

## May 2007 Why Go Green in Grapegrowing?

by Katy Budge

*The search for terroir ...  
broad and narrow definitions of sustainability ...  
some "green" wines ...  
and, just what do you serve a Queen?*

During her presentation at the recent Hospice du Rhone, Sophie Armenier of Domaine de Marcoux in Châteauneuf-du-Pape showed a striking close-up photograph of two hands, side-by-side, each holding a handful of dirt. One hand held a soil so fecund you could smell its earthiness; the other hand held a soil that could best be described as beige. Armenier did not elaborate on the image, but luckily, moderator Kelly McAuliffe pressed her on exactly what we were seeing.

Because it wasn't part of the formal presentation she had prepared in her very able English, Armenier offered the information in French for McAuliffe to translate. My French was good enough for me to realize that these soils were from two different nearby vineyards, but I missed the kicker. The dark soil was from Domaine de Marcoux's organically and biodynamically farmed vineyard, the other was from only five yards away!



*Cover crops (on right) at the Wild Horse vineyards in Templeton*

Armenier further explained that the vineyard is farmed this way "because of respect for the soils and the wines." By creating conditions where "living soils rich in flora and fauna can thrive," she explained, the wines are better able to express their terroir. Indeed, several other winegrowers I talked with indicated that terroir echoed this belief.

Tablas Creek Vineyards (<http://www.tablascreek.com>) in Paso Robles was created in 1989 as a collaboration between the Haas family and the Perrin family of France's Beaucastel. As Jason Haas, Tablas Creek's general manager explained, the Beaucastel vineyard has been organic since 1963 when Jacques Perrin became suspicious of all the chemical inputs going onto his vineyards. He did an immediate about face, and "found it was amazing how much that first vintage tasted like Beaucastel, even after just a year," said Haas. Not surprisingly, Tablas Creek has been fully organic since its inception, and "because it's the way we've always done it, there's never been any sort of challenge big enough to make us think about changing."

Phillip Hart of AmByth Estate Vineyard (<http://www.ambythestate.com/>) in Templeton didn't find this surprising. When he began developing his (now Demeter [<http://demeter-usa.org/>] certified) vineyard, he found himself gravitating very quickly to biodynamic methods, ironically, because he had met Phillipe Armenier, who some 17 years earlier had steered his family's Domaine de Marcoux towards the biodynamic principles of Rudolf Steiner. Hart became further convinced as he began seeking out and tasting wines around the world that were farmed in this manner.

"There was not just a minor difference in quality, but a huge difference in quality," he said. "The grapes taste more like the varieties they are and the place where they are grown." He has also found other added benefits, including being able "to get the vineyard to act older than it is," and increased beneficial insect and (non harvest pressure) bird populations. If there is any downside to subscribing to the biodynamic philosophy, Hart noted with a wry smile, it's that "it does tend to make you a fanatic."

Clearly, the fanaticism isn't just on the supply side. With the huge uptick in all things "green" in the marketplace, a lot of people – both producers and consumers are jumping on the bandwagon, at various levels of commitment. Like everything, it's "caveat emptor" in this booming industry sector, and the best way to assure you're really buying "green" wines is to get to know the winery, winemaker, and/or winegrower.

"Sustainable," "organic," and "biodynamic" are the buzz words on everyone's lips, but they're certainly not interchangeable terms. In terms of winegrowing, sustainable is the broadest category of the group, and though it can include winegrowers who wouldn't otherwise qualify as organic or the more restrictive biodynamic, it's still a positive direction to be taking. Problems such as erosion, non-point source pollution (typically in the form of agricultural runoff), wasteful irrigation systems, overly aggressive pest management, lack of worker training regarding pesticide use, etc. can all begin to be addressed using sustainable practices, an approach which considers not only environmental issues, but also those of economics and human resources.

Obviously, "sustainability" can also be a touchstone for a much broader view of responsibility with deeper ramifications. As Jeff Pipes of Pipestone Vineyards (<http://www.pipestonevineyards.com>) pointed out, "part of sustainability is local economy. If you are importing extraordinary amounts of fuel, labor, and machinery and shipping your product far and wide, you are part of the problem." At his own organically farmed vineyard which is also managed according to feng shui principles, Pipes has even started using draft horses instead of tractors, a move which has decreased soil compaction between the rows and improved soil structure.

"I'd like to see more small acreages return to animal power," he said. "The horses are self-sustaining (they can make babies - try getting your John Deere tractor to do that!), they help produce their own food (hay), the provide nutrients back to the fields (manure), they are quieter than the tractor and better for the farmer's soul, and overall, they may be cheaper than a tractor in fuel (hay vs. petrol) and repair (vet vs. mechanic) bills." (*photo below courtesy of Pipestone Vineyards*)



Ironically, even wineries going the extra mile and beyond to farm organically cannot call their wines organic if they add sulfites – essentially naturally occurring products – to their wines in the winemaking process, a distinction which understandably frustrates a lot of winemakers. As Haas explained, "we use small amounts of sulfites in the winemaking process to ensure that the wines we produce are suitable for aging (sulfite-free wines are extremely unstable, and likely to oxidize or volatilize within a couple of years)."

He believes that "if there is a marketing campaign planned, it should be aimed at revising the laws so that they are in synch with Europe, where wines that are organically farmed, and which are under a certain maximum number of parts per million of sulfur, can call themselves organic."

So where's the onus of responsibility to winegrowers and wine consumers? Basically, it's up to each to decide. As stated before, the promise of cashing in greenbacks by calling yourself green will undoubtedly lead to some questionable marketing, so consumers have to accept the onus of self-education and also realize that they make decisions when they spend money.

"It's America, so you have to vote with your dollars," said Pipes. "If you support sustainability, small farms, reducing carbon output, etc., then you need to buy those products. You can't say you're for all this and then run to Costco, Trader Joe's, or Safeway and buy the cheapest products that are produced on a mass scale thousands of miles away. However, we do live in a modern world and it's not really possible to be a zealot about this. One of my favorite sayings, and advice we try to live by regarding sustainability, is from Aldo Leopold: 'We shall never achieve harmony with land, any more than we shall achieve absolute justice or liberty for people. In these higher aspirations the important thing is not to achieve, but to strive.'"

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There's lots of information out there about sustainable vineyard management, but one of the best resources is right in our own backyard. The Central Coast Vineyard Team (<http://www.vineyardteam.org>), a non-profit organization based in Paso Robles, began its energetic outreach and education efforts over a decade ago, and has since brought thousands and thousands of California vineyard acreage within the banner of sustainability. Not surprisingly, a good number of CCVT members are also organic growers as well, and an increasing number are also biodynamic, a farming method championed by Rudolf Steiner that employs such concepts as doing planting and field management activities according to the lunar cycles.

Jason Haas has written several pieces about organic winegrowing on his Tablas Creek blog ...  
4/25/07 Organic weed control: ([http://tablascreek.typepad.com/tablascreek/2007/04/organic\\_weed\\_co.html](http://tablascreek.typepad.com/tablascreek/2007/04/organic_weed_co.html))  
3/5/07 Sustainable vineyard? Check the dirt ([http://tablascreek.typepad.com/tablascreek/2007/03/what\\_is\\_sustain.html](http://tablascreek.typepad.com/tablascreek/2007/03/what_is_sustain.html))  
5/12/06 Organic vineyards... and organic wines ([http://tablascreek.typepad.com/tablascreek/2006/05/organic\\_vineyard.html](http://tablascreek.typepad.com/tablascreek/2006/05/organic_vineyard.html))

Some of the many other wineries subscribing to organic and/or biodynamic winegrowing techniques include not only AmByth Estate Vineyard & Winery, Pipestone Vineyards and Tablas Creek Vineyard, but also Casa Barranca, Castoro Cellars, Domaine Alfred, Fetzer/Five Rivers/Bonterra, Grgich Hills, and Wild Horse. Know of others? Email me and I'll add them to the list!

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*OK, because I know you were wondering,  
here's what was served at the White House dinner  
honoring the Queen of England!*

*Spring Pea Soup with Fernleaf Lavender  
Chive Pizzelle with American Caviar*

*Newton Chardonnay "Unfiltered" 2004*

*Dover Sole Almondine  
Roasted Artichokes, Pequinillo Peppers and Olives*

*Saddle of Spring Lamb  
Chanterelle Sauce  
Fricassee of Baby Vegetables*

*Peter Michael "Les Pavots" 2003*

*Arugula, Savannah Mustard and Mint Romaine  
Champagne Dressing and Trio of Farmhouse Cheeses*

*"Rose Blossoms"*

*Schramsberg Brut Rosé 2004*