurigen* in Vienna, the study, although dealing with a niche topic, may serve as a blueprint for many other old-style market offerings such as the traditional English *Pub*, the Alsatian *Winstub*, the Bavarian *Braustube* the *Bouchon Lyonnais* and others. These forms of gastronomy, while not situated in a very touristic environment, have to face harsh challenges due to a shifting marketplace and changing ways of consumption.

The number of *Heurigen* in Vienna fell from over 500 in the 1960s to around 250 in the 80s and about 125 in 2011 (Landwirtschaftskammer Wien, 2011, p. 32). Apart from explaining the history and the social importance of traditional Viennese wine taverns, it seemed important to also provide an explanation from the legal perspective to help answer the research question. Our findings emphasise that thanks to its special fiscal status *Heurigen* has been a potentially highly profitable business model since 1784.

1. Viennese wine taverns

Vienna is a city with 1.8m inhabitants on the Danube with a long and important wine history. Today vineyards cover 612 hectares on Viennese’ hills (Arbeithuber, Waxenegger and Skurnik, 2011). The outskirts of Vienna to the south, east, north and west are wine growing areas. Nevertheless 87% of all vineyards are located in the hills of the 19th and 21st Viennese districts in the north-west where they form the right and left bank of the Danube. This is also where the famous wine and *Heurigen* villages like Grinzing, Neustift and Stammersdorf are situated.

The history of wine in Austria goes back to 276 AD when the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Probus cancelled an edict that forbade wine growing outside of Italy i.e. in the Roman provinces. The *Heurigen*, Vienna’s traditional wine taverns, have played and still play an important role in both the Viennese wine & food culture and wine marketing i.e. sales (Keen and Robinson, 2001). The term *Heuriger* (‘høʀɪgəʀ) in singular, literally meaning “this year’s”, has three distinct meanings: young (this year’s) potatoes, this year’s wine and the traditional wine tavern where the latter is sold (Robinson, 2006).

1.1. Legislative regulations, offer and prices

The *Heurigen* is subject to many laws. Some of them that date back as early as the time of Charlemagne, who was unique in the quantity of regulations he imposed concerning viticulture and wine (Keen and Robinson, 2001). A verdict of 795 AD declares that “vintners should have ready at least three to four grape wreaths each year.” While there still is uncertainty as to the precise meaning of this regulation, the most accepted interpretation is that the wreath signifies the times of serving wine (Sinhuber, 1996, p. 12). In 1784, Austrian Emperor Joseph II, son of Maria Theresia and brother of Marie Antoinette, issued the most important law in this regard. The law of Joseph II from 1784 allows winemakers to open their facility, which was usually in those times, to the public to sell their own wines.

The particularity of Joseph’s law lies in a small but significant detail: the sale of wine made from one’s own produce was and still is quasi-free from taxes. Small wineries in Austria are taxed on a flat rate basis and wine and food sales at the *Heurigen* are included in these “all-in” regulations. Traditionally Austrian wine taverns primarily use their own facilities to sell their wine, secondly are mostly run by family members and thirdly pay no additional taxes on their off-trade sales in the *Heurigen*. These three factors make it possible that in a *Heurigen* wine and food can be offered at much lower prices than in a restaurant. But Austrian wine taverns must comply with a number of important limitations whose specific details vary from region to region.

The most significant regulations concern opening times and the food and drink that is served. A *Heurigen* does not have the right to be open all year round. Depending on the region it can only be open from two to four weeks in a row and a limited number of weeks per year. Furthermore a traditional (tax free) wine tavern does not have the right to sell hot food, coffee, beer, non-traditional soft drinks such as Coca-Cola or Fanta as well as purchased (not home-made) wines or spirits. In a *Heurigen* the young, dry and mostly white wine is accompanied by bread and hearty food such as Liptauer (a cheese spread made of soft cheese, paprika and spices), cold, thinly cut pork roasts (*Schweinsbraten*, *Kümmelbraten* and *Surbraten*) as well as sausage products such as black pudding or liver sausage. A real *Heuriger* therefore very limited in its actions in order to respond to consumption trends. Neither is it allowed to offer wine which was bought elsewhere (e.g.