

Another Way to Grow a Grape

Grape growers are an interesting blend of traditional farmers who are trying something new to a non-traditional crowd that I fondly refer to as my tree hugger-SUV-hyper parent grape grower wannabe who is looking for some change in his or her life. It could be that they have just tired of the rat race in their current career, or maybe are in stage 1 of a mid life crisis or planning ahead for something to do in retirement. One thing many of these people have in common is a strong desire to farm in a manner that is both socially and environmentally friendly as to benefit their own children and yours.

Non-traditional, or what I am referring to as alternative viticultural methods have been practiced in our region and around the world for quite a long time. But it has only been in the past decade that they have really been taken seriously by serious wine growers. In Burgundy, where the post war chemical craze has denuded the soil of virtually all of its natural capacity, vignernons are looking towards these new methods of farming to help revitalize their soils – which are so important to high quality wine production. In California, many popular names like Fetzer, Frog's Leap and Sinskey are embracing organic and biodynamic viticulture as a way to produce wines in a more natural manner. To some, these methods may border on witchcraft or voodoo, but the fact of the matter is, some of the greatest wines in the world are being grown using these practices. What's the story?

Here in the east, with our hot, humid and wet summer climate and freezing winters, it has been long thought that delicate grapes, especially the European varieties, could not be grown using these alternative methods. Now, there is a strong interest to push this technology along so we can grow our wines without the use of synthetic pesticides. To lay the informational ground work for this advancement, an alternative viticulture meeting is being offered to winegrowers around the region in January. The goal of the meeting is to bring perspective and information to the often fuzzy realm of non-conventional commercial viticulture. This would include sustainable, organic and biodynamic methods. Because much of the practices and technologies exist outside of our customary agricultural experience, it is the objective of this meeting to give sound and practical information on subjects that are too often tainted with hyperbole. A group of serious individuals, researchers, growers, vendors and extension agents will present their views and experience of this new frontier in grape growing. It is hoped that, armed with this information, new and experienced growers will be able to decide for themselves if they want to employ these practices on their own farms. Speakers include Gunther Hauk of the Pfeiffer Center (NY), William Brinton from Woods End Research Lab (ME), Vicki Bess from BBC Labs (AZ), Al MacDonald, president of Oregon LIVE, Andrew Lorand, a private biodynamic consultant (CA), Alice Wise, viticulture extension agent for Cornell University on Long Island (NY), Don Lotter from the Rodale Institute (PA). Local grower experience is essential to putting these practices into perspective – Richard Fiegel, Rob Russell and others will share their knowledge with us. Organizers are trying to get one or two wine growers from France to represent the European view, one that is close to our own terroir. Drs. Jim Travis and Elwin Stewart will offer updates on their research activities, including results from two years of compost trials on commercial cooperator plots.

If you are interested in growing grapes, or growing anything in an environmentally and socially responsible manner, you many want to attend this meeting. All are welcome. Come with a very open mind.

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