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by Leigh Belanger

Sip this: Sustainability in the Vineyard

Chefs and diners toast to taste, health, and the environment with sustainably made wines

"PEOPLE are caring more and more about where their food comes from, and wine is becoming a part of that," says Chefs Collaborative board member John Ash. Although the market for organic foods has seen strong annual growth in the past decade, wine has been slower to catch up. Sustainably and organically produced wine's recent momentum-the category has seen over 20% annual growth in the past three years-results from a shift away from a perception that eco-friendly wines are unserious or poorly made, and an effort by winemakers and distributors to highlight sustainably made wines for interested chefs and consumers.

Defining these Wines

Conventionally produced wines rely on synthetic chemicals for weed control, pest management, and plant cultivation, and as a result, can compromise worker health, soil health, and biodiversity. By contrast, sustainable viticulture ensures the vineyard's long-term viability with ecological production methods (like organic and biodynamic) that enrich the natural resources at hand. There are a few different ways of approaching sustainability.

Sustainable vineyards limit (but don't prohibit) chemicals, use compost and cover crops to enrich the soil, and mandate biodiversity. Some of these vineyards practice organic methods without official certification. Others don't strictly adhere to organic methods, but take a sensible, viable approach to winemaking, one sometimes called "*la lutte raisonnee*," French for "a rational struggle."

Organic vineyards, like sustainable ones, use compost and cover crops to enrich the soil. Synthetic fungicides, herbicides, and pesticides are prohibited. In the cellar, techniques like reverse osmosis, excessive filtration, and the use of flavor additives and cultivated yeasts are also avoided. "Organic" is the term used for any vineyard with certification from the USDA, a process that takes three years to achieve.

Biodynamic vineyards go a step further than organic vineyards by viewing the land as a living organism. An approach developed at the turn of the 20th century by German philosopher Rudolf Steiner, biodynamics emphasizes building up soil and grapevine health, as well as biodiversity, through specific preparations and practices (like compost teas and homeopathics), that take into consideration the seasons, the sun and moon's cycles, and the four states of nature (heat, light, liquid, and mineral). Officially recognized by the French government in 1987, biodynamic wines are certified by the Demeter organization.

It's All Connected

In Oregon, the Salmon-Safe organization has been certifying "fish friendly" farms and wineries for over a decade. They work with Oregon Tilth and LIVE-the Low Input Viticulture and Enology program-to encourage wineries to adopt viticultural practices that enhance and restore the health of the salmon ecosystem in Oregon. Meeting the organization's standards, which center on planting cover crops to reduce stream runoff and properly managing pests, disease, and erosion, can qualify wineries for Salmon-Safe certification. These wineries- there are over 40-help strengthen a fragile natural resource while improving their own ecology, and in the process, remind us of the interdependence of our food systems.

A Question of Quality

Although biodynamic and organic wines are highly regarded in parts of Europe-Italy and France are leading the wine world's push towards sustainability-in the United States, these wines still suffer from a perceived association with poor quality, though that perception is starting to change.

Organic wines' reputation has suffered in part from confusion over their sulfite content. Sulfites, which occur naturally in wine during fermentation, have long been added to wine to help stabilize it and keep it from turning color and losing its fruitiness. Most winemakers will admit that it's tough to make a decent bottle of wine, red or white, without adding sulfites.

But the USDA regulations stipulate that certified organic wines can't contain added sulfites. Without these preservatives, certified organic wines can taste dull or "off," and have a shorter shelf life. If winemakers add sulfites to wine but use organic grapes, they can't be "Certified Organic." In this case, a second certification is available, labeled "Made with Organically Grown Grapes." Biodynamic vineyards have different certifications than organic, and certifications differ between countries. These differences can be confusing for consumers, and some industry advocates say the confusion has impaired organic wine's ability to grow apace with the rest of the organic category.

A Certifiable Shift

In the past, growers who practiced organic methods downplayed their practices to avoid being lumped in the lower price and quality brackets where organic wines were often found. These days, some organic growers avoid certification because they see it as an expensive and bureaucratic process. In Europe, where many revered wines come from biodynamic or organic vineyards, some growers eschew certification out of stubbornness, says Boston-based importer Richard Kzirian.

A Growing Movement

In California, organic grapes represent about 1.5% of all grape plantings--about 8,000 acres from 550,000 acres total. But a study by the University of California at Davis reported that in 2002, there were 6,858 acres and 114 growers. In 2003, there were 7,199 acres and 119 growers.

source: The Wall Street Journal

These growers think, "we've been doing this all along-why should we pay more money to prove it to you?"

But as attitudes shift, Susan Sokol Blosser, whose Sokol Blosser Winery in Dundee, Oregon, makes wine from certified organic grapes, believes that more "forward-looking wineries" will start working towards organic certification. For Sokol-Blosser, certification is important. "It verifies that you are who you say you are," she says.

Full of Flavor

Many chefs are familiar with the vibrant produce, dairy, or meats that come from sustainable or organic farmers and producers. Just like the memorable taste of a local, organic tomato, wine from sustainably produced grapes can be distinct and expressive, in part because these wines "come from farmers who have a keen sense of their grapes and the farm they grew on," says Scott Pactor, owner of Appellation Wine & Spirits, a Manhattan wine shop that focuses on organic and biodynamic wines.

The unique, place-specific flavor called *terroir* is more clearly expressed in organic wines, says Veronique Raskin, owner of the Organic Wine Company, an importer and retailer in San Francisco. *Terroir* is drawn from the specific soil and climate that a grape grows in, as well as from a winemaking technique that minimizes manipulation.

When these factors aren't altered by chemical and synthetic inputs, says Raskin, "whatever is grown on the land will be reflective of [the land]."

The Value of Education

Since many organic and sustainable wines aren't certified or labeled as such, "it comes down to an education component,"

for interested chefs and sommeliers, says Pactor of Appellation Wine & Spirits. "Chefs need to work with their suppliers."

Fortunately, he says, demand for these wines has grown to the point where distributors are putting together lists of organic and biodynamic producers to bring to their clients.

When sourcing organic, sustainable, and biodynamic wines, chefs will find many that are reasonably priced-unlike organic or artisanally produced foods, you don't pay more for these wines because they're organic. Many come from lesser known winemaking regions. For example, the Rhone and Languedoc regions of Southern France have a higher relative concentration of organic growers than the better known winemaking regions of Burgundy and Bordeaux. In Italy, smaller wine-making regions Apulia and Sicily are leading the push towards sustainability.

For chefs that change their menus regularly and work with sustainable ingredients and small producers as much as possible, these sustainable, terroir-driven wines, often from small producers in up-and-coming regions, offer another way to reflect the restaurant's overall sensibility. A flexible and dynamic wine list, like a food menu, allows chefs and sommeliers the chance to introduce their customers to an interesting range of sustainable wines.

And though bringing in these lesser known wines might seem risky, "that's part of the fun of building a wine menu," says Raskin. "We're doomed," she says, if everybody plays it safe by sticking with wines made from methods that diminish biodiversity, degrade the land, over-manipulate the grapes, and strip the wines of their character. "Life," says Raskin, "is about taking risks."

Resources:

www.theorganicwinecompany.com
www.organicwinejournal.com
www.appellationnyc.com
www.salmonsafe.org

For more on biodynamics, see "Wine from Sky to Earth," (Acres USA, 1999) by French biodynamic grower Nicolas Joly.

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Chefs Collaborative

89 South St., lower level
Boston, MA 02111
(P) 617.236.5200 (F) 617.236.5272
or join online at:

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