

Green with Confusion: We sort out the perplexing Sustainable – Organic – Biodynamic Quagmire.

We've all heard the terms sustainable, organic, and biodynamic, but what do they all mean? We could go into a lot of bureaucratic gobbledygook here, but we'll just stick to how these terms apply to wine:

Sustainable operations must be economically viable, environmentally responsible and socially just. A grape grower committed to sustainable practices will take steps to minimize chemical use, but may resort to a pesticide if necessary to save a crop.

Sustainable practices require growers to consider the health and welfare of their labor force in their decision-making. A sustainable grower might reason, for example, that applying a relatively benign herbicide such as glyphosate is preferable to requiring workers to hand-weed a steep vineyard. It's not much of a stretch to say that all premium wineries are sustainable.

Winemakers are stewards of the land in a very real sense. Their livelihood in both the short and long term depends not only on having a harvest, but upon the quality of that harvest. Grapes quality and crop yields have an inverse relationship. Artificially coaxing yield from vineyards by fertilization and irrigation results in what you see in the produce section of supermarkets: large grapes that contain mostly water.

The USDA definition of **Organic** prohibits the use of most chemical herbicides, pesticides or fertilizers. Organic growers are expected to improve the health of their soil through the use of cover crops, crop rotation and composting. **To carry the term "organic", wineries must be certified by an independent agency and recertified every year.** This simply costs too much for many small producers. Also, an organic winery risks financial ruin should a particularly pesky infection strike its crop.

It is important to remember that **all wines contain sulfites**. Not only are sulfites naturally present in wine grapes, but the human body produces about 1000 milligrams of sulfites daily. Organic wines made in the US must have no added sulfites, but sulfites occur naturally as a byproduct of the fermentation process. Again, premium wineries use added sulfites sparingly, with white wine wines more likely to contain higher levels.

The connection between sulfites and headaches is tenuous at best. Try eating a dried orange-colored apricot and see what happens. If no headache occurs, sulfites are not your problem. Unfortunately **many more people seem prone to headaches caused by red wine**. This is possibly sensitivity to tannins, but this has not been proved.

Biodynamic wineries remind us of the old Hebrew National commercials-they answer to a “higher authority.” There is no strict definition to Biodynamic, but here’s a partial list of the principles that may apply: planting and harvesting by Lunar phases, natural soil additives prepared in bizarre, ritualistic manners including plants and herbs fermented in buried cow horns and stag bladders, and even not allowing mechanized machinery. Before you bust a gut laughing, you should know that devotees of Biodynamic principles in the wine world are a veritable Who’s Who compromising some of the world’s greatest wineries. A partial list is Domaine Leflaive, Domaine de la Romanee Conti (partial), Domaine Weinbach, Nicholas Joly, and Gaston Huet. Did you notice they are all French? Biodynamics are by no means limited to French producers, but is fair to say that they perfected the process. Again, laugh if you will, but if you have ever been lucky enough to sip any of the wines made by these producers you know that quality is not an issue.

At Hair-O-The-Dog we are expanding our selection of organic and biodynamic wines. Almost every wine we sell falls under the heading of sustainable. We are in the process of making it easier for you to find the organic and biodynamic products in our stores, and we have begun to printing our price labels for these items on green paper.