

Development of Eno-Gastro Tourism in the Western Balkans

Elena Mladenovska Jelenkovic
University of UN – ECPD, Belgrade, Serbia
M6 Educational Centre, Skopje, North Macedonia
Wines of Macedonia (WOM), Skopje, North Macedonia

Abstract

Eno-gastro tourism, an emerging form of experiential travel combining wine and culinary experiences, has gained prominence as tourists increasingly seek authenticity, cultural immersion, and sustainability. The Western Balkans, endowed with ancient viticultural heritage, over 200 indigenous grape varieties, and rich culinary traditions, is positioned to benefit from this trend. This paper examines the potential of eno-gastro tourism in the Western Balkans by analysing global tourism trends, identifying the region's viticultural and culinary assets, and conducting a SWOT analysis. Through comparative analysis with renowned regions like Bordeaux and Rioja, as well as localized case studies (Tikveš Winery, New Balkan Cuisine, Herzegovina Wine Route), the research highlights strategic pathways. Findings suggest that although structural and organizational barriers persist, a unified branding initiative, such as the proposed "BALKAN Wines Association", paired with regional collaboration and sustainable practices, could elevate the Western Balkans into a competitive eno-gastro tourism destination.

Keywords: eno-gastro tourism, wine tourism, Western Balkans, culinary heritage, regional development, sustainable tourism

JEL classification: M31, L83, Q13, Z32

Paper type: Research article

Received: 15 April 2025

Accepted: 1 June 2025

DOI: 10.54820/entrenova-2025-0083

Citation: Jelenkovic, E. M. (2025). Development of Eno-Gastro Tourism in the Western Balkans. ENTRENOVA - ENTERprise REsearch InNOVation, 11(1), <https://doi.org/10.54820/entrenova-2025-0083>.

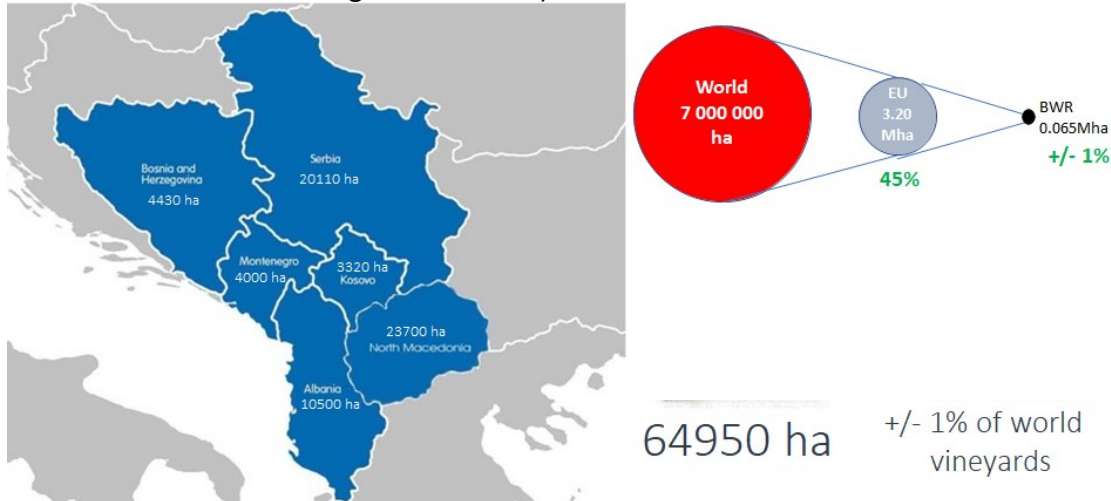
Introduction

Experiential and cultural tourism is increasingly prioritized by modern travellers over traditional leisure models. Among the fastest-growing niches is eno-gastro tourism, which merges oenology (wine tourism) with gastronomy into immersive experiences (Carlsen & Boksberger, 2015).

This aligns with global trends favoring authenticity, local traditions, and sustainable consumption.

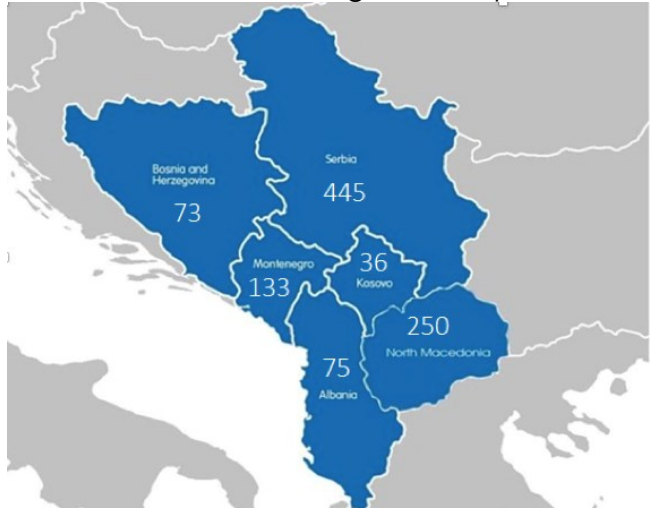
The Western Balkans (Figure 2 and 3), comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, represents an underexploited but highly promising eno-gastro tourism market (Figure 1). It boasts deep viticultural traditions, a convergence of culinary influences, and rich cultural heritage. Historically fragmented, the region now faces a pivotal opportunity to harness its authentic assets to develop globally competitive eno-gastro tourism as a driver of economic growth, rural revitalization, and cultural preservation (Getz & Brown, 2006).

Figure 1
Western Balkans wine regions ha analysis 2023/24



Source: Author's Illustration

Figure 2
Western Balkans wine regions companies analysis 2023/24



Source: Author's Illustration

Figure 2

Western Balkans wine regions Stakeholders Marketing Strategy and interests



Source: Author's Illustration

This paper critically examines the prospects of eno-gastro tourism in the Western Balkans. It reviews global market trends, assesses the region's heritage and resources, evaluates challenges and opportunities via a SWOT analysis, and presents strategic recommendations derived from best practices and local success stories.

Recent scholarship and sector reports provide concrete, region-proximate evidence that the Western Balkans' eno-gastro potential is credible but structurally constrained. Empirical studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia show that winery-level capabilities, visitor services, and route organisation are central levers for destination formation, but that they are often limited by fragmented coordination and uneven infrastructure (Vukojević et al., 2022; Trišić et al., 2019). Complementary work focused on Herzegovina underlines the importance of coordinated stakeholder action, public-policy engagement, and sustainability-oriented upgrading in order to translate wine assets into viable tourism products (Karamehmedović & Raspudić, 2024; Jahić, 2016). Evidence from North Macedonia and Montenegro further suggests that wine tourism development is advancing, yet remains sensitive to governance capacity, promotion, and post-shock resilience dynamics, reinforcing the need for structured route management and market-facing product design (Kwietniewska, 2020; Stanković, 2024). Finally, global guidance on gastronomy tourism highlights that long-term competitiveness increasingly depends on sustainability, experience design, and destination-level coordination—elements that align directly with the paper's call for regional cooperation and a shared platform for standards and storytelling (UNWTO, 2017).

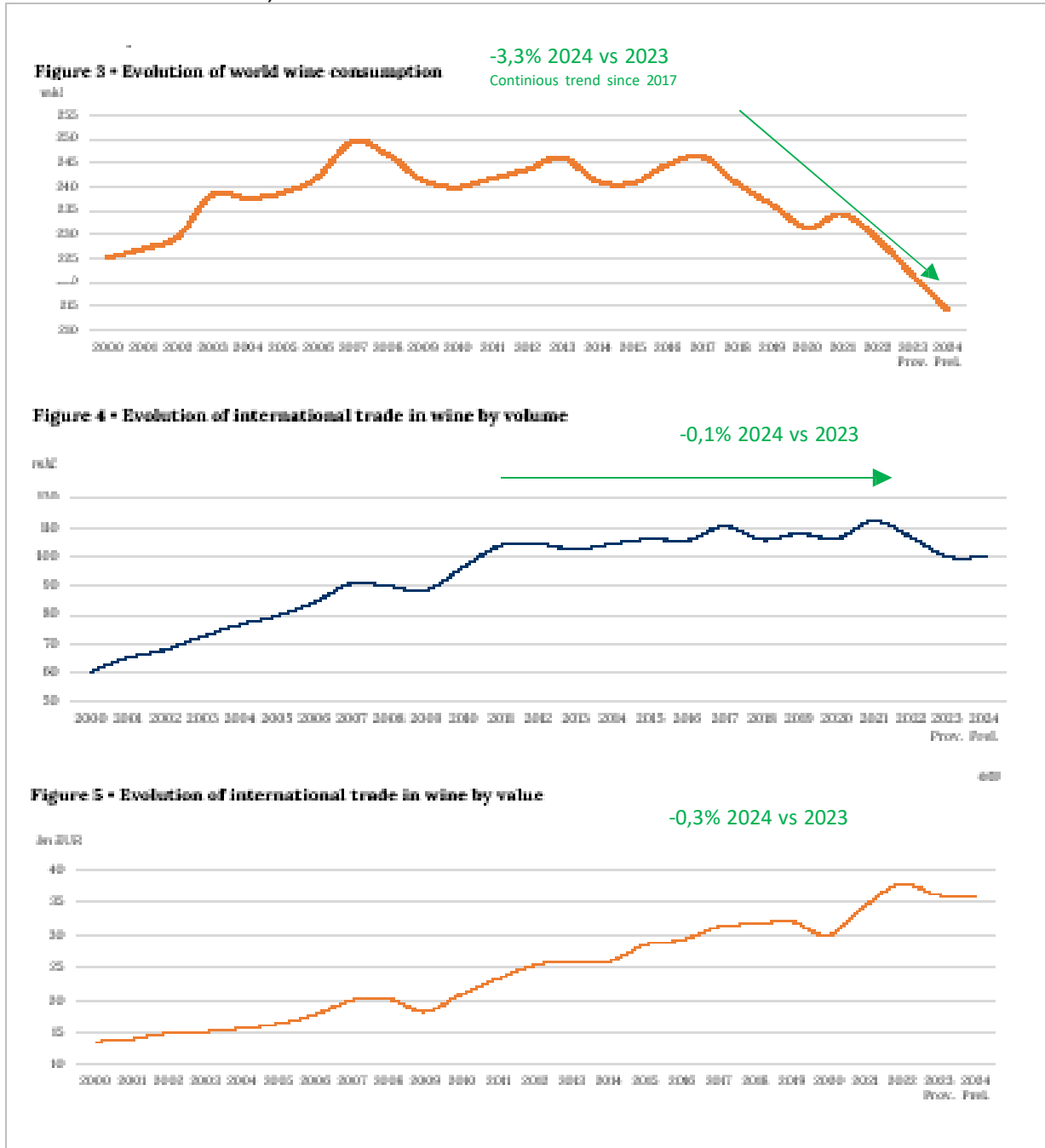
Methodology

Main research aim is to review global trends in eno-gastro tourism and locate the Western Balkans within that context. Aims also cover identifying the region's viticultural and culinary assets as foundations for tourism development. A SWOT analysis is performed outlining internal strengths and weaknesses alongside external opportunities and threats, as well as deriving learnings from international best practices in wine and food tourism (Figure 4). Several strategic recommendations are proposed for regionally coordinated development, including branding, infrastructure, and policy alignment.

The study adopts a qualitative, analytical design and combines several complementary methods: document analysis, comparative case studies, a SWOT-

based assessment, and a strategic synthesis informed by prior research on wine tourism.

Figure 4
 Evolutions trends of wine consumption, international trade by volume, and international trade by value



Source: FAO, OIV

Document analysis was used to compile and integrate regional evidence drawn from national reports and European Union documentation, providing a structured overview of the institutional and policy context. In parallel, comparative case studies were conducted to benchmark internationally recognised wine regions (Bordeaux and Rioja) against regional exemplars, including Tikveš Winery and the Herzegovina Wine Route. A SWOT framework was then applied to systematise the evaluation of

internal strengths and weaknesses alongside external opportunities and threats. Building on these inputs, the strategic synthesis translates the analytical findings into actionable directions, including the proposal of a joint regional branding initiative under the working name "BALKAN Wines Association". The approach is further grounded in the wine tourism literature, drawing on foundational contributions such as Carlsen and Boksberger (2015) and Getz and Brown (2006).

Results and Discussion

The global wine market has shifted toward premiumization and experiential tourism (Carlsen & Boksberger, 2015). Consumers increasingly associate wine with cultural capital and authenticity. This positions regions with strong heritage, such as the Western Balkans, advantageously.

Viticultural Heritage

The wine heritage of the Balkans is both ancient and resilient, forming one of the cornerstones of the region's cultural and economic identity. Archaeological and historical evidence suggests that viticulture in the Balkans can be traced back to Neolithic times (approximately 6000–5650 BCE), making it one of the earliest wine-producing regions in the world. This long-standing tradition was further shaped during the classical periods of the Thracians, Illyrians, Greeks, and Romans, who refined viticultural practices and expanded vineyard cultivation across fertile valleys and hillsides (Hall et al., 2009).

Although the continuity of this tradition was periodically challenged—most notably during the Ottoman period when alcohol production was restricted—winemaking practices survived within monasteries, village households, and family wineries. These custodians of knowledge preserved grape varieties, techniques, and rituals that ensured viticulture remained an unbroken thread in the region's cultural fabric. The resilience of these practices laid the groundwork for the modern renaissance of Balkan winemaking, which now combines inherited traditions with contemporary technological innovations.

Today, the region is home to over 200 indigenous grape varieties, each contributing to its rich biodiversity and distinctive enological identity. Among the most renowned are Vranec (widely cultivated in North Macedonia and Montenegro), Plavac Mali (Croatia), Temjanika (Serbia) and Žilavka (Bosnia and Herzegovina). These varieties not only represent important unique selling points for the region but also serve as cultural markers that differentiate Balkan wines from those of globally dominant producers. For niche markets increasingly seeking authenticity, terroir expression, and cultural storytelling, these indigenous grapes offer precisely the type of authentic experiences that align with contemporary tourism and consumer trends.

Thus, the Balkans' wine heritage is not simply a record of agricultural practice but a living tradition, continuously adapted and reinterpreted through historical adversity and modern opportunity. It provides a strong foundation for positioning the region as a distinctive eno-gastro destination, capable of attracting both wine connoisseurs and culturally motivated travelers.

Culinary Heritage

Balkan cuisine reflects centuries of cultural layering: Ottoman, Byzantine, Mediterranean, Austro-Hungarian, and Levantine influences. Signature dishes such as Ćevapi, Burek, Sarma, Tavče Gravče, Ajvar, and Baklava exemplify its diversity. Distinctive national cuisines, seafood-based Montenegrin gastronomy or bean- and

pepper-centered Macedonian traditions, complement wine tourism to create holistic eno-gastro packages.

SWOT Analysis of Eno-Gastro Tourism in the Western Balkans

A structured SWOT evaluation highlights both the unique advantages and the persistent challenges shaping the development of eno-gastro tourism in the Western Balkans.

On the strengths side, the region possesses an exceptional foundation for differentiation in the global tourism market. The presence of more than 200 indigenous grape varieties provides a distinctive enological profile that cannot be replicated by established wine destinations. This biodiversity, when coupled with the culinary richness shaped by centuries of Ottoman, Mediterranean, and Central European influences, gives the Western Balkans a strong comparative advantage. Furthermore, the deep cultural heritage, where wine, food, and social rituals are historically intertwined, offers an authentic narrative attractive to international visitors seeking experiential tourism. Importantly, the wine industry is showing consistent growth, with an increasing number of wineries investing in quality standards, modern technologies, and tourism-related services. The geographical proximity to the European Union further enhances the region's accessibility and integration into larger tourism circuits (Fig. 6).

However, several weaknesses hinder the full realization of this potential. The sector remains constrained by fragmented governance structures and the absence of a unified regional branding strategy, leading to a diluted international presence. Infrastructural limitations, including underdeveloped transport networks, insufficient hospitality facilities in rural areas, and lack of visitor services, reduce competitiveness compared to more mature wine regions. Also, many small-scale producers struggle with limited entrepreneurial and marketing capacities, restricting their ability to design and promote tourism products effectively. These internal barriers, if unaddressed, risk slowing momentum in the sector's development (Fig. 7).

The analysis also identifies significant opportunities for future expansion. Access to EU pre-accession and structural funds provides financial resources to upgrade infrastructure, strengthen institutional capacity, and foster innovation. At the same time, rising consumer preferences for authentic, sustainable, and experience-driven tourism align closely with the region's eno-gastro offer. Coordinated regional branding initiatives and cross-border collaborations could transform fragmented national efforts into a unified tourism identity, amplifying global visibility and enabling the Western Balkans to position itself as a competitive niche destination.

Nonetheless, several threats must be carefully managed. The region faces strong competition from internationally established wine tourism destinations such as France, Spain, and Italy, which benefit from long-standing reputations, consolidated brands, and well-developed infrastructure. In addition, climate change poses risks to vine-growing conditions, potentially affecting both quality and yield. Finally, political and regulatory complexities, including administrative fragmentation and the slow harmonization of legal frameworks across countries, could undermine regional coordination and discourage investment (Mitchell & Hall, 2006).

Overall, the SWOT evaluation highlights a paradox (Figure 5 and 6): the Western Balkans possess outstanding natural and cultural resources, yet institutional fragmentation and infrastructural gaps remain obstacles. Strategic governance, unified branding, and sustainable practices represent the keys to turning current opportunities into long-term competitive advantage.

Figure 5

Strengths

- ❑ **Western Balkan wine region has the critical size** for being visible in the wine world arena
- ❑ **fantastic tangibles assets** (historical heritage, geographical position, landscapes, climatic conditions) to face international competition
- ❑ **200 indigenous grape varieties** to capture consumers interests
- ❑ **large companies** but also **numerous family entities** to create diversity in wine style and wine taste
- ❑ **efforts toward quality** have become a reality
- ❑ **wine tourism** could be easily developed, thanks to the natural, anthropogenic values associated with the Western Balkan regions, to the existing hotels and accommodations offering and to the culinary diversity

Source: Authors' Illustration

Figure 6

Weaknesses

- ❑ **no competitive advantages in international grape varieties** (e.g. Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet, etc...)
- ❑ no **“common historical récit of Western Balkan régions”**
- ❑ **promoting landscape, terroir, climate, natural beauty ...** are seldomly done
- ❑ **oenological code of practices and wine production legislations** not in line with international standards and **no vineyard cadastre**
- ❑ « garage » and “family” wineries is **lacking technical assistance in quality modern winemaking**
- ❑ **no global effective “wine and food tourism” marketing strategy**
lack of offering of **hedonist, epirurian, well-being products / services**
- ❑ **no regional organization and no common international marketing**

Source: Authors' Illustration

Case Studies and Best Practices

Bordeaux (France) illustrates how coherent regional branding, effective governance, and integrated wine-route development can reinforce destination competitiveness (Getz & Brown, 2006). Rioja (Spain) similarly demonstrates that coordinated wine tourism routes can strengthen destination identity and provide a clear, recognisable visitor proposition.

Within the Balkan context, Tikveš Winery (North Macedonia) offers an example of how a regional producer can achieve international visibility by combining quality signalling (for example, awards) with immersive on-site tourism experiences. The New Balkan Cuisine initiative (Vanja Puškar, Bosnia and Herzegovina) reflects an innovation-driven approach to gastronomy, repositioning traditional cuisine through contemporary interpretation and market-oriented storytelling. The Herzegovina Wine Route (Bosnia and Herzegovina) further shows the value of cross-product integration by connecting wine and food experiences with landscape and nature assets (such

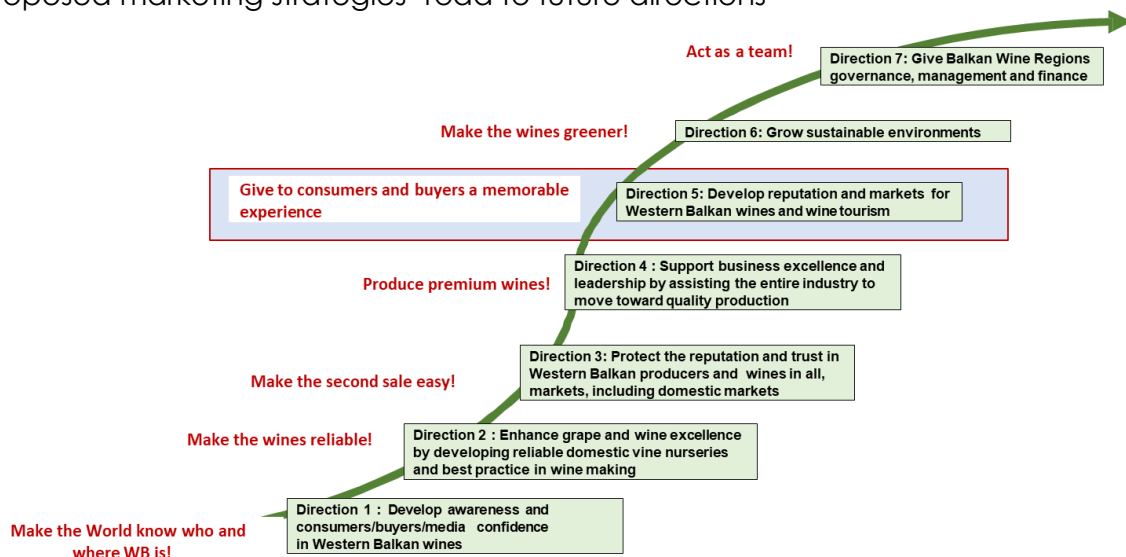
as the Kravica Waterfalls) and cultural heritage attractions (including the Mostar Old Bridge).

Building on these cases, the strategic directions emphasise: (1) expanding and professionalising wine routes; (2) strengthening cooperation between gastronomy, tourism operators, and wine producers; (3) developing a unified regional brand architecture; (4) investing in targeted training and service quality; and (5) embedding sustainability across production and visitor experiences. As a coordinating mechanism, the “BALKAN Wines Association” is proposed as a shared platform to support quality standards, joint storytelling, and coordinated marketing activities across participating destinations.

Within the overall individual country or group/regional strategy for the industry development, one of the important steps is the development of eno-gastro tourism (Figure 7).

Overcoming the classic barriers for development of eno-gastro tourism is very important - A lack of experience in and understanding of tourism within the wine industry as well as lack of entrepreneurial skills and abilities with respect to marketing and tourism product development. Other obstacle is the distance between vineyards and lack of infrastructure. Administrative barriers and lack of DMO initiatives limits the opportunity for this development. The lack of ‘champions’ to promote formal cooperative behaviors due to historical experiences. Namely, the transition to capitalism disrupted these cooperative structures, favoring individual ownership and market competition, which weakened public trust in collective models. In contrast, many EU countries have seen a resurgence of cooperatives supported by strong legal frameworks, social trust, and institutional support, making such models viable and increasingly popular and of much importance for the development of eno-gastro tourism.

Figure 7
Proposed marketing strategies' road to future directions



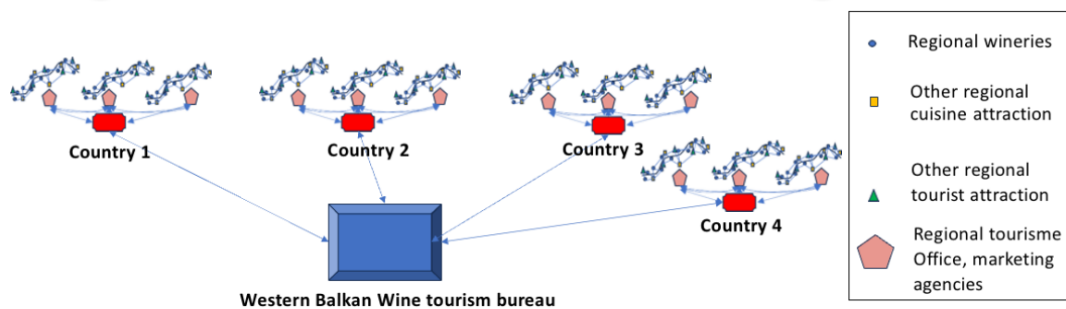
Source: Authors' Illustration

The main approach for success is collaboration on the regional level. In order to be effective, this strategy need to follow couple of logical steps: development of local wine routes followed by coordination with local cuisine attractions and unifying the offer. Depending on the target audience some other local attractions should be

included like cultural, nature, adventure, religious, e.t.c. All of the stakeholders to create joint new products and services and connect with tour operators, agencies and brand the region. The best solution is to have DMO (Destination Management Organization). When this multiplies in many regions, on country level the next step is to create joint offers for Balkan wine destination (Figure 8). This would result in increasing of the tourists and the economies of WB countries.

Figure 8

Develop reputation and markets for Western Balkan wines



Source: Authors' Illustration

The development of these organizations and capacity of every stakeholder is of most importance and can have positive results only with common marketing actions and joint communication followed by capacity building and trainings for professionals and travellers/consumers.

Conclusion

The Western Balkans possess a rare combination of viticultural diversity, culinary richness, and cultural heritage that can serve as a powerful foundation for eno-gastro tourism. With over 200 indigenous grape varieties such as Vranec, Plavac Mali, Temjanika, and Žilavka, coupled with deeply rooted culinary traditions shaped by Ottoman, Mediterranean, Austro-Hungarian, and Levantine influences, the region offers an authentic and differentiated tourism product that cannot be replicated by established wine regions. This unique terroir, in both the literal and cultural sense, creates fertile ground for immersive experiences that align perfectly with global tourism trends toward authenticity, sustainability, and cultural engagement.

However, the transformation of this potential into a globally recognized eno-gastro destination requires overcoming persistent structural and institutional challenges. Fragmented governance across multiple countries, weak infrastructure in rural areas, lack of unified branding, and limited entrepreneurial and marketing capacities among small wineries and producers remain significant barriers. Furthermore, external threats such as climate change, competition from globally established regions like France, Italy, and Spain, and the volatility of global travel markets add further complexity.

Despite these challenges, the opportunities are substantial. Eno-gastro tourism in the Western Balkans can catalyse rural development, generate employment, foster cross-border cooperation, and promote cultural preservation by valorising traditional practices in wine and food production. The integration of eno-gastro experiences with cultural landmarks, natural attractions, and community-based tourism can extend visitor stays, diversify seasonal demand, and improve the international image of the region. Best-practice models from Bordeaux, Rioja, and emerging intra-regional examples such as Tikveš Winery, New Balkan Cuisine, and the Herzegovina

Wine Route demonstrate how quality, storytelling, and coordinated promotion can elevate local products into internationally competitive experiences.

Strategic action is therefore imperative. A unified "BALKAN Wines Association" and joint regional branding strategy could consolidate fragmented efforts into a powerful collective identity. By implementing quality standards, enhancing training in hospitality and tourism, and promoting sustainability through responsible vineyard practices and short food supply chains, the region can strengthen its competitive edge. Digital tools such as cross-border booking systems, interactive eno-gastro maps, and coordinated social media campaigns (#TasteBalkans) can further enhance visibility and engagement with global niche markets.

To resume, the Western Balkans stand at a decisive juncture: either remain fragmented and underrecognized, or emerge as a leading eno-gastro tourism destination that offers visitors not only wine and food, but also narratives of history, resilience, and cultural identity. With strategic coordination, sustainable development, and regional solidarity, the Western Balkans can successfully position themselves as a distinctive and premier eno-gastro tourism destination on the global stage, contributing to economic development, cultural vitality, and long-term tourism competitiveness.

References

1. Carlsen, J., & Boksberger, P. (2015). Enhancing consumer value in wine tourism. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, 39(1), 132–144. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1096348012471379>
2. Getz, D., & Brown, G. (2006). Critical success factors for wine tourism regions: A demand analysis. *Tourism Management*, 27(1), 146–158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2004.08.002>
3. Hall, C. M., Sharples, L., Cambourne, B., & Macionis, N. (2009). *Wine Tourism Around the World: Development, Management and Markets*. Routledge.
4. Jahić, H. (2016). Wine tourism and wine roads in Herzegovina-Neretva Canton – Situation and prospects. *Acta Geographica Bosniae et Herzegovinae*, 6, 83–99.
5. Karagiannis, D., & Metaxas, T. (2020). Sustainable wine tourism development: Case studies from Greece. *Sustainability*, 12(12), 5223. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12125223>
6. Karamehmedović, D., & Raspudić, A. (2024). Key factors for developing sustainable wine tourism in the West Herzegovina Canton. *Oeconomica Jadertina*, 14(2), 83–100. <https://doi.org/10.15291/oec.4565>
7. Lopes, A., Silva, C., Seabra, C., & Abrantes, J. L. (2018). Wine routes: Development of wine regions and local communities. *International Journal of Multidisciplinarity in Business and Science*, 4(5), 39–44.
8. Mitchell, R., & Hall, C. M. (2006). Wine tourism research: The state of play. *Tourism Review International*, 9(4), 307–332. <https://doi.org/10.3727/154427206776330535>
9. UNWTO. (2017). *Second global report on gastronomy tourism: Sustainability and gastronomy*. World Tourism Organization.
10. UNWTO. (n.d.). *Gastronomy and wine tourism*. World Tourism Organization.
11. Vukojević, D., Tomić, N., Marković, N., Mašić, B., Banjanin, T., Bodiroga, R., Đorđević, T., & Marjanović, M. (2022). Exploring wineries and wine tourism potential in the Republic of Srpska, an emerging wine region of Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Sustainability*, 14(5), 2485. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14052485>

About the author

Elena Mladenovska Jelenkovikj, MSc, is a PhD student in Strategic Management at the University of UN – ECPD, Belgrade. She is a Visiting Lecturer in Strategic Marketing at the University American College Skopje. Her doctoral research focuses on strategic leadership, regional branding, and the role of eno-gastro tourism in sustainable economic development. Alongside her academic work, she is the CEO of M6 Educational Centre, a regional hub for leadership training and professional development, and the Executive Director of Wines of Macedonia (WOM), where she leads national and international initiatives to promote Macedonian viticulture, including the establishment of regional wine networks and the annual Vranec World Day. Her professional and academic interests converge around strategic marketing, business innovation, and transformational leadership, with a strong emphasis on sustainability and cross-border cooperation. She actively contributes to academic, professional, and policy discussions, bridging higher education, industry, and cultural promotion in the Western Balkans. Elena Mladenovska Jelenkovikj can be reached at:

elena.mladenovska@m6.edu.mk