

Marin

Sustainably Sonoma

Winegrowers and producers are experimenting with sustainability, organics and biodynamics — but will buyers notice?

Educating the Consumer

Here in Marin, we obsess about the source of our food and how exactly said food is grown or cultivated. These days, few are the farms that are not certified sustainable or organic, but what about wine? That goes into our bodies too, in some cases with great regularity and in significant quantities, but who questions the source? “A very small percentage of customers ask about how the wine is made,” says Magid Nazari, owner of Ludwig’s Fine Wine & Spirits in San Anselmo. “People are buying solely based on how the wine tastes.”

This lack of public knowledge hasn’t stopped the wine industry from taking steps to improve their practices. Sonoma County Winegrowers have a goal of 100 percent certified sustainable vineyards in the county by January 2019. Sonoma may be the first in North America with this aim, but Sustainable Wine New Zealand is the world leader in the wine sustainability movement, with efforts dating back to 1994, and claims to now have 95 percent compliance. It’s achieved this goal in part by using a big carrot to encourage sustainability certification: without it, wineries cannot enter wine competitions. And no medals equals fewer sales.

Without a similar carrot, will Sonoma be able to achieve similar results, and does it really matter? It certainly does for [Jean-Charles Boisset](#), the proprietor of the Boisset Collection, with wineries in both Sonoma and Napa. “Of course we are behind this initiative 100 percent,” he says. “We believe that sustainable farming practices help us to achieve a better expression of terroir as we strive to promote biological diversity within our vineyard ecosystems rather than attempting to limit it.”

The Biodynamic Buzz

Biodynamics follows the organic philosophy and runs with it, forbidding not only use of agrichemicals but also any other external substances — what’s known as farming in a closed system. Only compost and special, somewhat outlandish preparations are applied to the earth and the vines; work is determined by phases of the moon. Horses are sometimes used to work the vineyards and farm animals are an integral element in the holistic system.

Biodynamics, based on the ideas of Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, subscribes to the concept of life energy and the earth as living entity. It has become an easy target to poke fun at: a field preparation involving filling a cow horn with cow manure, burying it in the ground in the autumn, leaving it to decompose during winter and recovering it for use in the spring is one practice even some biodynamic producers question. But the approach has its advocates: Jean-Charles Boisset, of Raymond Vineyards in Napa and DeLoach Vineyards in Sonoma, is a flag-bearer for it, and biodynamic exhibits at both wineries provide a fascinating look at this century-old farming method.