

Regenerative Certifications Are Booming Right Now. Are They Worth It?

by Kate Dingwall - February 2, 2024

Though new regenerative certification Regenified debuted in 2022, it joined a clutter of other certifications offering drinks brands ways to co-sign their eco efforts. You can stand by Demeter's rigorous biodynamic principles, follow homegrown Napa Green's sustainability standards or focus on cleaner watersheds to make a Salmon-Safe wine.

But the recently launched regenerative agriculture certification in particular has caught on like wildfire. In November, Mendocino Wine Company rolled out a press release announcing its estate vineyards had received a shiny new Tier 3 Regenified certification. A day later, Maker's Mark announced it would be releasing its first Regenified barrel of bourbon, with 86% of grains sourced from regeneratively certified grains. In 2023, *Common Ground*, a film documenting the efforts of regenerative farmers, won the Tribeca Film Festival Human/Nature Award. On the poster: rancher and Regenified founder Gabe Brown. The popularity of this latest certification poses interesting questions for the beverage industry and beyond: Is the uptick in these certifications ushering in a new shift towards regenerative farming? And—more importantly—is it worth it?

The Rise of Regenerative Agriculture

Though the roots of the regenerative movement trace back to Indigenous communities and other ancient traditions—farmers who listened to the land—Robert Rodale first coined the term “regenerative agriculture” in the early ‘80s, referring to any type of farming that encourages environmental improvement. His research argued that healthy soil is crucial to the quality of our food systems and affects everyone on the planet.

In the 1990s, Regenified founder Gabe Brown fell into this holistic style of agriculture due to struggles on his North Dakota family farm. The region was plagued by drought, extreme cold and other inclement weather, pummeling his yields and leaving him depressed and in debt. Something needed to change. He started digging into historical documents written by Thomas Jefferson, an avid agricultural researcher, to figure out how to move away from the common industrial style of farming that had taken over the world. While researching, he documented the process, writing down his trials, discoveries and failures for other farmers to follow. He was surprised at the life that bloomed from the land—the ranch looked revitalized and alive. In 2018, he released a book on his findings, *Dirt to Soil*.

Still, the regenerative movement remained somewhat of a word-of-mouth trend until 2020, when actor Woody Harrelson released *Kiss the Ground* on Netflix. The sobering yet hopeful documentary, which follows the work of scientists, agriculturalists (including Brown) and celebrities, considers the dire state of the climate and how dirt can help combat erratic weather and rising temperatures. It was wildly popular. Within two years of its release, the USDA earmarked \$20 billion as part of the Inflation Reduction Act to benefit soil health and curb farm emissions.

When Harrelson released the movie's follow-up *Common Ground* in late September, he continued the conversation by advocating for regenerative agriculture. Regenified exploded. “Before this summer we were honestly relatively underground,” says Salar Shemirani, CEO of Regenified. “We didn't even have a real website until this December.” Now, the certification program is struggling to keep up. “With the pace of interest we're receiving, we're going to have to staff up really fast in the next month to meet the demand of the last three weeks alone,” says Shemirani. “We've received outreach from 674,000 acres. It's unbelievable.”

It's not the only regenerative certification seeing a surge of interest. In 2022, Regenerative Organic Alliance certified 500,000 acres. In 2023, 6 million acres were certified. "We've seen a remarkable fast growth in awareness around regenerative farming over the last two years," says Jason Haas, a partner in Tablas Creek, the world's first Regenerative Organic Certified winery. Since then, delegations from over 200 vineyards and wineries have come to learn more about about their farming. He adds, "when we first achieved certification, we had to explain to virtually everyone what it was."

What Does Regenerative Certification Mean?

Though many now know what the term "regenerative" indicates, the various certification programs do differ from one another in their specific focuses. Brown's Regenified is a five-tier certification process following a six-three-four rule: six principles of soil health, three rules of adaptive stewardship, four of ecosystem changes. It asks farmers to prioritize practices like minimal or zero tillage, selecting plants suited to their environment for crop cover, building symbiotic relationships with livestock and keeping living roots in the soil.

Regenerative Organic Alliance (ROA), which was introduced by the Rodale Institute in 2018, shares similar (but not identical) goals to Regenified including carbon sequestration, soil restoration, the promotion of biodiversity and creating more resilient ecosystems. Its subscribers are broad—businesses like Patagonia, Erewhon Market, Nature's Path and J. Crew are certified, alongside Oregon's Troon Vineyard and Paso Robles's Tablas Creek. Meanwhile, the Regenerative Viticulture Alliance (founded by the Association of Regenerative Viticulture) launched last year and is aimed at the international market. Certified Regenerative by A Greener World (AGW) is focused on helping farmers create generative plans, with certification awarded accordingly.

Craig Camp, winegrower of Troon Vineyard, believes that these certifications "show that you're actively making things better," he says. "It's not enough that you're not doing bad things or following unsustainable practices. You have to improve the land you're on." He was drawn to the ROA by its consideration of humans as well as soil. "To be certified, you have to ensure your employees are fairly paid for your region, you offer insurance and your business is a safe environment, especially from things like sexual harassment and discrimination."

Though Camp's certification is new, he's been practicing regenerative agriculture for decades. So has Brian Mattingly, director of Star Hill Farm Operations at Maker's Mark, who was inspired to shift his practices after watched Brown's early YouTube videos. He began putting up nesting boxes and planting native grasses. "I feel like as farmers, we have a big responsibility to capture carbon, probably more so than any other occupation," he says.

When Regenified came online, Mattingly got Maker's Mark on board. Because he had followed Brown's work for years, Regenified felt like a logical next move. They started by converting Star Hill Farms, the bourbon brand's home farm, and offering three-year scholarships and phone consultations so their partner farms could follow suit. "We pay for the certification on their behalf so there's no cost to the farmer," says Mattingly. "We didn't want there to be any excuses." It still took some convincing—a few farmers were worried it wouldn't be worth the effort. But, one non-believer noticed that after planting new cover crops, he got 30 bushels per acre more corn. "He was sold," says Mattingly.

Toughing Out The Transition

Upheaving longstanding agricultural processes isn't an easy pursuit. To achieve a regenerative certification, farmers need to consider every step of production, from worker wages to diversity of cover crops. "It's not a switch you can turn on and off," says Shemirani. "It's a journey—it takes time."

Nor is it affordable. “The primary obstacle to initiating a successful regenerative farming program is the cost,” says Raymond Reyes, director of viticulture and winery relations at Gamble Family Vineyard. Costs vary depending on the size of the farm and the efforts needed to reach regenerative status. Prices will also vary depending on the certification. For example, ROA charges an annual fee equal to 0.1% of gross crop production, plus licensing fees based on annual revenue.

Hilary Graves, vineyard manager of Paso Robles’s Booker Vineyards, found becoming Regenerative Organic Certified took an investment, but not as much as she had expected. “Let’s call it \$1,000-ish annually after the government rebates,” she says. And there are other financial benefits. She brings in sheep to mow, which are free. Instead of spending money on pricey chemicals and labor (an estimated 80 hours of manpower) to tackle a recent leafhopper infestation, she used a drone to drop predatory insects. The total cost equaled the price of chemicals, but she saved significantly on manpower.

Producers also have to handle the stigma. Camp says that critics tend to think regenerative and biodynamics farmers are a bit woo-woo—like they prioritize cow horns and star signs over science. “But my director of agriculture has a masters of soil science and my winemakers have masters in biology,” he says.

Yet, the land is what really proves the point for most of these farmers. Since Larkmead in Napa Valley transitioned to regenerative practices, the soils have vastly improved and the vines are far healthier. “They’re more resistant to drought, disease and fungus,” says vineyard manager Nabor Camarena. “We barely need to do anything—the vines take care of themselves.”

This is particularly evident when it rains. Studies have shown that a 1% increase in organic matter in an acre of soil will hold an additional 20,000 gallons of water. “Think of how much water you can store from the rain, especially as the climate changes and more droughts come on,” says Mattingly.

The Move Toward Certification

Despite Mattingly’s conviction for regenerative practices, he had been hesitant to advertise them. Ultimately, he chose to get certified as a way to help make Maker’s practices stand out against confusing messaging in the industry and other companies whose practices amount to greenwashing. Just because a vineyard claims to be regenerative and uses some principles, such as cover crops and permanent vegetation coverage, does not mean it doesn’t use herbicides like glyphosate to manage weeds under the vines. “Regenerative agriculture is a broad term at the moment,” he says. “A lot of wineries and producers are distorting the definition to meet their own needs.”

Graves feels similarly. She was already moving Booker toward organics and was hesitant to pay for certification. But, she decided to get Regenerative Organic Certified because, she says, “the word ‘sustainability’ is so watered down now.”

But while setting themselves apart from the imposters is a big draw for many of these farmers, the real goal is to prove to the larger industry that it’s possible to be financially profitable while truly following regenerative principles.

“We have a responsibility to educate more about these programs,” says Troon’s Camp. “We’re not going to change the world with our 100 acres, but we can show others it’s feasible for a successful business.”