

Green vines

Many winemakers are going easy on the Earth

BY SARA SCHNEIDER

We Westerners generally aren't shy about our Earth-loving behavior. We load up on goods from REI to outfit our frequent forays into nature, and we make weekly visits to the farmers' market to buy local produce. One group of us, though, is doing the right thing but not telling anybody—grape growers and winemakers.

According to Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation, more and more California growers are undertaking rigorous organic certification programs. "The big names are the most visible innovators—the Gallos, the Fetters," Scowcroft says. "They can afford to manage large parts of their land this way."

One big barrier to going totally organic is sulfur. A naturally occurring element, sulfur is a bit of a savior; it can be applied to vines to control mildew, and to wines to prevent oxidation and spoilage. But long-term, high doses in the vineyard can lead to excess soil acidity. Under certain conditions, organic growers may use sulfur, but winemakers can't add it to wines sold as "organic." The trouble is, wine is a delicate thing; as it comes to life in the winery, problems can develop, and it can go south. An all-or-nothing approach to sulfur use can leave a winemaker with no out.

Alternative means

Enter the small guys, with innovative paths to winemaking that are easy on the Earth. Programs are emerging that recognize growers and winemakers for putting as few chemicals into the ground as possible and for managing watersheds wisely, without forcing a potentially profit-devastating commitment.

One such smart, flexible program is



Oregon's LIVE (Low Input Viticulture & Ecology), founded in 1997, largely through the efforts of Ted Casteel, co-owner and viticulturalist at Bethel Heights Vineyard. It requires some practices, like planting nutrient-replenishing groundcover; prohibits a few others, such as using residual herbicides; and has a point system for ecological options—nonchemical methods of weed control under the vines, for instance. If a grower earns half of the available points, the vineyard can be certified.

Oregon has about 3,400 LIVE-certified acres of vineyards now and about 55 wines. The term "LIVE-certified" appears on very few of the labels, though. And most of those aforementioned California growers who've certified their land as organic aren't selling the grapes or bottling the wines as such.

Given that organic comestibles carry a certain cachet in the market and so command a higher price than conventional products, why aren't wineries using their green practices as a marketing tool? Here's the irony: While organic tomatoes conjure good images, organic wine taps bad memories for some. Early efforts were pretty dreadful. ("Sure, we can make wine without sulfites!") And winemakers are hesitant to risk activating those associations.

It's time to move on, though. More wines than most of us know, from all over the West, are sustainable. It's an Earth-friendly gesture to drink more of them. ●



Our picks

A blind tasting of LIVE-certified wines from Oregon dispelled the notion that "sustainably grown" has anything to do with mediocrity. As one Sunset taster put it, "I haven't found one yet that I don't like."

Amiti "Suneside" Single Vineyard Pinot Noir 2002 (Willamette Valley), \$30. Well structured, with dark cherries, cedar, tobacco smoke, and sweet vanilla.

Benton-Lane "First Class" Pinot Noir 2002 (Willamette Valley), \$35. Rich and velvety. Bromily berry, plum, mint, and sweet pipe-tobacco aromas give way to bright layers of cherries, mint, and white pepper.

Bethel Heights "Flat Black" Reserve Pinot Noir 2002 (Willamette Valley), \$38. Sweet cherry flavors over cedar, mushrooms, and soft leather.

Pozzi Pinot Noir 2002 (Willamette Valley), \$30. An elegant wine, with an earthy nose of blackberries, espresso, and licorice followed by velvety cherry, tea, and violet flavors.

Van Duser "Dijon Blacks" Pinot Noir 2002 (Willamette Valley), \$32. Deep cherry and leather aromas, with hints of cedar and vanilla; earthy fruit—dried cherries and plums—with black tea.