

The Green Zone

By Patricia Dines



Earth-Friendly Imbibing

Sharing your holiday merry with the planet

As we gather for our various seasonal holidays, many of us will likely bring a bottle of wine or Champagne to share. This can lead eco-folks to ask, “Are there tasty wines that are also earth-friendly? And how do we sort out the choices?”

Luckily, I can help. One of the benefits of my years of eco-writing is that I’ve been forced — yes, forced I tell you — to sample our local organic food and wine. Oh, how I suffer.

Often, the first question is if it really even matters to buy an eco-wine. Absolutely. As with food, growing wine grapes ecologically reduces the toxics in both our environment and our glass. According to David Steinman, author of *Diet for a Poisoned Planet*, mainstream wine “has too many pesticides to qualify as a top-quality product.” Pesticide residues have been found in wines at high concentrations, and Steinman observes that wine drinkers report fewer headaches after going organic. (Of course, moderation still counts.)

Folks also often wonder whether quality eco-friendly wines exist. The answer is an emphatic yes. In fact, winemakers often seek ecologically-grown grapes for their flavor. Veronique Raskin of the Organic Wine Company, a Marin importer, says, “For me, with organic wine there is a clear difference. You feel the essence of the wine, the terroir. You have a much stronger experience of the country and the winemaker with organic wines than you do with other wines.”

OK, so, filled with hope, we’re now staring at a store shelf or a menu. How to choose? Understanding some key words can help. For instance, what’s the difference between “organically-grown” and “organic”

wines? Both are made with organically-grown grapes. In addition, “organic wines” are produced according to organic winemaking standards established by each country.

In a controversial choice, U.S. organic wines aren’t permitted to use the pure sulfur dioxide preservative allowed internationally. Therefore, these wines can be good for folks seeking to avoid added sulfites, but can sometimes have a shorter shelf life; ask producers for their storage timing recommendations. I’ve found enjoyable wines in both categories.

Another delightful option for eco-consumers is biodynamic wine, which often offers richly dimensional flavors. Growing standards are even higher than for organic, and processing allows modest amounts of sulfur dioxide.

Two eco-wine identifiers to treat with more caution are “sustainable” and “natural,” because neither has a legal definition or regulation. Sometimes such wines are made with less-toxic growing or processing practices, but the specifics and commitment vary by producer.

So what are some of my favorite local eco-wines? My first choice for holiday bubbly is Jeriko Estate’s award-winning, organically-grown sparkling wine, one of the few from California. Handcrafted and estate-grown, it tastes charmingly subtle and inspiring. (www.jerikoestate.com, 707.744.1140)

I’ve also enjoyed the luscious and complex organically-grown wines of Rutherford’s Frog’s Leap Winery, produced in their 100 percent solar-operated facility. (www.frogsleap.com, 707.963.4704, 800.959.4704)

Another favorite of mine is Napa’s Robert Sinskey Vineyards. Using estate-sourced organically-grown grapes, their winemaking is, they say, “driven by the fruit, with minimal manipulation.” Behind the scenes of their beautifully dramatic tasting room, solar power helps run their winery, biodiesel powers their trucks and tractors, and sheep mow their cover crops. (www.robertsinskey.com, 707.944.9090, 800.868.2030)

Folks wanting a delicious natural wine, with no manipulation or additives including sulfites, can sample Coturri Winery’s full-bodied organically-grown selections. All are traditionally handcrafted in small lots and bottled by hand in Glen Ellen. (www.coturriwinery.com, 707.525.9126)

These and other luscious eco-wines are available in local stores or by mail order. Or enjoy a holiday tasting room visit, one benefit of our proximity to wine country.

Reflecting on his journey, vintner Robert Sinskey says, “I used to think that a clean, manicured vineyard was a thing of beauty, but now I look at a vineyard with a cover crop, a cluster of weeds, an occasional imperfect vine, a gopher hole here and there, insects buzzing, birds flying as signs of real beauty, health, even luxury. What’s most satisfying is that I can walk through the vineyards with my two girls and not be concerned about the grapes they put in their mouth.”

Ditto for our holiday cheer.

© Copyright Patricia Dines, 2008. All rights reserved. (www.patriciadines.info, 707.829.2999)

Published in the North Bay Bohemian, Dec. 17, 2008.