

Ore. growers join 'green' movement

Sustainable approach comes in many different labels

EUGENE, Ore. (AP) — In a Deschutes River-area restaurant a few years back, a customer asked the waitress what kinds of wine she had.

"Both kinds," she replied. "Red and white."

These days she might add green to the wine list.

Growers are at the mercy of weather, soil conditions and pests to produce grapes that make good wine. But many Oregon growers are deciding simpler is better and are growing grapes without pesticides or chemical fertilizers. They're relying on cover crops and mechanical means to control weeds and managing their vineyards as self-sustained units.

Oregon has become a leader in a fast-growing interest in organic, sustainable, salmon-friendly viticulture.

"Oregon has always been ahead of the rest of the country in terms of sustainability and the green movement," said Steve Girard, co-owner of Benton-Lane Winery near Monroe and chairman of the Oregon Wine Board. Interest in environmentally friendly wine and vineyard practices has taken off, winemakers and merchants say. But the trend seems to be making a bigger splash in some markets than in others.

"I've seen more of it this year than ever before," said Bob Wolfe, a Eugene wine merchant who's been selling Oregon wine on the Web since 1993. "The industry has really tackled this issue."

About 23 percent of the 15,600 acres of Oregon's vineyards have been certified as organic, sustainable, Salmon-Safe or Biodynamic, according to the Oregon Wine Board.

Each certification emphasizes different practices that may overlap.

The wine industry is still figuring out how to convert the trend to better sales.

King Estate Winery near Lorane has been certified organic since 2002. With 465 acres of organic grapes, it's the largest contiguous organic winery in the United States, CEO Ed King said.

The label of its Domaine series notes the wines are made with 100 percent organically certified grapes. But that doesn't make it an organic wine. Organic wines must be made without sulfites, a preservative, which means short shelf life and a lesser reputation in wine circles, said Sasha Kadey, King Estate's marketing manager.

King Estate also is certified Salmon-Safe for its protection of water quality, but doesn't say so on its labels or promotional materials.

"We don't leverage it much in terms of

Label definitions

Organic

The label can be used on foods certified by the USDA as being raised without the use of most conventional herbicides, fungicides and insecticides, or antibiotics, growth hormones, synthetic fertilizers or bioengineering.

Certified organic winegrape acreage:

Washington: 583 acres, out of nearly 30,000 bearing vineyard acres

Oregon: 873 acres, out of 12,600 bearing vineyard acres

Idaho: 13 acres, out of 1,156 bearing vineyard acres*

California: 8,034 acres, out of 477,000 bearing vineyard acres

Sources: Washington State University, The

Wine Institute in California, USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service

Salmon Safe

The third-party certification denotes winegrapes and other foods produced to decrease harm to fish habitat through erosion control, irrigation system improvements, reduced pesticide use and other practices.**

Certified Salmon Safe acreage:

Washington: 950 acres

Oregon: 4,820 acres

Source: Salmon Safe

Low Input Viticulture and Enology

Based on standards from the International Organization for Biological Control, this third-party certification requires vineyard owners to set aside space for wildlife and establish stream buffers, limits fertilizer and pesticide applications, mandates fertilizer and pesticide record-keeping and offers a number of "ecological options" that participants can choose from.

Certified LIVE acres:

Oregon: 2,387 acres

Acres pending LIVE certification:

Oregon: 2,485 acres

Washington: 581 acres

Source: LIVE

Biodynamic

Certified by the Demeter organization, Biodynamic winegrape growers are advised to view the farm as a contained biological organism. On top of USDA organic requirements, they must limit off-farm sources of plant nourishment, weed suppression and insect and disease control. For example, farmers are encouraged to keep livestock as a self-sufficient source of nutrients and soil fertility.

Certified Biodynamic Vineyards and Wineries:

Washington: 1

Oregon: 10

California: 29

Source: Demeter USA

Lodi Rules

The brainchild of the Lodi-Woodbridge Wine Commission, these rules provide overall guidelines for sustainable farming as well as specific requirements designed to deal with problems in the region, such as air pollution.

Certified Lodi Rules acreage:

California: 5,400 acres

Source: Lodi-Woodbridge Wine Commission

Fish Friendly Farming

Growers in California's Mendocino, Sonoma, Napa and Solano counties can help streamline compliance with water quality regulations by attending workshops and implementing improvement projects on their properties.

Certified Fish Friendly acreage:

California: 40,000 acres certified or enrolled

Source: Fish Friendly Farming

*Estimated for winegrapes based on the ratio of total grape-bearing acres to total grape planted acres.

**LIVE-certified vineyards are often co-certified as Salmon Safe. Some organic growers also co-certify with different eco-labels.

— Mateusz Perkowski

marketing," Kadey said. "I think organic certification carries more weight. ... It resonates a lot more with consumers."

Girard's Benton-Lane Winery, meanwhile, puts Salmon-Safe neck hangers on the bottles in its retail shop, and its labels note the vineyard is certified sustainable. The winery also includes both certifications prominently on its website and in its brochures, Girard said.

The designation indicates chemicals from the vineyards don't get into salmon-producing rivers.

The Salmon-Safe message resonates in the Pacific Northwest in particular, where the iconic fish is important to the region's ecosystem, Girard said.

King, Girard and other winemakers say

they worry that consumers may be confused by too many green certifications and labels. "There is confusion when you look at Biodynamic vs. organic vs. sustainability," Girard said. "They're all good, and they're all better than the alternative, which is basic farming."

Part of the challenge, Girard said, is getting consumers to think about wine the same way they think about produce and meat: Where did it come from and how was it grown?

To clear up potential confusion, the Oregon Wine Board is developing a new brand called Oregon Certified Sustainable, which will be applied to any wine produced from vineyards that are certified organic, sustainable or Biodynamic, Girard said.