Green Teams

Winegrowers band together to address environmental challenges and ensure long-term success

Tablas Creek is a partner in the Regenerative Organic Certification program, which includes animal welfare standards. The winery’s sheep are a model example. (Brittany App)

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The existential and economic threats of 2020 didn’t stop wineries from pressing ahead with critical environmental and social initiatives.
On the contrary, even throughout the pandemic shutdowns, the wine community found opportunities to collaborate across borders and make remarkable strides—all while coping with complex health and safety restrictions, new approaches to selling wine with restaurants and tasting rooms closed, trade wars that wrenched global distribution and massive wildfires in the U.S. and Australia.

“The best premium companies must stand up and lead by example in the fight to prevent damaging changes in the wine regions of the world,” says Miguel Torres Maczassek, general manager of Spain- and Chile–based Familia Torres, which is involved in multiple partnerships related to sustainable winegrowing. “We have to work together so that our future generation can keep producing wines that reflect the terroir with excellence.”

Profiled below are some of the new and notable wine-industry collaborations that have made significant progress in the past year on one or more aspects of sustainability, including environmental responsibility, social equity and economic viability.

Wherever you look in the world of wine, you’ll find many more inspiring examples to celebrate.

**Slashing Emissions**

**International Wineries for Climate Action**

Aim: Spur wineries to take substantial action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions

Each participating company commits to slashing its total carbon emissions by 50% by 2030 and to become “climate positive” by 2050. That means they will remove more carbon dioxide than they produce from not only their own direct emissions but also the energy they purchase and the “indirect” emissions from their supply chain. The latter includes products they purchase (such as barrels and bottles), business travel and employee commuting, transport of their wines and waste disposal.
Within five years of joining the group, companies must be powered by at least 20% renewable energy from their own property, undergo annual third-party audits of their direct and indirect greenhouse-gas emissions, and reduce their carbon dioxide emissions by 25% per unit of wine from a baseline measurement.

To achieve all this, they need to find solutions in their own vineyard and winery operations, as opposed to purchasing carbon credits to offset their emissions.

The partners determined a standardized system for wineries to track their direct and indirect emissions and have that data verified by a third party. Using such data, the group can evaluate the areas that are driving the most emissions and identify opportunities to counteract them, such as a broad-scale push to use lighter-weight glass bottles. They are also evaluating ways to counter emissions they can’t eliminate.

“We did a rough analysis of all the land we own, whether planted or unplanted, and the results were that we would be able to sequester more carbon than we emit as a company each year [using] reforestation, riparian corridor enhancement and other ecosystem enhancement projects on our land,” explains Katie Jackson, vice president of sustainability at Jackson Family.
Familia Torres' winery in Pals del Penedès features a solar-powered electric train, and a biomass boiler that make use of vine-cuttings. The company generates at least 25% of its energy itself, from renewable sources.

**What's Next:** The initiative is looking at ways to bring in more members, including a streamlined emissions calculator that would make the process more accessible to smaller wineries with fewer resources and outreach to other organizations focused on climate change.

“I hope we will have more than 200 wineries, especially the most representative ones of each country, as full members in five years,” says co-founder Miguel A. Torres, president of Familia Torres, who has long worked to inspire action on climate change within and beyond the wine industry. “It would be great to see also other sectors starting a similar initiative to implement carbon emissions-reduction programs.”

**Winery Partners:** Familia Torres and California-based Jackson Family Wines, cutting-edge companies in carbon-reduction efforts, formed this global group in 2019 to share innovative science-based strategies. The plan is to bring together like-minded wine companies with the resources to experiment and demonstrate what can be done, and the clout to influence others.
In early 2020, Spottswoode Estate in Napa, Symington Family Estates in Portugal, VSPT Wine Group in Chile, and Yealands Wine Group in New Zealand became co-participants. They have since been joined by California’s Silver Oak; the Alma Carraovejas winery and restaurant group in Spain; Cullen Wines in Australia; and Bodega Emina of Spain’s Matarromera group.

**Friendly Farming**

**Regenerative Organic Certification**

Aim: Create a higher standard for eco-friendly agriculture that incorporates the principles of organics with requirements for improving soil health, animal welfare and worker treatment

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Jason Haas of Tablas Creek

The idea behind regenerative farming is “not just that your farm isn’t contributing to the problems, but that it’s part of the solution to the challenges we know the world is going to have to deal with more and more over the next decades,” says Tablas Creek partner Jason Haas.
Organic farming’s emphasis on forgoing chemical pesticides and fertilizers in favor of natural methods is just the starting point for regenerative farming, which combines “the breadth of sustainability with the rigors of biodynamics, without the mysticism.”

Regenerative farming has gained favor in recent years as a means of “carbon farming,” sequestering carbon in the land by building organic matter and microbial diversity back into soils. But it also emphasizes issues such as degraded topsoil, resource scarcity and social inequality.

Patagonia, Dr. Bronner’s and Rodale Institute teamed with other companies and non-profits to form the Regenerative Organic Alliance (ROA) in 2017. The group brought together experts in farming, ranching and fair trade to develop new standards for certifying food, fiber and personal-care products. They wanted a certification process that would be rigorous but work globally across a range of agriculture-related businesses.

In the U.S., to earn the ROC, farms must first hold USDA Organic certification. On top of that, they must verify that any animals they are raising are free from harm and that workers are given living wages and safe conditions. The animal welfare and fair-trade certifications are coordinated with existing agencies such as Certified Humane and Fair for Life.

For the 2018–2019 pilot program, Tablas Creek, which was already certified organic and biodynamic, joined companies such as Apricot Lane Farms, Lotus Foods and Nature’s Path to evaluate the standards, paperwork and audit process and auditors. Haas explains, “It was not just, can you satisfy these protocols and regulations. But also, tell us how they affected you, what was reasonable and what was unreasonable and how do we make this work?”

**What’s Next:** Last August, ROA completed the certification’s pilot phase, and this year opens to new brands; 10 additional vineyards have applied. And the first ROC products have begun to reach market.
**Winery Partners**: Tablas Creek in Paso Robles participated in the pilot program and is the first winery and vineyard to earn certification. Former Fetzer president Paul Dolan sits on the board; a longtime leader in organic and sustainable winegrowing in California, Dolan practices regenerative farming at his own Dark Horse Ranch.

**Sharing Solutions**

**Porto Protocol Foundation**
Aim: Create a platform for wineries, wine regions, winery suppliers, wine buyers, universities and institutions around the globe to share information about climate-change research and solutions

Porto Protocol founder Adrian Bridge, CEO of the Fladgate Partnership, saw many companies and wine regions around the world working independently on projects to adapt to and mitigate climate change. He realized that if there was a clearinghouse for others to learn from the work of these leaders, everyone could make progress more quickly.
Bridge decided to “build a network and an open platform of climate solutions, spread across the wine value chain, because there is no time nor need to reinvent things that are working.”

He organized global Climate Change Leadership conferences in Porto in 2018 and 2019, gathering participants from within and outside the wine industry. Wine companies were asked to make a public, binding commitment to the Porto Protocol, a set of broad principles to follow that promote good environmental practices.

Foundation members share research, articles and solutions on PortoProtocol.com, where demand has surged for its online Climate Talks, with experts covering topics such as packaging, water usage, biodiversity, carbon sequestration and a comparison of the carbon footprints for sustainable, organic and biodynamic viticulture.

**What’s Next:** Future projects on the table include info-gathering on the influence of climate and sustainability concerns on consumer purchasing behavior.
—Suzanne Mustacich

**Winery Partners:** Port powerhouse Fladgate Partnership launched this non-profit, which now has 70 members—including Napa Valley Vintners, Coppola, Catena Zapata, Domaine Dujac, Lail Vineyards, Symington Family, Treasury Wine Estates and Willamette Valley Vineyards—plus 29 partners and more than 100 other signatories to the protocol.

**Capturing Carbon**

**Climate Adaptation Certification Program**
Aim: Verify that a vineyard’s practices are systemically climate-friendly according to that site’s unique traits
Sonoma County Winegrowers, led by Karissa Kruse, left, succeeded in getting 99% of the region’s vineyard acres certified sustainable; now the group is testing a new certification to offset carbon emissions (Robert McClanahan)

Viticulture can help offset greenhouse gas emissions from other causes, but there’s no one-size-fits-all solution for wine estates. Best practices may vary by microclimate, location or soil type.

With this in mind, the nonprofit California Land Stewardship Institute (CLSI) developed a program designed specifically for vineyards and customized to each site. To help test the Climate Adaptation Certification (CAC), the Sonoma County Winegrowers (SCW) signed on as pilot participants in fall 2019.

“We have to be figuring out local solutions, because that's where you get the win,” says SCW president Karissa Kruse.

CLSI executive director Laurel Marcus (who also oversees the Fish Friendly Farming certification to improve regional water quality) reviewed 300 pertinent scientific papers from California and other Mediterranean climates examining how carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide emissions are affected by everything from cover crops and tillage to irrigation practices.
Marcus and 20 participating growers collected extensive data back to 1980 for each property in the pilot, covering not only the vineyard blocks, but also pastures, forests and other undeveloped spaces.

Using state-of-the-art modeling tools, customized farm plan options were created for each property, with practical recommendations for sequestering carbon and reducing emissions. The CAC plans cover not just the practices, but the timing of them.

“For the most part, everyone could do something to move the needle. Sometimes it’s not a huge thing, like planting a hedgerow,” says Kruse.

**What’s Next:** Marcus aggregated the data for all 20 pilot participants; if they all kept to their lowest-emissions scenarios, their 1,883 vineyard acres would remove the equivalent of an additional 2,184 metric tons of CO2 per year, comparable to the emissions from 472 passenger vehicles driven for one year, or over 5 million miles driven.

Each property is reviewing which of its farm plan options it can implement. Participants will document emissions and reductions, and undergo annual audits to confirm they are following the practices prescribed, in addition to their existing sustainability certifications.

“For better or worse, it takes 5–10 years to figure out what happens,” says Kruse.

More Sonoma growers are now applying to the program; the partners are seeking grants to help everyone interested participate. Marcus expects to expand into Napa and Mendocino next. A science advisory panel is being formed, while a demonstration vineyard will help curious growers see the program in action. And as an educational incentive after the 2020 wildfire season, CLSI is adding a component on land management.

**Winery Partners:** Twenty wineries and growers, covering a diverse range of *terroirs*, were selected to begin the pilot in January 2020: the Bevill Family Trust, Dutton Ranch, Emeritus, Family Coppola, Gunsalus Vineyard,
Iron Horse, Jackson Family Wines, Kick Ranch, Lynmar, Ridge, Rio Lago Ranch, Ron Rubin Winery, Sangiacomo Family Vineyards, Sei Querce Vineyards, Serres Ranch, Silver Oak, Rodney Strong, Treasury Wine Estates, Vino Farms and Walt Wines. All of these wineries’ Sonoma vineyards were already certified sustainable.