

Vintners

going sustainable

BY BARBI WALKER

Sustainable wines - what are they and why should I care if my cab, merlot or pinot came from a sustainable winery?

Chris Benziger from the Benziger Family Winery in Glen Ellen, California, explains that when you drink a wine, you are “tasting a destination.”

As any good wine maker or wine lover knows, terroir has a major impact on a wine's taste. Vintners agree that through chemical-free, sustainable farming the wine will be more authentic by picking up the true essence of the land. Why is it so important?

Benziger, who quotes Gandhi as he explains sustainable farming, believes sustainable practices have not only improved the land where their vines grow, but have changed the taste of their wines.

Benziger says their vineyards have never looked more beautiful, alive or vibrant. He says that before the family winery took on sustainable wine growing, the farm “was going brown.” After 10 years of carefully working in harmony with the land, the farm is now lush and green, alive with the sounds of birds, bees and other buzzing insects, ripe with life.

“The wine picks up all the flavors of the land,” Benziger said. Now that the land they farm is more in tune with nature and less reliant on chemicals, the wine really presents its best side.

Drinking chemicals, in my wine? I hadn't really thought of it before, but now it makes sense. Even though I look for organically grown wines, there is more to consider than just organic processes.

Local Arizona vintner Eric Glomski, founder and director of winemaking for Arizona Stronghold, says it best: “If you are dumping chemicals on the ground, those grapes are going to soak it up.”

Wine grapes, like other produce, are farmed; and farmers have to control pests in order to grow healthy produce. So if tomatoes, apples or cucumbers are grown with pesticides and chemicals, we should think about this in terms of wines.

Just ask Michael Honig of Honig Vineyard and Winery in Rutherford, California. “You can be a certified organic farmer but

still destroy the land,” Honig said.

Honig is a strong believer in sustainable farming. About 10 years ago he chaired California's first initiative to develop a “Code” for sustainable wine growing practices. He helped write the Code of Sustainable Practices for the Wine Institute and played a major role in developing the first sustainable certification for California wineries.

The “Code of Sustainable Winegrowing Practices Self-Assessment Workbook” Honig helped develop is a 500-page tome that includes 227 criteria for winegrowers to assess and address the ecological, economic and social equity of their vineyard, according to the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance (CSWA).

Sustainable farming can mean different things, but the most commonly accepted meaning is being a “good steward of the land,” according to the University of California's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (UC SAREP). In fact, the program's website declares how important sustainability is for future generations:

“Sustainability rests on the principle that we must meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Therefore, stewardship of both natural and human resources is of prime importance.”

Sustainability goes beyond organic farming. According to CSWA's website, sustainablewinegrowing.org, “In addition to earth-friendly methods for vineyards and surrounding ecosystems, sustainability includes energy efficiency, protection of air and water quality, enhanced relations with employees and neighbors, environmentally preferred purchasing, among many others.”

This “umbrella concept,” as noted by CSWA, overlaps both biodynamic and organic practices and principles.

One such practice is regulated deficit irrigation. This particular technique purposely withholds irrigation to stress the vine, which in turn, can improve grape quality.

And with new moisture-sensing technology like the pressure chamber or referred to as a pressure bomb, farmers and

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vintners know exactly how much water their vines need, Honig said. The pressure bomb is so accurate that the Honig winery didn't water in 2010 at all!

“This is a huge savings to society because we use less water,” Honig explained. “We know the vines are healthier.”

Healthier vines mean healthier wines, which mean healthier bottom lines.

Sustainability recognizes all three important aspects of growth: health for the environment, healthy financial profitability for companies, and healthy social and economic impact (often called the ‘Triple Bottom Line’). Both the “Code of Sustainable Winegrowing Practices” workbook and the UC SAREP point out these three elements of sustainability.

- Environmental health
- Economic profitability
- Social and economic equity

It sounds holistic, and maybe it is, but what better place to incorporate holistic principles than in a vineyard? Vintners are part artist, part farmer and part merchant. Their love of the land comes through as they describe the feel of the dirt when they are out working in the vineyards, or the smell of the breeze as it flutters the grape leaves.

It isn't just the complexity of the wine that they love, but also understanding what the earth has to give to the wine, and knowing how to take care of the earth.

All the wine growers I spoke with repeatedly agreed that being a sustainable vintner means being in the vineyard more. Winemakers have to look at the crops, have to see what is happening to the vines, the terroir, all of it. Just like any produce farmer, they need to really know what is going on in the part of nature that encompasses their vineyards.

“Sustainable farming forces the winemaker out into the vineyards. We have to know our piece of property,” Benziger said. “You get into the rhythm of the land.”

But incorporating sustainable practices isn't always cheap, and producing wine is a business. Glomski points out that getting rich in the wine business won't come quickly, or at all, and implementing sustainable elements isn't always financially feasible.

However, Glomski's love of both the environment and Arizona motivates him to do as much as possible to keep the vineyards healthy and chemical-free. He refers to his approach as a “blended approach” to winemaking.

Arizona Stronghold vineyard, located near Willcox, uses composting, manure and bacterium sprays. Citric-acid/sulfites are used for sterilizing, and the vineyard is free of petro-chemicals. Glomski doesn't overlook the connection between Arizona Stronghold's chemical-free farming and receiving 89 out of 100 points from “Wine Spectator” on its 2009 Nache wine. Glomski

said the land is doing better since converting the farm from conventional to sustainable farming.

Although Glomski drives hundreds of miles regularly between his wineries and tasting rooms located throughout Arizona, he said all the driving is “a necessary evil” to promote what he and his business partner, Maynard Keenan (lead singer for the multi-platinum record-selling band Tool), believe so strongly in: Arizona Wine.

“We take it seriously and are relentlessly marketing it,” Glomski said.

Winemaker Sam Pillsbury, of the Pillsbury Wine Company, is another major believer in Arizona wines. Pillsbury, also a filmmaker, is living a dream come true as a winemaker in Arizona.

“I've always had a big thing about celebrating the region you live in,” said the New Zealand transplant. “I was pretty sure wine producing was going to happen here.”

It looks like Pillsbury knew what he was talking about. “Wine Spectator” New York senior editor, James Molesworth, blogged about Arizona wines and the “serious quality” coming out of the Grand Canyon State, according to winespectator.com.

Such serious quality that Pillsbury's own 2007 Petite Sirah from Cochise County Stronghold Vineyard scored 89 points from “Wine Spectator.”

The passion winegrowers feel for their land and wine translates to buyers and consumers. Brent Karlicek, wine merchant for local Postino Winecafes, said the staff at both Phoenix restaurants are getting caught up in the passions of local Arizona producers, such as Arizona Stronghold and environmentally conscious vintners like Honig, Benziger and Oregon-based Erath. Karlicek says the current movement of sustainable winegrowing practices produces better wines.

“Sustainable viticulture as a practice means a lot more time, a lot more connecting with the vineyard – you don't make a better wine by accident,” Karlicek explained.

“The current movement away from commodity wines to high-yield, chemical-free wines

offers an expression of the place, or destination. Karlicek said, echoing Chris Benziger. “It allows for a connection to that place.”

This is great news for Arizonans who want to support local merchants, buy from responsible wineries, and connect to their home with a glass of rich, complex wine.

Enjoying wine is a personal experience on many levels, and feeling good about what you are drinking should be part of the enjoyment.

“When you buy things that you believe in, you are going to feel better about them, better about yourself,” Glomski said. ■

Cheers!

Opposite Page:
Honig Vineyard
This Page Top and Bottom:
Benziger Family Winery & Eric with Arizona Stronghold Vineyard