



Green Underground

{Why organic viticulture is the wine industry's clean little secret}

STORY THOM ELKJER PHOTOS SUSAN VOGEL

Rob Sinskey watches his young border collie, Puka, race up a vine row toward the sun setting at the top of the southern ridge. She brakes to an indignant halt before a series of huge gopher holes. A moment later the dog is back at Sinskey's side, her tail wagging, insisting that they investigate together. He looks down at her affectionately, then out across Old Sonoma Road toward the Carneros farmhouse where he lives. ■ Ten years ago, Sinskey made a radical decision that produced a transformation in his dying vineyards. Phylloxera was taking the vines, and a steady cycle of fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides—the same ones everyone used, the ones recommended—

life out of the to make his earth his grapes would no matter what. gophers rampant so be it: Fields



the universities had leached the soil. He decided so happy that grow beautifully If that meant in the vineyards, that are safe for

animals, he figured, would be safe for his kids and his dog. ■ Sinskey's vineyard manager Kirk Grace and winemaker Jeff Virnig walk up, discussing nontoxic anti-gopher strategies. "They love it here," Grace says of the pesky animals, sounding not entirely annoyed. The gophers are not alone. Down below in a reservoir that collects runoff from the hillside, a muskrat swims in a long, perfect arc just below the surface, its round brown back like a submarine coursing through pristine blue-gray water. ■ Sinskey, Grace and Virnig don't tend to use words like "organic" and "sustainable" out here in the vineyards. They're usually interested in something more specific, such as how

the canes on their Merlot vines grew just as long as they needed to be, and no longer, without any pruning.

You can find vineyards like theirs all over wine country now. I can recommend many from personal experience,

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including Brick House and Willakenzie in Oregon's Willamette Valley; Benziger in Sonoma Valley, Wild Hog on the Sonoma Coast and Davis Bynum in Russian River Valley; Araujo, Niebaum-Coppola and Spottswoode in Napa Valley; Sanford and Sunstone in Santa Barbara County; and Yorkville Cellars in Mendocino's Yorkville Highlands. I expect to visit a dozen others in the coming year.

Once you know what you're looking for, these vineyards stand out. Instead of bare earth below the vines, you see green. During the growing season, there are more people than machines. There are also more birds, owls, bats, mice and insects, all consuming each other in a food chain you can almost feel. Weeks after the harvest last fall, I visited Bonterra, whose organic vineyard occupies the upper end of the old McNab Ranch in southern Mendocino County. On the way there I passed many vineyards where the leafless vines appeared naked and drained. At Bonterra, on the other hand, the whole property was still full of color and buzzing with life.

Sinskey is certified organic by California Certified Organic Farmers. Bonterra is certified biodynamic, a more philosophic and biologically detailed program that originated with Rudolf Steiner in the 1920s. Other growers and wineries, including well-known names too numerous to mention, follow programs known as sustainable agriculture and integrated pest management. Everyone I meet who is pursuing one of these programs seems serenely confident that they are doing the right thing. But as I researched this story, I noticed something odd. I have been drinking the wines from many of these producers for years, but rarely heard them talk about green farming. The whole organic viticulture movement appears to be spreading out of sight, underground—a curious reflection of the movement's intense concern with life below the earth's surface.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, organic farming excludes synthetically compounded

fertilizers and pesticides. Instead farmers use just about anything organic. In a vineyard, composts are made of grape skins, animal manure and vegetables, and all manner of flowers, herbs and legumes planted in

the vine rows. Insect pests are controlled using other insects that prey on them. These are known as "beneficials." The USDA makes a special point of identifying the focus of all this activity: increasing healthy metabolic activity in the soil.

Soil, of course, is always the first item people mention when they are attempting to define the components of *terroir*—a sense of place you can taste in a glass of wine. *Terroir* is a quintessentially French wine concept, so I ask



a Frenchman, Christophe Baron of organically farmed Cayuse Vineyards in Walla Walla, Washington, to tell me what effect organic farming has on it. "You have the question backward," he replies. "It's impossible to sense *terroir* if you're constantly changing it with chemicals from outside. Only when you remove those things can you truly hear the earth speak." This is obvious once it's pointed out. It occurs to me later, however, that during my visit to Cayuse a year or so earlier, Baron had never mentioned that his vineyards are organic.

This seems to be emblematic of the whole movement: passionate advocacy that, publicly at least, rarely rises above a whisper. We already know that modest consumption of wine is good for our health, and there's no question that nontoxic farming is better for our planet

The staff at Robert Sinskey Vineyards, left to right: vineyard manager Kirk Grace, winemaker Jeff Virnig and owner Rob Sinskey. Above, organic vineyards like Sinskey's in Carneros stand out: Instead of bare earth beneath the vines, you see green.



ture movement.

than the alternatives. There's also growing evidence that that organic viticulture makes a positive contribution in the winery and in the glass, and I've certainly found noticeable differences from vineyards that have gone green. So why is everyone so quiet?

One explanation I heard many times is that "organic" is a dangerous label for premium wine. According to this argument, the first fully organic wines that appeared in the late 1970s and the 1980s were unstable, short-lived and frequently more a duty than a pleasure to drink. "Those wines left a bad taste in everyone's mouth, and no premium winery can afford to get tarred with that brush," explains Duff Bevill, one of Sonoma's veteran vineyard managers and president of the Dry Creek Wine Growers' Association. "The attitude seems to have been, it's better to go organic and keep it to yourself, and keep your options open to spray [chemical agents] if that should ever become your last resort to protect your vineyard."

Bevill is explaining, not advocating. Farmers are conservative by nature, and you only get one crop a year in a vineyard. Still, these rationalizations put hypothetical possibilities above practical reality. In the first place, many organically (and sustainably) grown wines enjoy

high rankings and strong sales. Furthermore, the enormous number of young wine drinkers is untainted by something that happened in the wine industry 15 or 20 years ago. In fact, demographic research and my own informal survey of young winemakers, sommeliers and wine sellers indicate that plenty of people respond positively to the idea of organically grown wine.

In the second place, the benefits of going public with green viticulture outweigh the possibility that poison might one day seem like a good idea again. In Europe, which is far ahead of the United States in this regard, consumers are well aware of the top organically based producers, which include such respected, internationally known labels as A & P de Villaine, Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Domaine Leflaive, all in Burgundy, and M. Chapoutier in the Rhône Valley. These wineries are not hedging their bets, because they know the market is there. In London, consumers can go into wine shops that either specialize in or sell nothing but organically grown wine. Bonterra, for example, sells tens of thousands of cases in the United Kingdom every year. Here in the United States few people can name even one organic vineyard.

Furthermore, there is a clear distinction between



The cover crop in Robert Sinskey's Carneros vineyard, above left, consists of vetch, sugar peas, Cayuse oats and winter clover. The bird house is designed to attract raptors as a form of rodent control. A winter clover seedling, above right. Opposite, Davis Bynum's operation in Russian River Valley uses organic methods. From left, Davis' son Hampton Bynum, general manager; winemaker David Georges; Davis' daughter Susie Bynum, treasurer; founder Davis Bynum; and vineyard consultant Jack Larsen.

organic wine (the bad old stuff) and wine made from organically grown grapes. Both come from organic farms, but they take different paths after that. Winemaking worldwide has long included a natural preservative that occurs in the form of highly diluted sulfur. Sulfur derivatives called sulfites occur naturally in the winemaking process, and small additional quantities keep bottled wine fresh and flavorful for decades. Only a very tiny percentage of people is medically allergic to sulfites (vintner David Bruce, a dermatologist, points out that our bodies produce them daily). Nonetheless, current law defines organic wine as having fewer than 10 parts per million of sulfites. That is a high standard of purity and an extremely low level of protection, making the wine more vulnerable to bacteria and oxidation.

Obviously, this is not an economically viable course for most wineries, which must store, ship and stand by wines that have been sitting on retail shelves or in people's pantries. So while there are completely organic wines, there are few of them. "People who insist on organic food might seem to be a logical market for organic wine, but it turns out they don't drink that much alcohol so demand is not high," says Steve Frenkel, owner of a wine distributor called Organic Vintages. Yet he readily admits that

sales of organically grown wine are increasing. It's the whisper again: "We're here, if you can find us."

The problem with the whisper is that most wine drinkers can't hear it. No one is telling us we can choose wine that puts fewer pesticides and herbicides into the nation's waterways (never mind the wine we're drinking). "People buying luxury goods want their purchases to express both their taste and their values," says Bonnie Dahan, president of The Bunalen Catalog, a purveyor of high-end housewares, furniture, garden items and personal care products made from organic ingredients and sustainable means of production. Premium wine is clearly a luxury item, observes Rob Sinskey, "yet most of it is made with lowest-common-denominator farming. Other luxury items are made with the best raw materials. There's a disconnect."

The disconnect affects everyone who drinks wine. Juliane Poirier Locke, author of *Vineyards in the Watershed: Sustainable Viticulture in Napa County* (published by the Napa Sustainable Winegrowers Group) wrote the book after years as a journalist covering agriculture in Napa. One of the bright spots for Napa County is three straight years of lowering pesticide use, from 1998 through 2000 (data for 2001 were not available at press time). "We need to empower people to make a connection,"

Poirier Locke says, “between management of the land and the wine they drink.”

The wine industry is slow to make this connection for us. “They may be concerned that promoting organic farming could be seen as implicit condemnation of the chemical approach,” suggests Brian Leahy, president of California Certified Organic Farmers. The 90 winegrowing members of CCOF in California farm only 8315 certified vineyard acres, less than 2 percent of the state’s total. No one knows how many more acres are organically farmed without certification, but Leahy guesses the number is substantial because, he says, “compared to other crops, wine grapes are relatively easy to farm organically.” Vintners who have made the shift tell me it’s more expensive at first, but then costs normalize.

“When we started out, people said it would be too hard, too expensive, too complex,” recalls Linda Rice. “They really didn’t know, because there were very few models



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then.” She and her husband, Fred Rice, launched Sunstone Vineyards in Santa Ynez Valley in 1989, and have been organic from the beginning. “We found our way,” she says. “Now, there are many more people and resources to support organic viticulture.” There are also many more wineries taking advantage of them, not just in California but also in Oregon, Washington and other states.

One of the hardest-working organic viticulture experts in America is “Amigo” Bob Cantisano. He and his company, Organic Ag Advisors, are now in such demand that winemakers who once summoned him at their pleasure now arrange their schedules to fit his. Cantisano is also helping dispel the fog of uncertainty that some vintners say prevents them from committing to organic agriculture.

Take, for example, the argument that organic farming leaves grape growers more vulnerable to diseases and insects. Researchers now suggest that healthy, chemical-

free vines may resist phylloxera and other diseases naturally. Cantisano also believes that the industry’s alpha pest, the glassy-winged sharpshooter, will leave vineyards alone if nearby there’s a more varied, alternative habitat planted with nitrogen-rich plants. At Honig Cellars in Napa Valley, a client of Cantisano, they call such areas “sharpshooter buffets.”

It’s clear that certifiably green farming is commercially viable for premium wineries of all sizes, from tiny backwoods operations to corporately owned wineries selling up to 100,000 cases a year. So what is it going to take to make nontoxic grape farming the norm instead of the exception? Both vintners and consumers have to change their behavior in small ways that can have a large impact.

First, wineries that grow or buy certified organic grapes should say so on their labels. All it takes is a single line—“Made From Organically Grown Grapes”—which is allowed under current rules. Wineries will still put

organically grown \$50 wines on store shelves next to \$50 wines that slurped up a chemical cocktail. The difference is, with appropriate labeling we’ll know which is which. This in turn will enable us to support producers whose wine leaves the earth in better condition, not worse.

Second, everyone else who is farming organically should certify as rapidly as possible. Communities throughout California are becoming increasingly agitated by what they call “industrial viticulture” – which they see as pushing out other crops, grabbing scarce water, endangering indigenous trees and polluting waterways. In this atmosphere, the wine industry could use a public relations victory. Being able to point to 10 percent or 25 percent certified organic vineyards in California would be a stunning achievement in a state where other crops average 1 percent organic. This means wineries with green vineyards have to commit: get certified and put a line on their labels. Growers that sell their grapes should ask wineries to name their vineyards and identify them as organic. This summer, the USDA plans to issue new national organic farming guidelines that will clear up any lingering confusion about the rules, so that excuse should disappear from the scene.

Ultimately, the premium wine industry could emerge as one of the country’s green leaders, proving that principles and pleasure can go hand in hand. But first the industry has to end its current ambivalence, the moral equivalent of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” As long as organic vintners keep mum or hang back, they’re delaying the day when wine becomes part of the solution, not part of the problem. ☺

HOW TO LEARN MORE

BOOKS

The Great Organic Wine Guide by Hilary Wright (Piatkus, \$16) is an easy-reading, nontechnical guide that explains all the major concepts clearly. It also shows the different progress of consumer awareness in the United States and Europe.

Real Wine by Patrick Matthews (Mitchell Beazley, \$25) is about winemaking as much as winegrowing, focusing on how a growing band of winemakers is turning away from technology and back toward more natural processes in the vineyard and winery. Dovetails perfectly with the whole organic argument.

Vineyards in the Watershed: Sustainable Viticulture in Napa County by Juliane Poirier Lock (Napa Sustainable Winegrowers Group, \$16) focuses exclusively on America's premiere winegrowing region, showing how growers in Napa are revising their vineyard practices to address effects on the wider environment.

WEBSITES

If you drink California wine, live in the state or vacation there, take a moment to visit the Web site of California Certified Organic Farmers. Click on "Find a Farmer" and use the simple search engine to find organic vineyards by county. Once you see one up close, you'll understand immediately why a live vineyard is better than one in which almost everything but the vines is dead. www.ccof.org.

"Tilth," a word related to "tilling," refers to the microbial, metabolic life of the soil. More tilth, happier earth. Oregon Tilth is the certifying organization for that state's organic farms, including vineyards. www.tilth.org.

The Integrated Pest Management Institute promotes and certifies replacement of pesticides with natural means of insect control nationwide, not just in vineyards but in all forms of agriculture. www.ipminstitute.org.

Veronique Raskin grows organic grapes and imports European organically grown wines to the United States. She founded the Organic Grapes into Wine Alliance (see below), and has also packed her commercial Web site with abundant information on organic winegrowing and related topics. www.ecowine.com.

ORGANIZATIONS

CCOF, Oregon Tilth and other green viticulture organizations have membership programs for businesses and private individuals, and would eagerly welcome your support.

If you would like do more than buy organically grown wines for your table, check in with the Organic Grapes into Wine Alliance. Their motto is "Committed to producing a most civilized beverage in a most responsible way." Find OGWA online at www.organic.com and live at 1592 Union St., Suite 350, San Francisco, Calif., 94123; 415.256.8882.

