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GREEN GRAPES

Organic and biodynamic farming produces stunning and eco-friendly wines.



I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN CAREFUL ABOUT WHAT I PUT INTO MY BODY. The old saying “You are what you eat” made sense to me, even as a child, and it was not a big stretch to expand “eat” to “drink.” So cocktails the color of toxic waste were never my first drink of choice; and beverages, whether fruit juice or wine, always sounded more appealing when “organic” appeared in their names.

In this era when winemakers and winery owners, especially those in Napa and other popular regions, are celebrated like rock stars, it’s easy to forget what they really do. But as almost any grape-grower in the field will tell you, they are first and foremost farmers. And farmers know that whatever their crop, it’s the soil that’s most important, the one thing they must safeguard. While big industrial farming efforts rely on chemicals, often toxic, smaller more environmentally aware growers in the wine business look for other methods of preventing pests and promoting fertility. To more and

more in the wine business, that means farming either organically or biodynamically.

Most consumers already have a fairly clear understanding of at least the basics of organics. But biodynamics are much more mysterious. Biodynamic farming starts with the principles of organics—eschewing herbicides and pesticides and opting for more natural methods—and incorporates a number of beliefs, perhaps best described as “New Age,” proposed by Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner early in the 20th century. There are many complexities to this form of agriculture, which proposes to make the farm a self-sustaining unit. For instance, the lunar calendar influences planting; and then there’s the cow horns. Biodynamic farmers stuff cattle manure, crushed powdered quartz, and various herbs and flowers into cow horns and bury them in the fields for a summer to produce fertilizer sprays. Although this fact always causes a bit of a





Thekla and Richard Sanford of Alma Rosa Winery & Vineyards.

snicker from the uninitiated, farmers who use the technique swear by its success.

Wine critics aren't yet united behind this movement, and there's as yet no clear proof that the practices yield superior wines. Studies have shown benefits for the soil, though, and that combined with the idea of cutting down on the amount of toxic chemicals that go into the ground and into our bodies seems like it can only be a good thing.

Many wineries in Central California have adopted organic and biodynamic farming practices to produce the best wines possible. For Richard Sanford, founder of Alma Rosa Winery & Vineyards (www.almarosawinery.com) in the Santa Rita Hills appellation of Santa Barbara County, farming organically was an easy choice. "I started growing vines 37 years ago," says Sanford, the first to plant wine grapes in the Santa Rita Hills. "I knew back then that all the chemicals were getting into the ground water, so I wondered how farmers did it before those chemicals were invented."

Sanford founded both the Sanford & Benedict and Sanford Wineries before going out on his own with his Alma Rosa. "My wife and I had an organic garden," he recalls of their early days, "and she suggested that we grow the grapes organically. So in the mid-eighties, we weaned ourselves of all chemicals." Look to Alma Rosa for both exceptional chardonnay and pinot noir made from organic grapes.

HERE ARE A FEW OTHER GREEN-LEANING WINERIES:

Just west of Buellton, **GYPSY CANYON** (www.gypsyncanyon.com) cofounder Deborah Hall produces both pinot noir and Angelica, a unique dessert wine from Mission grapes. All her fruit is organic and biodynamic.

BECKMEN (www.beckmenvineyards.com), praised for its syrah and other Rhône varietals, uses biodynamic principles to grow the fruit for its award-winning Santa Ynez Valley wines.

LAETITIA VINEYARD & WINERY (www.laetitiawine.com), in the Arroyo Grande Valley of San Luis Obispo County, makes highly acclaimed pinot noir from certified organic grapes.

In Paso Robles, **PIPESTONE VINEYARDS** (www.pipestonevineyards.com) produces Rhône-style wines by following organic farming practices. For an added dose of good green karma, Pipestone has integrated the Chinese principles of feng shui into the vineyards and winery as well.

Green Wines to Try in '08



Beckmen, famous for its emphasis on Rhône varietals, uses biodynamic principles to grow the fruit for its award-winning Purisima Mountain Vineyard wines. Pick up the **2005 ESTATE SYRAH**, Santa Ynez Valley (\$25), and the **2005 ESTATE GRENACHE**, Santa Ynez Valley (\$40), to experience an intensity and purity of flavor.



Laetitia Vineyard & Winery, in the Arroyo Grande Valley of San Luis Obispo County, incorporates elements of biodynamic farming in its operation. The winery converted all its vineyard and winery vehicles to biodiesel fuel and makes highly acclaimed pinot noir from 26 acres of certified organic grapes. Try the **2006 LAETITIA CHARDONNAY RESERVE** (\$30) for tropical fruit and citrus aromas. The **2005 LAETITIA PINOT NOIR LA COLLINE** (\$60) supplies the intensity of a single-vineyard wine and also offers impressive complexity.



Gypsy Canyon cofounder Deborah Hall follows both organic and biodynamic principles and her fruit is certified in both categories. The **2006 GYPSY CANYON PINOT NOIR** (\$95) shows elegance. And her **ANCIENT VINE ANGELICA** (\$130), a dessert wine produced from Mission grapes she found on her land after purchasing the property, has a unique sweetness that sets it apart from others in the category.



Castoro Cellars in Paso Robles has certified organic vineyards, and powerful flavors as an expression of the soil come through in its **2005 PRIMITIVO** (\$22), a zinfandel crafted in the Italian style. The **2005 CASTORO CELLARS ZINFANDEL WHALE ROCK ESTATE** (\$30) hails from the same organic vineyard, but is a classic, explosive California interpretation of the grape.



Tablas Creek has been certified organic since 2003, and the Paso Robles winery offers a number of Rhône blends, all estate grown and all organic. The winery's **2006 ESPRIT DE BEAUCASTEL BLANC** (\$40), a traditional Rhône blend of white grapes, garners consistently high scores from critics every year and offers a wide array of flavors and aromas. The **2004 TANNAT** (\$35) showcases a grape from France's Armagnac region, where big, if tannic, wines are produced.



Compare a pair of pinot noirs from Alma Rosa: the **2005 ALMA ROSA PINOT NOIR STA. RITA HILLS** (\$36) and the vineyard-designated **2005 ALMA ROSA PINOT NOIR LA ENCANTADA VINEYARD, STA. RITA HILLS** (\$49). It'll be a truly enjoyable comparison for you. ■