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Guilt-free toasts

By ANNA CLARK

Winemakers are embracing green innovations from the fields to the bottle.

CONSUMERS are discovering that going green doesn't mean the end of the good life. On the contrary, when it comes to wines, sustainability makes them even better. Word is getting out, spurring a plethora of wines labelled "sustainable" to appear on the shelves of retailers.

But in terms of wine, does "sustainable" connote a commitment to greener growing practices or is it a marketing gimmick?



Sustainability the key: A worker cutting Chardonnay wine grapes in a vineyard. Winemakers are adopting green practices to make their products earth-friendly.

After a cursory perusal of winegrowers' websites, I reminded myself that a slick marketing strategy does not always equal sustainability. My husband and I love wine, but we are by no means connoisseurs. Even after buying *Wine For Dummies*, I still ask questions like "How do you recognise a good wine?" and "Which matters more – varietal or region?"

Compounding my confusion, I now have green questions, too: "How do organic grapes improve a wine?" and "What makes a vineyard sustainable?"

I was due for trip to California's wine country for a little re-education from the experts. Michael Honig is one of these experts. Honig, who sits on the board of directors for The Wine Institute, is taking the Institute's Sustainable Winegrowing Programme to the next level by establishing a certification to offer over 1,100 wineries and related businesses a roadmap for going green.

The Sustainable Winegrowing Programme helps wine producers establish eco-friendly practices from ground to glass by developing guidelines and training to promote alternative energy, ecosystem management, composting, recycling, water conservation, and corporate citizenship.

Through this effort, Honig is helping elevate the prestige of the entire region in the global wine market.

A green vineyard

Honig begins the tour of Honig Vineyard & Winery by showing us his solar array. Installed in August 2006, the winery's photovoltaic system – “our electricity farm,” is how he describes it – consists of 819 Sanyo 200-watt modules mounted on the ground, which generates plenty of power for the winery, including cooling and bottling, he explains. Over the next 30 years, Honig's solar system will prevent the emission of over 3.3 million kg of carbon dioxide – the equivalent of planting more than 13.6ha of carbon dioxide-absorbing trees.

“The costs we incur now are more like investments. We are applying the same money we spend on electricity to paying off the bank loan to pay for the solar panels. After 10 years we will own our system, enabling us to save over US\$42,000 (RM151,200) a year in electric bills,” says Honig. “We used to rent our power. Now we're on our way to owning it.”

The solar panels and infrastructure cost US\$1.2mil (RM4.3mil), but Honig only had to pay for about one third of that. As part of the Million Solar Roofs Initiative, California's Public Utilities Commission has mandated that the local utility give credits to customers who feed solar power back into the grid. These credits, combined with state and federal tax credits, make solar affordable enough for widespread use.

“We'll pay this off within 10 years, less if the cost of energy goes up,” says Honig. “The warranty on these panels is 25 years, so our vineyard should enjoy 100% cost-free solar-powered energy for at least 15 years.” Honig's support of clean power also extends to his choice of fuel. He uses biodiesel in all of his trucks.

Continuing the tour, he points out sustainable features like a tributary restored by native vegetation and ground cover plants such as mustard seed, clover, and barley, which act as a natural blanket covering the soil with organic matter.

Honig also uses trained golden retrievers as “sniffer dogs” to detect the mealybug, an invasive species that first appeared in southern California a decade ago. Sniffer dogs allow the wine grower to zero in on individual vines for removal, alleviating any broad use of pesticides.

Honig stops at a box that looks like a birdhouse. “One of the ways we keep from using pesticides is by using bird boxes. Blue birds eat an enormous amount of insects. To keep the insect and rodent population in check, we use hawk perches, barn owl boxes, blue bird boxes, and bat boxes,” explains Honig.

Using nature's resources to address the problem of insects sounds like a stroke of genius until I remind myself that this is not an innovation, but simply the way it was meant to be. The difference between sustainable vintners and others is they see a tangible benefit to their bottom line by working in concert with nature.

Since vineyards are farms, land is their natural capital; to preserve the health of the land is a long-term investment.

“Is conservation the right thing to do? Absolutely,” says Honig. “But sustainability also means ‘sustaining your business’. Green practices are integral to our business because they help us run a more efficient operation and produce a better product,” he adds. Honig’s critically-acclaimed wines are a testament to this fact.

Lighter packaging

Another green leader is DeLoach Vineyards, a certified organic winery known for its biodynamic farming practices and high quality yet affordable wines. The vineyard is located in nearby Sonoma County in the Russian River Valley, which wine experts consider “America’s Burgundy” for producing the best pinot noir in the country.

Wine Enthusiast magazine named owner Jean-Charles Boisset Innovator of the Year for 2008. I ask general manager Lisa Heisinger to explain why. “Well, Boisset has a long history with sustainable viticulture, but I think the area in which we’ve provided leadership as a company is in sustainable packaging.”

Boisset won the award for his ground-breaking applications of Tetrapak, PET, aluminium, and screw caps in wine packaging. His bold decision to put Premier Cru and Grand Cru Burgundies under screw cap makes wines “greener” by eliminating cork failure, which ruins 1% to 3% of wine produced. “Considering everything that goes in to making, transporting, and selling a bottle of wine, losing 3% can add up environmentally and financially,” Heisinger explains.

The decision to put wines with centuries of prestige under screw cap was met by a split reaction. “Some people thought it was great and would re-invigorate French wines,” she says. “Of course, others were flabbergasted.”

Ultimately, the screw-cap wines were very well received and sold out, so it was a bold move that paid off, though not for all wines and not in all markets. “The screw caps wines are popular with our international buyers. But here in America, there is still a luxury connotation to wine. We want the romance of the cork. We want the glass bottle,” says Heisinger.

Americans may still be wary of screw cap wines, but those are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of green packaging. Heisinger presents Boisset’s greenest innovations: wine in a plastic bottle embossed with a geometric design; wine in a lightweight aluminium bottle that chills rapidly; and a half-litre of wine in a recyclable cardboard container. These packaging alternatives are less energy-intensive than heavy glass bottles.

They also require far less transportation. As Heisinger explains: “It takes 28 more trucks to deliver the same volume of bottled wine as it does wine packaged in Tetrapak.”

Says owner Jean Charles Boisset: “The vast majority of the environmental impact of wine comes from the production and disposal of the packaging and from shipping the heavy merchandise around the world. We know that wine meant to be enjoyed young can be kept fresh and flavourful in a variety of packaging formats.

“Why then not offer this wine in lighter, more environmentally friendly packaging that will reduce its carbon footprint and cost less to ship, yet still provide the high quality that customers demand?”

Sustainable winemaking isn’t new to Napa, California, but what was once considered a trend seems poised to become an industry standard, albeit a flexible one. The term “sustainable” spans everything from agricultural practices and

energy use to packaging and transportation of the finished product.

Still, sustainable is not to be confused with “organic”. The term organic applies to grapes grown without chemicals and pesticides. The finished product cannot be labelled organic because wine by its very nature contains sulphites.

So, when you see “made with organically grown grapes,” the wine can be considered as close to organic as possible. –
Reuters

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