



Merry Monks

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Sustainable Winegrowing

Sustainability is one of imperatives of our time. As we open our eyes to the negative impact of industrialization on our planet, conversations about best practices to reduce our footprint trickle through most industries, including agriculture. We love living in the Sierra Foothills because industrial farming is pretty much non-existent here—this is the land of small, family-owned farms. Sustainable practices come more naturally to the small farmer. Even so, we have observed a gradual transformation in our local agricultural community over the past two decades, as this discussion has shaped decisions and practices.

Rick Wickham of Meyers Ranch Vineyard Management recalls how around 1998, the local winegrowing community became acutely focused on the need to increase the quality of the fruit to meet the needs of the winemakers. One of the big changes was a focus on “deficit irrigation management.” Monitoring programs were instituted in many vineyards, in which moisture readings were collected via neutron probes and pressure bomb tests. A very precise, limited amount of water was delivered to the grapevines through drip irrigation, based on these readings. In contrast to old-style flood irrigation, overhead sprinklers, or even unmonitored drip irrigation, this new method of irrigation was an important step in conserving our limited water resources. This change went hand in hand with cluster thinning and canopy management, ensuring that the vines had an optimal balance of fruit and foliage—important both for vine health and fruit quality.

Over the next few years there was an increase in how much money was spent on wine grape farming in general, and new practices continued to move in the direction of sustainability, as well as quality. These methods included site-specific soil nutrient additions, and carefully selected cover crops to control erosion and increase soil nutrition.

In 2002, the California Wine Institute released a workbook and self-assessment program for Sustainable Winegrowing. By happy coincidence, this was also the year we planted our estate vineyard. We went through the program and diligently applied it to our vineyard.

Over the years we have continued to review our farming practices, alongside our vineyard manager, so that we can keep improving our methods. For example, in the early years we used weed eaters to control unwanted growth of the cover crop beneath the vines without the use of herbicides. More recently, we have been using an implement called a “hoe plow,” in which strips of cover crop underneath the vines are turned over, and invasive weeds and other plants are removed by hand.

Several monitoring programs are in place for early detection of pests and diseases. Prior to *veraison* (the onset of ripening), we do a preventive regiment of foliar sprays in the vineyard (typically sulfur), so that problems do not set in. According to Rick, this preventive approach is crucial in avoiding the use of harsh chemicals later on; if diseases are allowed to take hold, more drastic treatments are required. Additionally, the agricultural fertilizer and chemical companies such as Wilbur Ellis and Mid Valley have made big strides in improving the quality and effectiveness of their products so that much less treatment is required for various applications. And an increasing number of organic and “like organic” products are coming available.

We also work in cooperation with our county’s agricultural department as they monitor potential new pests in the vineyards with sticky traps. And both the county and state work with farmers and wineries to implement practices that protect the water sheds.

These are interesting times, and it is gratifying to see the rise in environmental consciousness in our community and state, and the ways in which this translates to industry practices. Even though the initial motivation for changes in local winegrowing methods was quality, sustainability has been closely linked—from preserving soil nutrition and integrity to conserving water, preventing runoff and limiting the use of chemicals. At Cantiga, we strive for healthy, sustainable methods in both vineyard and winery; it is important to us that our personal values are reflected in our business practices. You have heard all about it in the “spiel”—and hopefully the results show in the product!

Included in your spring shipment:

2017 Verdelho, Sierra Foothills (New release)

Harvest Brix: 25.0 pH: 3.56 TA: 6.63 Alc: 14.7% RS: 0.0% ML: 0%
Cases produced: 224 Aging: 2 years in stainless steel

We are thrilled to offer you a brand new variety—a lush, medium bodied white for spring! Although we mourn the loss of our Chardonnay source, we are excited about introducing a new white into our lineup. This Portuguese variety is grown locally in the Shenandoah Valley, Amador County and made in our classic food-friendly style. It was cold fermented without malolactic for two months, in order to preserve the lovely fruit aromas. It is completely dry (no sugar) and has some gorgeous complexities. This is proving to be versatile with food, complementing seafood, Asian cuisines and Mexican and Spanish dishes.

2013 Zinfandel, Herbert Vineyard

Harvest Brix: 25.2 pH: 3.54 TA: 6.83 Alc: 15.3% RS: 0.0% ML: 0%
Cases produced: 342 Barrel age: 3 years, mostly neutral European oak

Always our most popular wine, our Herbert Zinfandel is another excellent choice for spring. It exhibits bright raspberry and pomegranate fruit, anise spice, excellent structure and acidity. This is our 11th vintage from the historic Herbert Vineyard. Like other vintages, the 2013 is outstanding with BBQ (particularly pork), as well as Italian or Indian cuisine. It is also fantastic with tomato-based pasta dishes and gourmet pizza!

2013 Library Barbera, Cooper Vineyard

Harvest Brix: 25.7 pH: 3.56 TA: 7.35 Alc: 14.7% RS: 0.0% ML: 0%
Cases produced: 204 Barrel age: 2 years in mostly neutral European oak

Our 2013 Barbera was released to our wine club in 2016 and sold out very quickly. We moved what we thought was a small reserve to Library. Imagine our surprise when we recently discovered we had more set aside than we had thought! This oversight allows us to bring this amazing, limited wine out once more for our club. This classic Italian-style wine is dry and well-structured with pomegranate fruit and a floral bouquet. Try it with tomato-based pasta dishes, gourmet pizza, Kalamata olives and prosciutto.

Cheers, and many thanks!

Rich & Christine Rorden