

'People farming' could be key to business success



The countryside is opening its doors, after the financial and psychological trauma of lockdown.

Some vineyards are again offering tours and other events and, while the effects of Covid-19 will be felt for many years, there is still cause for optimism in the medium and long term.

The pandemic will speed the trend towards the "staycation", increasing the public's desire to holiday and spend leisure time in the British countryside. This is tied in with the nation's growing appreciation of the natural environment and the physical and mental benefits that time outdoors can bring.

As 'customers' seek out new experiences, viticulture businesses are well placed to tap into this demand, through accommodation, hospitality and events.

This is ironic as businesses that relied heavily on such visitor-based income have been hit badly by the coronavirus restrictions, but this will still prove to be a key revenue source for vineyards in the future.

If we've learnt one thing from these last terrible few months, it's that operations with multiple, diverse income streams are more resilient – having a reduced exposure to risk, as well as more opportunities for profit.

Having the right buildings is a requirement for many of these enterprises, so vineyards with the right infrastructure will be at an advantage.

If suitable buildings aren't already in existence, perhaps existing redundant agricultural ones could be converted into a tasting room, a corporate meeting venue or self-catering accommodation? An intimate knowledge of the planning system will be vital to navigate the at-times complex and costly rules and regulations.

It's not only the coronavirus crisis that will change the sector in the years ahead. We are a young industry and one that is still establishing a supply/demand equilibrium.

The rapid rate of vine planting over the past two or three years has resulted in a potential over-supply problem. Some of these extra acres have been put to vine by operators with clear route-to-market strategies, but other plantings have been speculative.

While the rush to enter the sector may slow, the potential to generate revenue remains – and making the most of the opportunities that events and tourism offer will be at the heart of many successful business models.

A WineGB report, published last autumn, spoke of the role of "vineyard clusters" such as The Wine Garden of England, Vineyards of the Sussex Weald and The Vineyards of the Surrey Hills.

These demonstrate how effectively competitors can work together as a generic region to collectively promote an area for wine tourists.

Supported by tourism bodies and local hotels, pubs and restaurants, wine businesses will need to nurture this "collegiate spirit" to harvest the desire of visitors to come through their gates.

Welcoming visitors in any capacity ("people farming", as some in the agriculture sector refer to it) requires a different skill set to both growing grapes and making wine. The events and hospitality sector is fiendishly competitive, calls for fantastic people- and staff-management skills and can require large sums of capital.

This means that many of those who thrive in it are big-turnover, professionally run enterprises with superb facilities that offer a truly world-class customer experience and can evolve quickly to take advantage of new consumer trends.

But viticulturists are nothing if not versatile. They need to be, too, coping with constant challenges and changing circumstances – whether that's unexpected weather, government policy or new consumer trends.

One only has to look back at the recent Viti-Culture Live event to see proof of that ingenuity – the mere existence of the online show (organised in a matter of weeks, after Covid-19 forced the cancellation of the in-person one at Plumpton) demonstrating the adaptability of the sector.

As event sponsor, we were pleased to play our part in making sure the event went ahead. The interaction that took place on the day highlighted the scale of coronavirus-related problems, but also the opportunities that exist in the longer term.

Restructuring and amalgamation will be the order of the day in some businesses in a bid to cut costs and build market share, and the contribution of income from wine tourism will grow.

There is an increasing appreciation of the UK countryside, more interest in the provenance of food and drink, and a burgeoning consumer desire for food and drink-related 'experiences', whether that's getting married in a beautiful vineyard or taking afternoon tea in a beautiful converted barn.

Change is on the way for the viticulture sector and, for many, this means tapping ever-more into tourism and events - giving people personal, memorable experiences they will talk about for years to come.

Many successful businesses will farm people as well as grapes – and make the most of the public's appetite for great rural experiences, as well as great wine.



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