Winemakers abandoning organic status for sustainability, improved taste

Organic wine was quite the rage a few years ago because consumers wanted to "feel good" about buying "sustainable" wines and the industry played off of these feelings. According to "Organic Wine Finds," an organic online vendor, organic wines:

> **Taste better—**The sorting table is scrutinized for unhealthy grapes and fermentation takes place with natural rather than artificial yeast
> **Contain fewer or no chemicals—**forbidden from using pesticides, herbicides, and synthetic fertilizers to grow their grapes…unlike conventional wines where the practice is common, organic wines are guaranteed not to contain GMO yeast
> **Are more socially responsible—**Wineries that are committed to organic production are also highly concerned with sustainability and ethical treatment of both their land and their workers
> **Are less prone to vintage variation—**Proponents believe that their grapes have greater natural resistance to inclement weather and disease
> **Are affordable—**A small premium to pay for organic wines … is generally no less than the price increase between a mass-produced conventional wine and a higher-quality, smaller production

But a number of winemakers, particularly in France, have dropped their organic status, partly because of regulatory restrictions, but more because of increasing concerns about sustainability and the environment. These decisions by winemakers may be souring the perception that "organic means clean" portrayed by groups promoting organic foods.

In 2009, organic wine sales grew by 3.7 percent, outpacing sales of conventionally harvested wines, which grew by 2 percent. Globally, about 1,500 to 2,000 growers produce organic wine; about 900 of those are from France. Since 2011, however, the number of organic wine growers has leveled off from the dizzying 10-year climb that started in 2000. Some areas, including France, have even started to see drops in organic certifications for wineries.

Let's take a look at the only objective "reason" for buying organic wines—chemicals. Organic wineries do, as a matter of fact, use pesticides. And those pesticides have recently driven some growers away from using organic methods.

Too much copper for their taste

Domaine de Fondrèche in Mazan, under the French appellation of Côtes de Ventoux, announced that it was withdrawing its organic certification, which it had been growing wines under since 2009. The winery cited copper buildup in its fields, the result of using copper sulfate, one of a number of pesticides allowed by organic certifiers around the world (including the French Ecocert, as well as the USDA's National Organic Program).

“I *believe now that certain synthesized products applied at the right moment may offer better environmental protection than some organic alternatives, but these are all banned by Ecocert,*” Sebastien Vincente, proprietor of the winery, told Decanter, a trade magazine. He also said that since conventional pesticides are stronger and more targeted, he wouldn’t be using as much tractor fuel to disseminate the pesticides.

Other wineries may be following suit, but still more French wineries use some so-called organic practices without registering as an official “organic” winery. These practices can include avoiding soil tillage and the use of cover crops and compost, while still using pesticides forbidden by organic certifiers. John Hilliard, who runs Hilliard Bruce, a sustainable winery in Santa Barbara, California, said:

> It’s time for organic farmers to come clean with the public and stop repeating the same lies that they don’t use “chemicals” or “pesticides”. The public will sooner or later find out the truth: there are new products on the market that can have have far less environmental impact. And by the way, we all use cover crops and compost, that’s not just an organic practice, that’s just good farming!

Copper use isn’t just affecting soils, it’s also affecting the workers at these farms. An Australian study of vineyard workers found, by testing cheek swabs, copper levels that were 10 times those of controls. While even worker levels were initially low, those levels can accumulate in the body over time and continuous occupational exposure has been associated with interstitial lung disease and a number of cancers, especially of the lung and kidneys.

More than one way to beat fungus

Copper’s main function in a vineyard is to beat back fungus, a persistent problem when growing vines in temperate areas (where, of course, most wine grapes grow). In Europe, copper sulfate has been used as a fungicide for more than a century and was recently incorporated into organic standards of growing. Cross-breeding grapes to combat the fungus has not been very successful—attempts to breed American vines with European ones (many of the current fungal infections owe their origins to the United States) have not produced a variety that resists fungi.

However, other methods might include genetic modifications to resist fungus. Several proteins in barley have been found to resist fungus, and the genes for those proteins could be useful in wines. These include genes for chitinase, an enzyme that targets the chitin found in fungal cells, and genes for enzymes that disrupt fungal metabolism. However, this work is preliminary and some field trials have shown that these varieties succumb to disease just as much as conventional varieties do. But it doesn’t hurt to look. Meanwhile, more varieties are being introduced and cross-bred for disease resistance.

Regardless of the future of the organic certification in the win industry the goal of sustainable quaffing is still in the realm of probability and more than any label, that’s what consumers really want.

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