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## How wineries are packaging their eco-credentials

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Erick Wong / The Chronicle

Bonny Doon Vineyard's  
2007 Ca' del Solo  
Albarino label

Feel-good phrases like "responsible stewards of the land" and "family farmed for a sustainable world" take up a lot of real estate on the front label of Parducci's Sustainable Red. The back label features a checklist of the wine's eco-creds: locally farmed grapes, solar energy, earth-friendly packaging. A cardboard wrapping around the bottleneck seals the deal by proclaiming that it's made at the country's first carbon-neutral winery.

Parducci - part of the Mendocino Wine Co. - is a dramatic example of how winemakers are choosing to communicate their sustainable practices. In the old days, wine associated with organic agriculture was left dusty on the shelf. But in this new era of eco-luxury, green is something to be proud of. Wineries are devising all kinds of ways to market their eco-practices.

"In the early days, green was hippie and hemp," says Kevin George, founder of Articulate Design Inc. in San Francisco, who designed Lexus' Hybrid Living marketing program. But today, he says, "For discerning buyers there's a whole lot of choices they can make that can bring together luxury and sustainability."

Organic and biodynamic vineyard certifications in California continue to grow at a steady pace, though they are eclipsed by the number of wineries involved in sustainable winegrowing programs, which more often involve self-monitoring rather than third-party certification. (See "Sustainable wine definitions," below)

Whichever green path they chose, the challenge is deciding how to let the consumer in on what they're doing. On the bottle, that can range from making zero mention to splashing it all over the label like a package of organic baby lettuce.

"I really want people to better know and better understand these concepts, because I think consumers will embrace these products quicker, which will then encourage wineries to communicate it and to do these processes," says Paul Dolan, a fourth-generation winemaker and co-owner of the Mendocino Wine Co. "The bottom line is, it's better for the planet."

## **Green certification**

Yet green-minded wine drinkers still have reason to wonder what kind of eco-bang they are getting for their buck when faced with bottles on the shelf. While biodynamic and organic standards are enforced by third-party certifiers such as Demeter USA and California Certified Organic Farmers, bottles are not always labeled as such, and there are different levels of certification.

The term "sustainable" is much more amorphous. The largest sustainable vintners organization in the state, California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance, currently focuses on education and self-assessment but is developing a certification program that could be approved by the end of the year. Meanwhile, smaller organizations such as Lodi's Sustainable Viticulture Program have already created their own certification programs.

The CSWA defines sustainable with three Es: environmentally sound, economically feasible and socially equitable. Members are encouraged to reduce, but are not outright required to eliminate pesticides. On the other hand they are also asked to consider environmental factors that do not go into organic certification, such as energy use.

Since the nonprofit was founded in 2002 as an offshoot of the Wine Institute and the California Association of Winegrape Growers, more than 1,300 vineyards and wineries - or 60 percent of California's wine case production and 40 percent of vineyard acreage, according to the CSWA - have participated in the organization's self-assessment program. Yet wineries are not permitted to mention it in the bottle, since it is not a certification process.

"The industry wanted to make sure we were walking the walk and that the message was clear and that they were really adopting these processes before we did certification," says Allison Jordan, executive director of CSWA and director of environmental affairs for the Wine Institute.

Some wineries, such as Mendocino Wine Co., create their own sustainable logos. Benziger, the first Sonoma winery to release a biodynamic wine, has a logo on its front label that indicates the grapes have been certified by the winery's self-created "Farming for Flavor" sustainable winegrowing program.

Others, such as Lange Twins in Lodi, use label phrases like "a tradition of sustainable winegrowing." Kunde Estates in Sonoma, who participates in the CSWA program, has a bottle "necker" that explains some of its green practices.

But plenty of wineries don't say a thing on the bottle, as a recent UC Davis survey of 28 winery CEOs found, despite the fact that all that participated in the survey said their wineries are incorporating green practices.

"Number one, and most importantly, it's not well defined what green is. There are some emerging qualifying organizations, but they're a little bit nervous to go with someone who is later proved not to be

reliable," says Robert Smiley, professor in UC Davis' graduate school of management and director of wine industry studies.

## **Labels can be unclear**

He adds, "This stuff's complicated. You ever look at a wine label? You've got a lot of other things you've got to get on there. The government warning, brand, year, sometimes the story. Several of them said we'll communicate on our Web site or when we give talks or if someone comes into the tasting room."

Wineries that use organic grapes have other reasons for keeping it quiet. Historically, organic wines were stigmatized because they must be made without sulfites, which can reduce shelf life and affect flavor. Today, only a handful of California wineries produce true organic wine; it's much more common to make wine with organically grown grapes and added sulfites.

Robert Sinskey Vineyards began going organic in 1991, after Rob Sinskey had taken over winery operations from his father, Bob Sinskey, and noticed that the vineyard soil wasn't healthy. But the winery didn't publicize its practices for a decade.

"Wines that had the organic tag were somewhat ghettoized. They were sold in a shelf in the health food department. The quality was so poor that it wasn't recognized on its own merits," says Sinskey. "We didn't want to be identified with that wine."

Now, Sinskey's vineyards are both organic certified from CCOF and biodynamic certified from Demeter. Yet the only indication of any type of certification is on the bottom of the back label, which reads "Ingredients: Organic Grapes."

Sinskey opted not to use the Demeter certification logo partly because it requires paying a tariff per bottle. All in all, he'd rather keep things subtle.

## **Biodynamics on the rise**

Between 2006 and 2007 organic certification of vineyards by CCOF, which spokeswoman Jane Baker says is responsible for more than 90 percent of vineyard certification in the state, went up to 9,240 total acres, a growth of 10.4 percent and a much larger increase than the previous three years.

Biodynamic winegrowing is seeing an upswing in California, though it's relatively modest in terms of overall winery numbers. Whereas in 2003 there were about a dozen certified organic vintners or wineries in the state, today there are 38, plus half a dozen in transition or starting the process.

Biodynamic has similar breakdowns to organic wine in that wineries can choose to produce certified biodynamic wines or wines made with biodynamic grapes. Demeter USA is currently in the process of making certification standards for both more stringent, such as no longer allowing any sugar, acid or yeast additions for certified biodynamic wine, to make the most natural expression of the grapes and terroir possible. These new standards should have final approval at the end of December and are already being phased in, says Jim Fullmer, executive director of Demeter USA.

One of the bigger biodynamic players is Bonny Doon Vineyard. The Santa Cruz winery recently downsized to about one-twelfth of its size - from producing 450,000 cases to 35,000 cases by selling off some of its larger labels - in order to work toward its long-term goal of transitioning to 100 percent estate-grown biodynamic wine.

"I really want to make wines that are truly distinctive, that truly have a reason for being. There are too many wines that are forgettable," says Randall Grahm. Biodynamic is "basically a means to learning how to discover terroir of a site and making wines that have a sense of place," he adds.

Bonny Doon recently began listing all ingredients on its wine label, including yeasts or other additives allowed under biodynamic certification. Its certified wines also carry the Demeter logo.

"We wanted people to know what we were doing. It's just another label or metaphor or word," says Grahm. "It doesn't address whether the wine is good or well made. It will tell you things about how it is made."

Fullmer agrees. "I've noticed with wine labels what matters most isn't a certification - whatever it is, organic, biodynamic, salmon-safe. When I'm talking to a label artist about integrating the certification into the label, usually the emphasis is to not to clutter the label with all these seals," he says. "It's the quality of the wine that sells itself, not all these certification seals."

Wineries that avoid certification seals on the label find other ways to let customers know about their green practices. Kunde, Fetzer and Benziger offer eco-tours of the vineyards, while others talk about farming practices in the newsletter or on the Web site.

There is still plenty of concern in the industry that sustainable winegrowing programs - even those that offer third-party certification - provide wineries with too much leeway. Winemakers who were certified organic long before green became hip can get frustrated when newcomers with lower levels of commitment make a big thing about their sustainability, a buzzword that has created controversy in the organic and biodynamic movements.

"I feel like it's saying you're almost pregnant," says Sinskey. "I see it all as greenwashing."

Paul Dolan agrees about the potential to misuse the term "sustainable," though he was the first chairman of the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance and uses the term in the names of his wine.

"I do think certification is very, very important. Far too many people say they use organic practices or biodynamic practices and they're not," says Dolan, whose wines are largely made from certified organic and biodynamic grapes. "It's disingenuous to those who shift their whole perspective and farm practices to become organic."

Yet Jordan of the CSWA points out her program's big advantage.

"It helps people to enter at any point," she says. "Because sustainability takes into account economic feasibility, it draws in a greater percentage of growers."

To Dolan, whose Paul Dolan wine label home page features an illustration of bunnies hopping among vines with falcons and planets soaring overhead, his own definition of sustainable is nothing less than shooting for the stars.

"I wanted to create standards that were very high so that others would reach," he says. "Our minimum standards in saying we're sustainable is that we're 100 percent carbon neutral and use 100 percent green power, because those are the biggest negative contributions to the environment."

### **A bottle's carbon footprint**

Mendocino County is in the forefront of the green agriculture movement in California, and Fetzer Vineyards & Winery of Hopland (Mendocino County) is one of the region's sustainable movers and shakers. Though it has had environmental programs for 20 years, including initiatives like using 100 percent green energy, its latest is one of the more ambitious. The winery is in the process of converting 23 million wine bottles to lighter-weight glass.

Changing wine packaging to save energy isn't a brand-new practice in the wine industry, but it usually involves converting to a format other than glass. In the spring, the Wine Group of San Francisco announced that classic table wines Almaden and Inglenook would be sold in a Bag-in-Box rather than their characteristic jugs. Other winemakers, such as Bandit from St. Helena's Three Thieves and French Rabbit, release table wines in Tetra Pak boxes.

Tetra Pak and BIB are much lighter than glass and their straight sides allow them to stack closer, requiring less energy for shipping. But although these wines do well as picnic or party wines, it's still hard to take wine in a box too seriously, which is where lightweight glass comes in.

Fetzer commissioned a study from the British environmental consultant group Best Foot Forward, which determined that if all of the winery's bottles - from the 28-ounce magnum to the 17.5-ounce 750 ml bottle - were converted to lightweight glass, the average glass reduction would add up to 16 percent annually. The reduced manufacturing and transportation emissions would mean a 14 percent reduction in the winery's carbon footprint.

The most noticeable difference between the new and old glass bottles, which are produced by Owens Illinois (O-I) and are already rolling off the bottling line, is that they do not have a punt - the traditional dimple on the bottom of the bottle that is often deep enough for sommeliers to use as a thumb handle when pouring.

"It feels slightly lighter," says Ann Thrupp, Fetzer's manager of sustainability and organic development. "I call it sleeker."

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## **Sustainable wine definitions**

**Biodynamic.** Biodynamic winemaking is more established in Europe than in the United States, though the country's main certifying agency, Demeter USA, lists 68 U.S. wineries or vineyards that have been certified or are in transition.

Though biodynamic farming is similar to organic farming in that it eschews chemical fertilizers and pesticides, proponents say biodynamic wines have more of a sense of place, since very few additives are allowed. In fact, Demeter USA is in the process of changing its certification standards so that no additive other than sulfites can be added to wine labeled "biodynamic wine."

Wine that is labeled as "made with biodynamic grapes" must be 100 percent biodynamically farmed and is allowed to have certain levels of yeast, acid and sugar additions.

**Fair trade.** Oakland's TransFair USA just announced that it has begun certifying Fair Trade wines from Argentina, Chile and South Africa for the American market, so it's a new label to look for.

Fair Trade certification of wine has been around since 2003 in Europe. The certification means that wineries met certain standards for living wages, environmental sustainability and community

improvement. The wines arriving in stores with the Fair Trade logo include Wandering Grape, which is made with grapes grown in Argentina and South Africa and is sold at Target.

**Organic.** California Certified Organic Farmers, which certifies the vast majority of wineries in the state, has certified more than 9,000 acres of California vineyards.

Like biodynamic wine, organic wine falls into two categories: "Organic wine" must be made from organically grown grapes and without added sulfites. In addition to carrying the CCOF logo, it may contain the USDA organic logo. Wines "made with organic grapes" or "organically farmed" wine must have been produced in a certified organic facility and be made from organically grown grapes under USDA and CCOF standards.

**Sustainable.** Though this is more of an umbrella term for wine that is made with environmental considerations, regional organizations like Lodi's Sustainable Viticulture Program have created certification programs for wineries that meet certain green standards.

The California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance has a self-assessment program and offers seminars to wineries that are interested in reducing their carbon footprint. It is also in the process of creating a certification program.

### **What makes a green label?**

Depending on certification and winemaker preferences, wine labels may include phrases like "made with organically grown grapes" in the case of True Earth, or "a tradition of sustainable growing," in the case of the Lange Twins' Pinot Grigio, above. Ca' del Solo's Albarino label features a tiny Demeter logo, indicating biodynamic certification.

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