

The New York Times

April 30, 2013

A Corporate Retreat for Team-Building, With a Taste of Wine

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IT seems counterintuitive for companies to take their employees somewhere where the alcohol begins to flow even before lunch is served. But wineries around the world are increasingly accommodating businesses asking for meeting space, catering and even wine-making lessons for their workers.

These are not drunken office parties; most of the alcohol consumption is associated with supervised wine-making activities, and top executives are usually present, says Mauricio Romo, tourism manager at the Viu Manent vineyard in Chile, who said he had not seen “bad behavior” in the five years his winery had offered business meetings. At the same time, once guests learn how complex winemaking is, company goals seem more achievable, Mr. Romo said.

Here is a sampler of vineyards offering corporate retreats.

Chile

With smocks over their casual business clothes, guests at Viu Manent, near Santa Cruz in the Colchagua Valley about 90 miles south of Santiago, go out in the vineyard and pick grapes. Or, if they prefer, they can do what employees of Bayer did recently: blend wine, design labels and market their finished product in an exercise called “Winemaker for a Day.” Participants aren’t creating anything Wine Spectator is going to review, but the vineyard’s tourism manager says they may pay more attention at a meeting like this one.

“The objective for large companies is to take their executives prisoner in order to concentrate their attention,” Mr. Romo said, describing an excursion that might begin at 7 a.m. in Santiago, the capital, with a two-hour bus ride to the valley. “After a coffee, they have their telephones amputated from their soul so they can concentrate on the message.”

How much time will be spent as amateur viticulturists depends on the agenda and what the boss wants to accomplish. But a day always ends with a dinner and generous servings of the Malbec that Viu Manent is known for. The vineyard has indoor and outdoor meeting facilities appropriate for groups of all sizes and a plan for overnight accommodations is in the works.

Germany

One hour by train from Frankfurt along the Main River is the wine-growing region of Franconia.

Tourists come to enjoy the historic villages and winding bike paths, but with banking, pharmaceuticals and manufacturing in the region, more than a quarter of the Americans visiting Germany are there for business, according to the national tourism board. In 2000, Artur Steinmann and his daughter, Steffi, decided to corral this market by adding a conference center and a six-room inn to the Artur Steinmann Winery.

“Today it’s not enough anymore to focus only on wine production,” Ms. Steinmann said. “We are very proud of being one of the first wineries in our region, which could offer business meetings and accommodation combined with wine.”

Small groups of employees from SSI Schaefer Noell, a German warehouse and logistics company, regularly visit Steinmann for sales meetings. The company’s travel manager, Nico Kiesl, says costs are about half of what it pays for similar accommodations in a big city, and participants get more personal attention as well as wine when the day is done.

Wine tastings and a tour of the cellar are available if a company requests it, and sometimes guests will hike up to the trail above town and visit the vineyards where the region’s Silvaner and Müller-Thurgau grapes are grown.

“A little walk and a small glass of wine can really bring energies back,” Ms. Steinmann said.

Italy

Tourism is a large part of the economy in Italy’s Lombardy Lake District, but Lake Iseo, north of Milan, is still relatively undiscovered.

Seeing an opportunity, the Bersi Serlini winery five years ago added a large meeting room and four guest suites to its brick-and-stone structure. One hundred and eighty people can now attend conferences in the main hall.

When they are ready for a break, guests head down an old stairway to the vaulted cellar where a unique Italian sparkling wine called Franciacorta is made in the traditional method of Champagne, with the secondary fermentation taking place in the bottle.

The meeting space opened in 2006 with social events in mind, but adding corporate functions has been a boon, bringing customers in during the workweek when business is otherwise slow. Hosting companies has also increased sales, according to Chiara Bersi Serlini, who manages the winery along with her sister. “Typically they ask to have a special bottle included in the whole deal so that the guests all take it home,” Ms. Serlini said. “Most guests will also buy some from the shop.”

California

In the Napa Valley, the vineyards producing the region’s famous cabernet sauvignon and

chardonnay have long welcomed tourists, and about 10 percent of them are traveling on business, according to the Napa Valley Conference and Visitors Bureau, so it is no wonder that many of the valley's wineries encourage corporate gatherings.

"The corporate client is looking for a unique, customized event," says Tracy Drash, director of retail operations for Constellation Brands, which owns the Robert Mondavi Winery. In addition to wine-related activities, Mondavi offers business meeting attendees an opportunity to join in a garden-to-table program, picking and preparing produce from the gardens.

Ten miles north of the Robert Mondavi Winery is the Castello di Amorosa, a castle and wine estate inspired by 13th-century Tuscany, where Mary Pham, digital marketing manager for Toyota, recently held an event for auto dealers. Other businesses that come for work-related meetings might want to advise their employees to dress down, because team-building activities here could mean stomping grapes.