

A Sustainable Vineyard Helps to Create a Sustainable Planet

As I look around me every day and see roads cluttered with gas guzzling SUVs, product packaging run amok, monster houses and all the other trappings of a modern, industrial society, I often wonder about the long -term sustainability of our planet. With the world -wide uneven distribution of wealth and increasing scarcity of resources, we appear not to be acting responsibly or in the best interest of our children and future generations. How long can our take but not give back attitude last? Oil, coal, timber, fish and countless other animal and plant species are all threatened. We are rationing water. And what do we often leave in return. Pollution... be it agricultural run off, smog, dying seas or the by products of our own modern lives – it all combines to degrade the world around us. I'm not really in a position to comment about a farmer's personal life style, but perhaps we can help ourselves and our planet as a community of conscientious grape growers and wine producers. I believe strongly in this obligation to both our environment and fellow man. When I was in Oregon, I helped to develop a program called Low Input Viticulture and Enology (LIVE). Live was developed by growers, for growers, in an attempt to lessen off farm inputs and create a “best practices” program that would approximate a sustainable form of viticulture. The idea had been developed in New Zealand and Europe and we employed these models to form our own program, the first in the U.S. and still the only one sanctioned by IOBC, an international sustainable agriculture agency bases in Switzerland.

Two weeks ago I was on Long Island to talk about sustainable viticulture to a group of grape growers whose fearless extension leader, Alice Wise, has taken the lead on creating a sustainable program for eastern vineyards. This is a major undertaking for Alice and a great step forward for eastern viticulture. I believe that this program, once implemented, will be a model for all eastern vineyard regions and it strongly represents why LI is the leader in viticulture in the U.S., outside of the western states. The problems in eastern vineyards, as each of you know, are much more complex than those in the drier western states (yes, even in Oregon). Primarily we must deal with fungal diseases and insect pests, which love our warm, humid continental climate. Because we have all grown up in a world that preaches better living through chemistry, our attitude has become to spray our way out of every tight situation. We may not be able to wean ourselves completely from this behavior, but we can certainly strive to modify it.

In the course of my work I am constantly asked about organic, and even biodynamic methods, of farming wine grapes. This is still somewhat pie-in-the-sky technology right now for commercial wine grape vineyards. The disease and pest complex is simply too rigorous given our current level of knowledge. But it is encouraging that these questions are on the minds of our grape growers. It shows that they are thinking out of the box, towards a more environmentally conscientious brand of viticulture. With these thoughts and ideas will come answers to the questions and the necessary technology to farm in the most environmentally friendly manner.

I quickly add that the bottom line for all of the programs is that grape quality should not be compromised, nor the economic viability of the farm. Livelihood must be sustainable, and wine quality optimized. Finding the right balance is the challenge. Farming in this manner is asking growers to take educated risks in the vineyard, based on education, experience and communication, to grow the best possible grapes with the least impact on the environment. In

reality, our best growers are already farming sustainably, so it's not that much of a journey to get there. Grape growers, as a group, tend to be conscientious and well educated about environmental issues. This will make the jump to a brand of low and alternative input farming more of a technology leap than one of philosophical change.

For more information about sustainable viticulture, you can check out these web sites...

Oregon LIVE – <http://www.liveinc.org/>

Central Coast Vineyard Team – <http://www.vineyardteam.org/>

IOBC – <http://www.iobc-wprs.org/>

Lodi Wine Growers Association – <http://www.lodiwine.com/>