

Organic Wine

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What's the Deal?

By Tucker Dean

Based on what we can plainly see in the general marketplace, and according to folks who know about these sorts of trends, interest in organic products (including wine) is just beginning. For a long time, organic products drew a few, highly typical customers – mostly vegetarians and back to nature sorts, true aficionados of natural products. Nowadays, organic products appeal to a much broader segment of the population that, contrary to common belief, is not only made up of only the usual suspects.

Organic Grape Growing

Like any other branch of agriculture, some winemakers choose to rely less on fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals. Those that meet certain criteria may be labeled as organic. It is often compared to biodynamic, although biodynamic is much more extreme.

It is true. There are a growing number of quality organic offerings from the vine. Organic wines can be every bit as tasty and fresh as their non-organic counterparts. Organic wine is made from grapes that have been grown without the use of potentially harmful chemical fertilizers, pesticides, fungicides and herbicides. This is not to imply that non organic farmers are irresponsible to the environment. Good farmers are as conscious of the land and as organic as they can be. Consider this, there are products on the market that are environment safe and made from naturally occurring substances found in plants, but since they are made synthetically they are not organic product.

Sulfites

Following the recent creation by the USDA of a National Organic Program, an organic wine is now defined as "a wine made from organically grown grapes and without any added sulfites or sulfur dioxide". This is an unfortunate restriction, since commercial wines virtually cannot be successfully made without their use. . It's the grapes being organic that should matter, not the inclusion of largely naturally-occurring sulfites. Sulfur dioxide is a natural fruit preservative widely used in dried fruits and other food products as well as wine. In addition, sulfites are a naturally occurring byproduct of fermentation, and are additionally added to wine as a preservative to prevent oxidation. Mandatory labeling of Contains Sulfites for all wines began in 1987 for all wines sold in US. While for most people, consumption of food preserved with sulfites is not a problem; the bad rap comes from the few highly sensitive people that may have an allergic reaction. These highly sensitive people are an extremely small percent of the population. Wines without added sulfites are very few in numbers and are very unstable. A co-founder of the Organic Grapes In to Wine Alliance (OGWA), Veronique Raskin has lobbied for national U.S. standards for organic wine that would permit sulfites, in the form of "naturally-occurring" sulfur dioxide, to be added in processing. Almost all organic wines must now be referred to as "wines made

from organic grapes" (or organically grown grapes). By the way, added sulfites are nothing new in wine and they have been used for decades. Consider this, salt is a chemical after all, and yet it is not considered an evil additive.

The Organizations:

CCOF or California Certified Organic Farmers, a nonprofit organization formed by a group of grassroots activist farmers, is one of the oldest and largest organic certifiers in North America. The CCOF was formed in 1973.

Organic certification is a three-year process for CCOF certification, at the end of which a winery can note on the label that its wine is made from organic grapes.

The OGWA or Organic Grapes into Wine Alliance (1989) has their own standards for organic wine, which include being made from certified organic grapes, low sulfite levels, no toxic materials in packaging (including no tin-lead capsules), and use of recycled glass bottles.

The recent history of organic wine, and the labeling of organic wine, dates back to 1990, when congress passed the National Organic Foods Act. Certified organic grapes will have been grown in vineyards without the use of synthetic chemicals for a minimum period of three years.

In 2000, the USDA finalized the regulations relating to the National Organic Program or NOP. Together with the Tax and Trade Bureau (formerly the BATF), the NOP regulates information regarding organic claims on wine labels.

100% Organic - Made with 100% organically grown grapes and do not have any added sulfites.

USDA Organic - Made with at least 95% organic ingredients. These wines may have an additional 100 ppm of sulfur dioxide added to them.

Made With Organic grapes- Contains at least 70% organic ingredients. These wines may have sulfur dioxide added as well.

Around the world

The definition and legal use of organic terms vary significantly from one country to another, and the laws about use of the terms are still evolving. For grapes to be considered organically grown they must be grown in accordance with the regulations of that country.

France has a national logo for organic products - the AB-Logo, or Agriculture biologique, which is owned by the French state. Organic products can be labeled with this logo when they contain more than 95 percent organic components, and produced or processed within the EU.

Is organic wine suitable for vegans?

First of all, vegan (pronounced VEE-gun) wine is made without animal products. As such it can be part of a vegan diet. Most vegans do not want animal products to come in contact with their food. The Vegans are the strictest type of vegetarians and will not eat animal food or produce potentially full of chemicals and hormones. Nothing is required with regards to the use of animal-derived ingredients in organic regulations. Historically, a wide variety of natural agents have been used for fining: ox blood, egg whites, milk casein, fish bladders, horse gelatins, etc. Fining is the clarification process of winemaking which removes the fine particles left in wine after filtration. By the way, because of Jewish dietary restrictions, all kosher wines are vegan.

The Role of Certification

When a label says "organic," it means the wine has met certain standards that are set by a government agency. As mentioned, different nations have their own certification criteria, so what's organic in one country may not be so in another.

Many wineries that are technically organic still choose not to be certified. There are many reasons for this. Some do not want the added costs and bureaucracy of registering. Others may disagree with their government's standards. It can also be a marketing decision. Whatever the reason, they are not allowed to use "organic" on their labels.

The truth is that while there are many certifying agencies, certification is important because it protects consumers from fraud.

The Rational

Some believe that conventional wine grape growing, with its emphasis on synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, is fast killing the soil. Plants are given pesticides to such a degree that they lose their ability to self-defend and grape vines become dependent on synthetic chemicals. These can be detrimental to the health of everything from soil microorganisms to the folks who work the land and live in the communities nearby.

There is no doubt that growing organic as opposed to conventional protects the environment and the people that work in the vineyards from the potentially harmful effects of pesticides, herbicides and insecticides. Organic is more than a way to farm, It is also a philosophy. An ancient Indian proverb says "We did not inherit the Earth from our ancestors; we are borrowing it from our children."

2003 marked the conversion to all organic farming methods at Marimar Estates 60 acre Don Miguel Vineyard in Russian River Valley

"The whole idea is to create an ideal balance between the vines and nature. The vineyard will be ecologically healthier, and the grapes of higher quality. That's our long-term reward", says winery founder Marimar Torres, who has CCOF certification for her vineyards.

I'm not yet specifically seeking out organic wines for personal use, however if a wine I enjoy is available on the shelf and if it happens to be organic, it's a plus for sure. The trend I hope to see is wineries committed to taking care of the vineyards they own in the purest way possible, and encouraging grape growers they purchase fruit from to do the same. Marimar Torres believes conversion to organic farming practices is ultimately better for the life of the vineyard. It makes sense to me, and it seems like the right thing to do.

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