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Is Sustainable Winemaking The Wave Of The Future?

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This is the last installment in my three-part series on organic, biodynamic and sustainable winemaking. Organic and biodynamic farming, as mentioned in my [previous columns](#), are two methods that eschew man-made chemical inputs. Sustainable farming doesn't preclude the use of man-made chemicals, but instead urges their use in moderation and in the context of the winery as a whole. Unfortunately, sustainability is one of those terms that has been browbeaten into meaninglessness. Everyone calls out sustainability in their marketing materials but nailing down a firm definition is difficult.

I recently received an entire book dedicated to the matter, [Down to Earth](#), by Janet Fletcher. Billed as a seasonal tour of sustainable winemaking, it profiles several California wineries pursuing sustainable practices. The prologue features a very useful glossary of terms, but most importantly Fletcher defines sustainability in relation to organic and biodynamic processes. Get comfy because it's a mouthful: "The principles that define sustainability are a comprehensive set of environmentally sound, socially responsible, and economically viable best practices that encompass every aspect of the vineyard, winery, surrounding habitat and ecosystem, employees and community."

Phew. So, in essence, sustainable wine farming isn't just about the grapes; it's about everything that touches the winemaking, from lighter bottles and composting to protecting air quality and giving back to the community. There are certainly wineries that are doing far more than others in the sustainable arena—some are doing the bare minimum while others, such as Honig, are ardently pursuing sustainability from cork to compost.

John Hilliard, winemaker and owner, along with his wife Christine, of Hilliard-Bruce winery, draws a dramatic contrast between sustainable and organic practices. During a recent email exchange he stated, "Organics does not mean pesticide free. Organic methods generally prohibit synthetic pesticides, while sustainability prohibits high-risk pesticides. Synthetic pesticides are no more or less toxic than natural pesticides. In fact, many organic materials are potentially more dangerous than sustainably synthetic materials." He went on to explain that organic materials are often less effective and hence have to be applied in massive doses to work properly. In using very small amounts of synthetic materials winemakers are actually doing less harm. Karl Wente, of Wente Vineyards, affirms Hilliard's comments as he is quoted in *Down to Earth*, "Spraying [synthetic materials] may seem to be the antithesis of sustainability, but you have to balance it

against using more water or running tractors. Are you going to spray once or multiple times? It's all about trade-offs."



Vineyards at Hilliard-Bruce Winery

Clearly, winemakers are already engaged, knowing the value of keeping their land healthy for generations to come. For now, most wine drinkers aren't asking how their wine was made; they just want to know what it tastes like. Yet, I think the conversation has begun. Below are some wineries that are leading the way, but please note, they are but a few of the many wineries pursuing sustainability.

Honig, Napa Valley, CA. Honig is one of the wineries leading the pack in sustainable winemaking. They use lighter weight bottles and recently sacrificed valuable winery land to restore the Napa River's riparian edges. Owl boxes invite welcome predators to manage rodents and one acre of solar panels runs the winery. They even bring in "sniffer" dogs to detect the pheromones of the female mealybug—a pest that can wreak havoc on a vineyard but is easily dealt with if detected early. They keep things simple producing Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Hilliard-Bruce, Santa Rita Hills, CA. This Santa Rita Hills based winery runs on solar power and uses water collected from their six acre reservoir. On-site composting and judicious use of synthetic materials keep soil disruption to a minimum. They specialize in Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. The 2011 Santa Rita Hills Chardonnay is one of the best I have tasted this year. Mouthwatering with lemony creaminess on the palate, a springy pop of peach and a subtle vanilla tone from soft use of oak. Just gorgeous to sip alone and utterly rock star with fried chicken and grits. Only 19 barrels made...so buy it up if you see it.

Bodega Garzon, Uruguay. As far-flung as Uruguay might sound, Bodega Garzon is actually one of the more progressive wineries outside of the United States. When their new sustainably crafted winery is complete it will be the first LEED certified winery outside of North America. The winery's flat roofs are planted with grass to offset emissions and provide insulation. Solar and wind power meet the winery's energy needs. Only 11 miles from the

Atlantic, the winery produces bright vivid whites (Albarino and Sauvignon Blanc) as well as a silky Tannat.

Wente Vineyards, Livermore, CA. As one of California's oldest winemaking family operations and with 3,000 acres under vine, the Wente's have ample opportunity to make an impact. The scraps from the Wente restaurant are composted and, combined with a slow-acting fish oil, used to feed the vines. Depending on solar power and eliminating the extended cold-soak process in winemaking have resulted significant reductions in energy use. Wente produces a range of varietals, but they are best known for their critically-acclaimed, elegant Chardonnays.

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