

Tasting Highlights Sustainable Wine Growing

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Bruce Fry, vice president of operations for Mohr-Fry Ranches (front) in Lodi, was among those tasting eco-friendly California wine during a Red, White & Green event at Sonoma-Cutrer Vineyards. He was also a featured speaker.

California vintners and growers have made great strides in implementing sustainable wine growing practices during the past decade, serving as a model for other wine communities and agricultural industries. To promote the success of these practices, four representatives from long-time California farming families personalized what it meant to be sustainable during an event held March 24 at Sonoma-Cutrer Vineyards in Windsor, California.

Bill Cooper of Cooper-Garrod Estate Vineyards in Saratoga, Bruce Fry of Mohr-Fry Ranches in Lodi, Michael Honig of Honig Vineyard & Winery in Rutherford and Steve Schafer of Schafer Ranch, Madera and Chumela Vineyard shifted early on to environmentally friendly practices as a way to ensure longevity of their family's operations. This, they agreed, has improved the land, made good economic sense, enhanced wine quality and made them better neighbors.

Speaking at a "Red, White & Green" tasting and panel discussion sponsored by the California Association of Winegrape Growers (CAWG) and Wine Institute in honor of Earth Day, they gave 10 reasons why California wines are an eco-friendly choice (the event's theme). These ranged from subscribing to California's Sustainable Winegrowing Program and embracing alternative energy sources to adopting water conservations practices and using creatures and beneficial insects to cultivate vineyards and manage pests.

"It's been a long row that we've hoed," said Cooper, chair of the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance board.



Michael Honig, president of Honig Vineyard and Winery in Rutherford, discusses sustainable winegrowing practices to help shine a spotlight on California wines prior to Earth Day.

Introduced in 2002, the Sustainable Winegrowing Program is a best practices program for growers and vintners. Its Code of Sustainable Winegrowing workbook covers hundreds of sustainable vineyard and winery practices from the ground to the glass. According to the Wine Institute, more than 1,300 participants have evaluated their vineyards and wineries at over 210 workshops to date. This response represents 53 percent of California wine production and 522,000 winegrape acres.

Cooper stated that the underlying principle behind the program was "to help everybody improve" their practices. And further: "It's all about protecting where we grow our grapes." Cooper's family has been growing winegrapes and making wine in the Santa Cruz Mountains since the 1970s.

Honig agreed, stating, "If we destroy our environment, we'll have nothing left." He pointed out that "as farmers and generational businesses, you look at the long-term when making decisions--what's going to happen in five, 50 and 100 years." An early proponent of sustainable farming methods, Honig chaired the first California initiative to develop a Code of Sustainable Winegrowing practices. He is a director of the Wine Institute and serves on the boards of several organizations including the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance (CSWA).

Schafer, a fourth generation grape grower in Madera County, is a board member of CSWA and former president of CAWG. He said he has watched animals return to the fields since they changed farming practices. "Partly because of chemical use, they disappeared. Now

through IPM and sustainability, all the game animals are coming back, the coyotes are coming back." He said "getting out of the pickup and into the field" point of view has led them to make key changes in their management philosophy. "Increased management is a primary tenant of sustainability," he explained.

Fry was born and raised on his father's farm in Lodi. A fifth generation farmer and third generation winegrape grower, he serves as vice chair of CAWG and president of the Winegrape Growers of America. Fry talked about the role of cover crops in sustainable farming plus the success of the Lodi Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing program, the only program in California that is certified. The program, which started prior to the statewide effort, enables vineyards to become certified as producing sustainably grown grapes--and publicize it; look for the TTB-approved "Certified Lodi Rules" sticker on wine bottles.

Fry was proud to point out such a sticker on a bottle of St. Amant, a 2006 Old Vine Zinfandel from one of the first "Lodi Rules" certified vineyards located on the Mohr-Fry Ranch. "The consumers are looking for that so we're putting it out in the marketplace," he said. It was one of 19 sustainable, organic and biodynamic wines served at the event.

Using wine tasting to promote the breadth and depth of California's eco-friendly practices, the speakers emphasized how the Sustainable Winegrowing Program has given their peers options to help them improve their practices. "Everything that touches your practice is in that book," said Schafer, adding, "The most compelling accomplishment of the sustainability program is the dissemination of information to growers."

Karen Ross, president of CAWG, said the next "benchmark report" would be issued in 2009. It will be based on voluntary self-assessments.

And though certification is expected to occur in the future, Wine Institute Communications Manager Gladys Horiuchi pointed out that "peer to peer influence is the best way to encourage people to adopt sustainable winegrowing practices. The industry has demonstrated that it can self-govern."