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California's Wine Community: Stewards of the Land

California grapes are grown and produced into wines predominantly by families who have farmed the land for generations. Californians have adopted sustainable practices that allow them to grow, make and sell their wines in a socially and environmentally conscious manner that benefits everyone—families, employees, neighbors, communities and wildlife, and the soils, air and water that make great wines possible.

California winemakers and grape growers hold a deep sense of responsibility to safeguard the beauty and bounty of the land on which their grapes are grown. While they may have legal title to their vineyards and wineries, most believe their ultimate roles are as caretakers, as stewards who are mindful of the impacts grape growing and winemaking have on the environment, and who work together to leave the land healthy and productive for their families and future generations.

The California wine community embraces a statewide Code of Sustainable Winegrowing Practices, a best-practices program that guides them on how to do their part to keep California green and clean by reducing water and energy use, minimizing pesticide and herbicide use, building healthy soils, protecting air and water quality, maintaining natural wildlife and vegetation habitats, and enhancing their communities.

SUSTAINABLE WINEGROWING:

California winegrowers follow sustainability guidelines in myriad ways to preserve and protect limited natural resources. An important tenant is the reduction in the use of synthetic pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers, which are replaced with natural remedies. For example, cover crops are planted between vine rows, to add organic nutrients to the soil, provide a home for beneficial insects that destroy the bugs that are harmful to vines, prohibit the growth of nutrient-sapping weeds, and aid in erosion control. Natural means are used for pest management. Sheep are allowed to graze in vineyards to mow weeds naturally. Growers use organic fertilizers and compost rather than man-made additions.

Vineyard managers erect owl boxes and raptor perches, providing homes for birds that prey on gophers, mice and moles that cause root and tunneling damage.

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Streams and rivers are restored so that fish populations thrive. Wineries use drip irrigation on an as needed basis to conserve water while improving wine quality. Paper, cardboard, glass, plastic, grape pomace and landscaping waste are recycled. Soy-based inks are used on packaging materials. Solar panels capture the California sun and convert it to energy. Underground and hillside caves keep wines cool as they age to decrease or eliminate the need for air-conditioned cellars, and the aging barrels are made with sustainably farmed lumber.

Wine producers are striving to become “carbon-neutral,” offsetting the amount of carbon dioxide they create during the winemaking process. This can be done by the use of wind and solar power, and vehicles that run on biodiesel fuel. Trees have the capacity to absorb carbon emissions and provide habitat for beneficial predators, so trees are preserved and planted adjacent to vineyards. Sustainability also includes fair wages and housing opportunities for workers, making their work conditions as safe as possible, and training employees on how to keep the business green and pristine.

ORGANICS AND BIODYNAMICS:

An increasing number of growers farm organically or biodynamically, which are also part of the sustainability trend. While sustainability involves a broad list of best practices from the ground to the glass, an organic vineyard focuses the use of no synthetic pesticides or other non-organic chemicals; soil enrichment, pests, weeds and vine diseases are managed through the use of natural preparations, cover crops and hand-working the soil. Biodynamic farming follows the tenets of organic grape growing and uses herbal remedies, treating the vineyard as a complete ecosystem. Compost teas and natural preparations enrich the soil and keep micro-organisms alive. Insectaries provide a welcoming home for creatures that prey upon harmful pests. The timing of planting and pruning is determined by the phases of the sun and moon.

Established in 1934, the California Wine Institute is the public policy advocacy group of over 1,000 California wineries and affiliated businesses that initiate and advocate state, federal and international public policy to enhance environment for the responsible production, consumption and enjoyment of wine. The organization also works to enhance the economic and environmental health of its communities and the state through its leadership in sustainable winegrowing and winemaking practices and a partnership with California Travel and Tourism Commission to showcase California’s wine and food offerings. The Wine Institute membership represents 85 percent of U.S. wine production and 95 percent of U.S. wine exports. For more information visit www.wineinstitute.org or www.discovercaliforniawine.com.