

Randall Graham, founder and president of Bonny Doon Vi

# Earth, Sky and Wine

## DECODING THE ECO-CHIC WINES OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Words by Patricia Gajo

**F**rom Mendocino to Santa Cruz, there's no denying that sustainable viticulture rules. But with catchphrases like "organic grapes" and "organic wines" titillating the wine scene, curious wine drinkers are often left wondering their worth—of the wines, that is. We asked our go-to sommelier, Natalie MacLean – who recently released an iPhone app for easy wine pairings – for her expert thoughts.

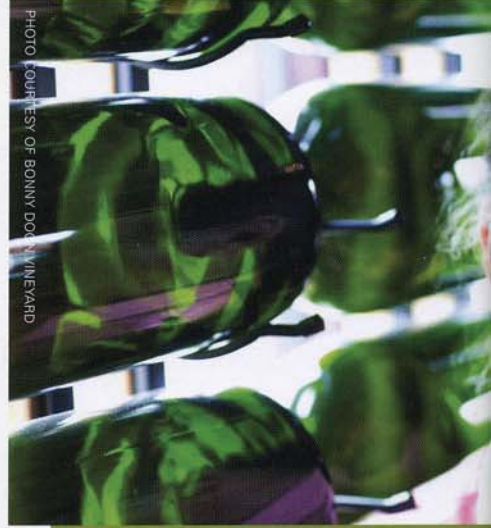


PHOTO COURTESY OF BONNY DOON VINEYARD



PHOTO COURTESY OF BONTERRA VINEYARDS

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BONTERRA VINEYARDS AND FETZER VINEYARDS



ABOVE & RIGHT: McNab Ranch Beauty and top-selling Bonterra Cabernet Sauvignon as well as Fetzer's Merlot



#### What's your take on organic wines?

**Natalie MacLean:** They are no longer the oxidized plonk made by hippies in the 1970s. Today, they're well made and they compete on both quality and price with other wines. Practicing organic viticulture means attention to detail and that can only help the wine's quality and perhaps even the taste.

#### Is the word "organic" a marketing buzzword?

**NM:** Organic is certainly fashionable these days, just as locally grown is. It means different things to different people, and laws vary by country as to its definition, so it's a fuzzy concept. Still, I think that there's value in the word beyond marketing hype.

#### Are organic wines superior in any way?

**NM:** They're not necessarily better tasting, nor are they a more healthful wine—and they certainly won't minimize a hangover. However, the commitment required of organic farming translates across other aspects of production and often results in a higher quality wine.

#### Is it possible to have a quality wine that is not organic?

**NM:** Absolutely. And some regions that are plagued with harsh conditions, such as rain, cold, and pests, simply can't produce organic wine as easily and cost-effectively as can producers in Chile and Argentina, for example.

#### THE TRUTH IS IN THE TASTE

As far as organic certification goes, many qualified vineyards don't bother with that piece of paper, viewing their methods simply as a means to an end for great wine. Here, we give you two eco-friendly wines from Mendocino – each playing their part in their own way. Natalie's top picks are included, so why not judge for yourself?

#### FETZER VINEYARDS ~ [fetzer.com](http://fetzer.com)

Fetzer has been making wine since 1968 and is the first in California to seriously harvest white wines. They market themselves as "The Earth Friendly Wine."

**APPROACH //** Fetzer isn't completely organic (and, thus, cannot be labelled so), because, although their grapes are as such, they also buy non-organic grapes from other growers. Green-speaking, however, Fetzer's director of sustainability, Ann Thrupp, directs the e-public to a link outlining their sustainability deeds, which include using compost to feed the soil, planting crops to attract "good" insects, buying 100 percent renewable energy, including solar panels, and even running their tractors on biodiesel fuel made of vegetable oil.

#### MOST POPULAR WINE // 2009 Chardonnay

#### NATALIE'S CHOICE // 2008 Fetzer Valley Oaks Zinfandel

"A blackberry-rich, plummy wine with full-bodied goodness. Supple and smooth, this is a great wine for a party."

#### NATALIE'S PAIRINGS // Hamburgers, beef fajitas, tacos, and pepperoni pizza

#### BONTERRA VINEYARDS ~ [bonterra.com](http://bonterra.com)

The McNab Ranch has been cultivating organic grapes since 1987. A selection of their wines is farmed bio-dynamically.

**APPROACH //** Bonterra currently adds a small amount of sulphites, antioxidants that occur naturally in the fermentation process, to help prolong the shelf life of its wines, which rules them out as completely organic, despite their 100 percent organic grapes and otherwise organic production. "Regulations are constantly changing though," says Maggie Peak, who handles

#### I HEARTYOUNTVILLE

*If you've made it all the way out West, don't miss this Napa Valley hotspot.*

#### EAT // The French Laundry ~ [www.frenchlaundry.com](http://www.frenchlaundry.com)

It's ridiculously difficult to obtain a reservation – the Internet is filled how-to-tips – but with only 16 tables and almost every culinary award under Chef Thomas Keller's hat, making the recommended two-month advanced booking is rather optimistic. Good luck, the meal is more than worth the effort.

#### SLEEP // Villagio Inn & Spa ~ [www.villagio.com](http://www.villagio.com)

On the same street as The French Laundry, this Tuscan-inspired hotel echoes an elegant Italian villa vibe throughout its 112 rooms and 13,000 square foot spa. Every check-in includes a welcome bottle of Chardonnay (unless Merlot is preferred) and the breakfast buffet offers a bottomless flute of bubbly. Cheers!

the brand's public relations. She projects that perhaps one day such minor amounts of added sulphites won't affect a wine's organic certification.


#### MOST POPULAR WINE // 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon

#### NATALIE'S CHOICE // 2007 Chardonnay

"A rich, plush Chardonnay with soothing layers of ripe pears, peaches, mango, and pineapple. Full-bodied and balanced with an excellent structure. Perhaps for the picnic table or deck. Part of the Vintages Essentials."

#### NATALIE'S PAIRINGS // Grilled red pepper, eggplant, Asian dishes, and roast chicken

#### BIODYNAMIC BREW

To make matters more exciting and downright bizarre, some winemakers push the organic movement one step further by adhering to biodynamic principals from Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner (early 20th century). Loopy to some, but a way of life to others, this philosophy of farming follows the "optimal dates" of a biodynamic calendar and incorporates cosmic aspects into viticulture, such as planet and moon movement over the land. For example, there are certain days when roots of the wine vines are more active, and thus better for irrigation. According to Natalie, "Sure, there's the bizarre witchcraft element to biodynamic farming, but if it makes a producer pay closer attention to the land and the vines, all the better." Bonny Doon Vineyard ([bonnydoonvineyard.com](http://bonnydoonvineyard.com)), run by Randall Graham in Santa Cruz, is certified biodynamic and enjoys a steady, dare we say, cult-like following. Their best seller, the Vin Gris de Cigare Rosé, is a top pick for Natalie as well. "One of my favorite rosés year after year. It has Old World balance and length with New World vitality and fruit: ripe raspberries and earth." 

#### DOWNLOAD THE DRINKS MATCHER APP FOR YOUR SMARTPHONE

Natalie MacLean, sommelier and publisher of Canada's largest drinks e-newsletter, has created the new Drinks Matcher app. It's like having a personal sommelier and bartender at your side, or, on your phone.

"The variety of food-and-drink combinations has exploded in the last five years," says MacLean. "Chicken isn't just chicken anymore – now we eat it stuffed with pancetta and fresh herbs, rubbed with curry spices, or sautéed in an orange balsamic sauce. We're looking for more interesting flavors, both on the plate and in the glass—and we want them to work together."

For more information on the Drinks Matcher, visit [www.nataliemaclean.com/mobilematch](http://www.nataliemaclean.com/mobilematch)