

The Modesto Bee

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Wine sustainability ratings on the way

Consumers of California wine easily can tell a red cabernet from a white chardonnay, and soon they will have a tool to determine whether it's green.

Winemakers and grape growers who forgo pesticides, sow cover crops, reduce waste and energy consumption, provide workers health insurance, and are mindful of their nonfarming neighbors will be able to distinguish themselves as certifiably sustainable under a third-party audit system developed by the Wine Institute, a public policy advocacy group.

"People do want to know that the products they purchase are grown and produced in some sort of sustainable fashion," said Chris Savage, director of environmental affairs at Gallo Wines. "Our expectation is it will become even more important in the future."



This photo taken Dec. 1, 2009 shows John Conover, general manager and partner, stands in a doorway near steel tanks at the Cade winery in Angwin, Calif. The LEED certified winery is one of the greenest in the state. The winery was made with recycled materials, is solar powered and is organically farmed.

Nearly a decade in the making, the Certified California Sustainable Winegrowing Program is part marketing tool, part voluntary self-regulation, and partly a way to help consumers navigate an increasingly complicated purchase. The program was announced by the Wine Institute this week.

Natural cork, synthetic or screw cap? Organic, organically grown or biodynamic? The program analyzes 227 practices from the field to the glass for the most prolific fruit crop on the planet.

California is the world's fourth-largest producer of wine. The state's nearly 3,000 wineries produce 90 percent of the wines consumed in the United States.

The "sustainable" certification is designed to tell consumers not only how the California grapes and wine were treated, but the field workers and neighbors as well. Growers and winemakers assess themselves in all areas of the production process, an exercise then verified by an outside auditor.

Growers and winemakers representing 62 percent of the 467 million gallons of wine California produces annually have signed up. Industry officials say the designation will help the state's wines stand out as retailers increasingly rate the products they carry.

"We get requests for sustainability score cards daily from restaurants and distributors," said Steve Smit of Constellation Wines U.S., which includes Robert Mondavi. "This certification helps us scale it down to something we can explain."

As wineries, vineyards and urban areas increasingly intersect, the risk of legislation looms on issues from nuisance abatement to stream degradation. Bird bombs, anti-fungal spraying, deer depredation and discing are the ugly side of the process.

Nine years ago, the Wine Institute formed the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance, which has evolved into this certification program similar to the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED program for buildings.

New Zealand, South Africa and Australia have sustainability standards, as does Oregon, the fourth-largest U.S. producer. Washington state has a self-regulated program.

Some worry the standards will mean more cost and paperwork for farmers, who might not recoup the money from wineries they supply.

"The concern is that if you're not with the plan, you're a second-class citizen. Those who are willing to complete the paperwork, I hope they get a return on their investment," said Nat DiBduo, who represents mostly large-scale grape growers in the San Joaquin Valley, the source of 60 percent of the state's crop.

Winemakers will be able to advertise and tout the designation on their Web sites. Already, Livermore's Cedar Mountain Winery is calling itself "the only certified green winery" in the region.