

Greening the Future

Vintners and growers look back on more than five decades of environmental leadership—and ahead to what happens next

By Matt Villano



When it comes to farming, there's a right way and a wrong way to work the land.

For generations, farmers in the Napa Valley have known this simple truth, building lives and livelihoods around best practices for longevity. Before the advent of pesticides, back when agriculture revolved mostly around soil and water and plants, farmers used cover crops to maximize soil nutrition, deficit irrigation to conserve water, and reused resources to stretch every dollar as far as it possibly could go.

In private cellars, over wine and lunch at places like the Miramonte in St. Helena, farmers equated this approach to survival—this was the stuff they had to do to keep their farms running and keep their family businesses afloat. According to Michael Honig, president of Honig Vineyard & Winery, they might as well have used the term “sustainability.”

“Dry farming, cover crops, thinning—some of the very same ideas and philosophies about low-impact farming from years ago—are essentially driving the farming behind the ultra-premium grape industry today,” he says. “Sure, innovation has changed some things here and there, but for the most part we’ve simply taken what we’ve learned through science and improved slightly upon what our predecessors did.”

Indeed, the truth is that environmentalism and a yearning for conservation have existed in Napa Valley and among Napa Valley vintners for decades. Put differently, most Napa Valley farmers were green before green became Napa Green.

Through the Napa Green program, best practices have been codified, formalized and institutionalized to the point where participation now requires special plans personalized to the vagaries and eccentricities of every farm. In 2014, the initiative—which now has both a winery and a land component—celebrates the 10th anniversary of its first certification and is going strong. For every acre of vineyard land in Napa County, 1.35 acres of land are certified or pending certification in the Napa Green Certified Land program. On the winery side, certified entities are producing less waste, using less water and energy and minimizing their impact on the local ecosystem as a whole. More than 3.3 million cases of wine produced in Napa Valley come from a Napa Green Certified Winery facility.

As the program continues to grow, as the valley becomes more wedded to sustainable farming overall, leaders say it is imperative to maintain stringent standards, and work to sell consumers on the notion that good wine made the right way is the best wine one can buy.

“People want to do the right things but need a roadmap to get there,” says Hugh Davies, president of Schramsberg Vineyards. “Now we have that map; how we use it to take the next step is entirely up to us.”

A history of thinking green

Just as Napa Valley grape growers have been farming sustainably for generations, so too has the local community laid a great foundation of environmental preservation and conservation over the years.

The fight began way back in the 1960s, when, in the face of unchecked development, a group of vintners and residents concerned about the politics of land use banded together to engineer legislation that established the valley from downtown Napa to Calistoga as the Napa Valley Agricultural Preserve. Plans were drawn up to protect some 26,000 acres of farmland, mostly on the valley floor (today, Agricultural Preserve zoning covers close to 40,000 acres). To call the proposal revolutionary was an understatement; it would become the first agricultural preserve of its kind in the entire country.

At the time, some of the wine industry’s biggest names spoke out for conservation. Supporters of the agricultural preserve concept included new winery owner Robert Mondavi; his brother at Charles Krug, Peter Mondavi; Beringer’s Roy Raymond; and Schramsberg’s Jack Davies (Hugh’s father).

Perhaps the most famous quote from the battle came from St. Helena winemaker Louis M. Martini, who asked: “Do the citizens of Napa Valley really believe the future of our land is best served by destroying landmarks and vineyards and replacing them with subdivisions, bleak shopping centers and highway strip developments?”

The answer was a resounding “no,” and the Napa County Board of Supervisors approved the measure creating the Napa Valley Agricultural Preserve in April of 1968, protecting the land

from development forever. This kicked off a spate of further regulations, some of which included conservation easements in 1976; the Growth Management System in 1980; the Winery Definition Ordinance in 1990; the Hillside Farming Ordinance in 1991; and the Napa River Restoration, which began in 1998 and continues today.

By the new millennium, the region's landmark environmental programs were the most stringent and comprehensive in the wine industry. In 2001, however, local leaders teamed up to set the bar even higher, and embarked on a quest to establish a voluntary program to certify those winery operations that exemplified the very best in sustainable practices.

Over the course of the next two years, representatives from nearly 30 groups worked together to devise the parameters of an initiative to certify Napa-based grape growers as meeting and exceeding 19 local, state and federal land or production best practices. In addition to the Napa Valley Vintners (NVV), some of the participating organizations included the Napa County Farm Bureau; the Napa Valley Grapegrowers; the Napa County Department of Planning, Building and Environmental Services; the Sierra Club; the Audubon Society; Friends of the River; the Napa County Resource Conservation District; and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Linda Reiff, president and CEO of the NVV, remembers the era as one of reconciliation and cooperation.

"Many in the valley felt there was an adversarial relationship between the agricultural and environmental communities," she says, looking back. "It was a magical thing just to get some of these folks in the same room at a time when they might otherwise have been filing lawsuits against each other."

Understanding Napa Green

Finally, in 2004, the landmark Napa Green program became a reality when the first property was certified.

The initiative started with certification for land use only; in 2008, the program added a winery component as well. Currently, under the one Napa Green umbrella, wineries and growers participate in farm-specific plans tailored to protect and enhance the ecological quality of the Napa Valley, or in production facility programs that minimize waste and energy and water use for an overall goal of pollution reduction.

Today, the program helps land owners enhance the watershed by preventing erosion and meeting regional sediment discharge requirements, reduce or eliminate chemical use and restore wildlife habitats (including, of course, habitats for salmon and trout in the Napa River and its tributaries).

Overall, more than 61,000 acres of land are enrolled, more than 35,000 acres have been certified, including nearly 17,000 acres of vineyard land. With about 45,000 total acres of vineyard land in the county, this means that one-third of all Napa County vineyard land has been certified.

The land program is administered by the California Land Stewardship Institute, an independent



nonprofit organization in Napa. Here, Executive Director Laurel Marcus is charged with helping wineries and vineyard owners put together their farm plans—a process that involves seminars, handbooks and ultimately could take years to complete and tens of thousands of dollars of work on the property.

“These plans are much more than just checklists; they are comprehensive transformations that we take very seriously,” she says, noting that certification is handed down by third parties including the National Marine Fisheries Service, the Regional Water Quality Control Board and the Napa County Agricultural Commissioner. “That’s one of the reasons this program is so amazing: real work gets done to improve natural resources and the environment.”

On the winery side, Napa Green helps wine businesses adopt a specific set of sustainable and green business practices developed for wineries, including conserving water and energy, reducing waste and preventing pollution with the overall goal of reducing carbon footprints. The program is a subsidiary of the California Green Business program.

Just as the California Land Stewardship Institute administers the Napa Green Land program, the Napa County Department of Public Works is charged with handling the Napa Green Winery program. There, Steve Lederer, director of environmental management, oversees both the application and certification processes. Along the way, he walks wineries through water and energy use audits to determine how much they use and the extent to which they have taken steps to keep usage low.

Lederer describes the process as “painstaking but important,” and notes that sustainability is as much an operational mindset as it is a logistical reality.

Why green matters

There’s no question that operating a business sustainably has its benefits—globally and locally, tangible and intangible.



From the highest levels, running a business with the environment in mind helps reduce greenhouse gases (GHGs) and minimize waste. It also shrinks the amount of traditional, grid-based energy necessary for day-to-day operations—which, in turn, lessens the threat of GHGs. Statistics from the county indicate that in 2012 alone, participating Napa Green wineries saved more than 3 million pounds of carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere through recycling and other measures.

From the perspective of Napa Valley as a region, operating farms in accordance with local rules and regulations cuts down on soil erosion, which can damage local watersheds and eventually hurt local fish.

Of course, individually, the benefits of greening vineyard and/or winery operations are enumerable. Reducing waste and conserving water and energy usage are perhaps the biggest benefits; in addition to improving the overall health of each business, they also directly affect the ledger sheet.

Some of these financial savings are obvious: Davies says the solar panels his winery installed back in 2010 effectively have eliminated energy bills across the board, a savings of tens of thousands of dollars each year. Jon Ruel, president at Trefethen Family Vineyards, reports similar savings from solar panels there.

At Chateau Montelena, Assistant Winemaker Matthew Crafton says his team experienced huge cost reduction after installing a new compressor in 2011. Instead of releasing hot air into the atmosphere, the new compressor captures the hot air and uses it to pre-heat hot water for use around the facility.

Many wineries also report intangible benefits from realigning priorities toward sustainability.

Many of the Napa Green Certified Wineries have implemented carpooling programs, which cut down on the amount of carbon dioxide winery employees produce and help build camaraderie among colleagues.

Bruce Cakebread, president of Cakebread Cellars, adds that at his winery, he has put espousing sustainability in all job descriptions, and notes that he asks potential employees about it during job interviews.

“We go out of our way to make sure the whole notion of green is engrained in our people at every step of the process,” says Cakebread. “What we’ve found is that contributing to this kind of environment—being part of a team that’s committed to doing right by the Earth—actually makes our employees feel that much better about coming to work.”

Where do we go from here?

Despite great strides over the last 10 years, the Napa Green program faces challenges to long-term success.

First, because the program is still so relatively new, it is hard to put a dollar-value on achieving Napa Green certification. How much of a boost does certification give to a label’s price point? To what extent does that boost provide a return on the investment to prep a winery or vineyard operation for certification overall? In private conversations, many winery executives often ask questions like these. The answers differ for every business.

Davies says that while sustainability is “critically important,” the best conservation tactics mean nothing if a winery isn’t earning enough money to stay in business and apply them.

“We’re not so altruistic that we’ll take every step possible to make sure that we’re 150 percent green, but we’re trying our best,” he says. “At the end of the day, if we don’t make money the game is going to end, so we have to make sure that we’re running a healthy and viable company overall.”

Another potential problem: semantics. As with most modern initiatives that relate to the notion of “green,” definitions of “green” and “sustainability” have become somewhat subjective, making it difficult to achieve context for just how significant compliance with Napa Green really is (see sidebar, page 13).

Finally, some allege it will be difficult to market the Napa Green distinction and gain traction in the marketplace without the help of key consumers. Ideas include convincing restaurant and retail buyers to get behind the idea and educating certain sommeliers to become evangelists for wines that have been farmed and produced sustainably.

For wineries with sizeable production runs, leveraging relationships with sustainability-friendly supermarket chains and independent grocery stores also could be a solution. The good news: it appears at least some of these stores are more than willing to collaborate.

Devon Broglie, associate global wine buyer at Whole Foods, says his company’s customer base is more than willing to base wine-buying decisions on environmental considerations.

“We have a specific client base that is purchasing ‘no sulfite added’ wines for health reasons and USDA organic wines for the intrinsic value they see in other organic products,” he wrote in a recent email. “But I believe the value-add with sustainable only comes after they’ve tasted the wine and deem it to be a great value of taste for the money.”

What’s next?

Over the next decade, many grape growers and winery owners see the valley’s commitment to conservation getting even stronger.

Few can dispute the notion that the first ten years of the Napa Green program have been a success. Marcus goes so far as to say that program performance to this point has “exceeded even the highest expectations.”

For Honig, the Holy Grail is a day in the not-too-distant future when one of the selling points of the region becomes Napa’s near-universal commitment to eco-consciousness—a reality that realistically could be achieved on some scale before Napa Green’s second decade is up.

“Right now we’re known for our ultra-premium grapes and wines,” he says. “It’s just a matter of time until we are known as much for our farming practices and our commitment to keeping the ecosystems pristine.”

“The key to the future is the preservation, protection and enhancement of this extraordinary slice of heaven that we inhabit, farm and make our wines from,” says Reiff. “The Napa Valley means a lot of things to a lot of different people, but in order to keep it what it is today, above all else we need to keep it green.”

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Napa Green vs. Other Sustainability Programs

It's no secret that Napa Valley is one of the most highly regulated wine regions in the world. This means that complying with standards established by the Napa Green Program is quite a feat. Because definitions of words such as "green" and "sustainability" differ widely, here's a side-by-side comparison of Napa Green and other well-known environmental certification programs.

Program	% of Vineyards Certified	Program Features
Napa Green	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 37% of vineyards in Napa County • More than 61,000 acres certified or pending certification • For every acre planted to grapes in Napa County, 1.35 acres are certified or pending certification in Napa Green • 3.3 million cases of wine produced at Napa Green Certified Wineries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailor made for Napa Valley • Focus on farming and land use best practices and reduction of greenhouse gases and energy and water waste • Program certifies both vineyards and wineries • Third party, independently certified by regulatory agencies
California Code of Sustainable Winegrowing-Certified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 % of vineyards in California 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes the adoption of sustainable practices and ensures the cycle of continuous improvement • Certifies both vineyards and wineries statewide • Third-party certified by non-regulatory company, Sure Harvest
Lodi Rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 22% of vineyards in Lodi appellation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program certifies vineyards only • Third-party certified by non-regulatory company, Protected Harvest
SIP Certification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5% of vineyards in California 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vineyard-only program • Certified by independent advisory committee in tandem with accredited third-party auditor
Certified Organic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10% of planted vineyard acres in California 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoids the use of synthetic chemicals in favor of natural methods, such as crop rotation, tillage and natural composts • Independent agencies, like California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) certify farms using organic methods
Biodynamic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 1% of planted vineyard acres in California 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holistic and regenerative farming system that is focused on soil health, the integration of plants and animals, and biodiversity • Vineyards certified by Demeter Certified Biodynamic