

Organic Wine Production



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The word “Organic Wine” conjures up much confusion as information is often picked up from conversations around the braai with buddies, or that boring lecture by some alternate impractical know-all, or the neighbour who rebelled against all advice and went on an “organic tangent” and lost his farm as a result. Recently I have noticed a curiosity and willingness among wine farmers to explore what was a frightening concept called “change” as they realise that they have to adopt sustainable farming methods if they intend to continue making a living off the family farm.

What is Organic Wine Production?

Conservation farming methods are acknowledged to be the future of farming. One of these is the organic system of wine grape farming which emphasizes the importance of a healthy soil in sustainable productivity. This method has proven its’ long term value when applied correctly.

Organic wine grape farmers strive to build up a healthy productive soil by:

- Increasing humus (active carbon) content, which stimulates productivity by the addition of compost or planting green manures which are tilled into the soil. This improves the structure of the soil, as neither excessively sandy or clay soils deliver the best production. Water and nutrients are absorbed by soil with this “sponge like” structure, retained and stored rather than being lost by draining past the roots or runoff into streams and rivers.
- Productive soil is a living ecosystem in which beneficial soil life such as earthworms aerate soil by burrowing tunnels and distributing plant matter through the soil to feed important soil life. A number of insects like wood lice and ground beetle’s break down and recycle organic matter into the soil, and microscopic organisms such as bacteria and fungi process nutrients and make them available for uptake by the vine. There are many natural species of soil organisms whose sole purpose is to protect the vine from pests and disease causing pathogens.
- Apply mulch or planting of cover crops to control the germination of weed seed, moderate soil temperatures, reduce water loss through evaporation and to stabilise topsoil to prevent soil erosion.
- The modern organic wine grape farmer takes a scientific approach to nutritional management for optimum crop production, while the winemaker crafts the character of the wine as influenced by the terroir, mineral content and makeup of the soil, the climate and the position of the vineyard. A soil analysis should be used as a basis for an accurate fertilizer plan. From this the chemistry such as balances between the various nutrients and pH of the soil can be corrected and fertilizer applied for optimal uptake of nutrient levels required for the life stage of the vine, the targeted yield and desired qualities which are required by the winemaker.
- Inputs like poisons, synthetic fertilizers and herbicides used by conventional farmers, which could damage the environment, pollute, kill soil life, or leave behind toxic residues in wines, soil or water sources are strictly forbidden in organic farming.
- Modern organic cellars use adapted equipment and techniques to eliminate the dependency on chemical additives and preservatives such as sulphur dioxide. When a wine is labelled as Certified Organic the consumer is assured that a stringent inspection and control system, governed by worldwide standards through IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements) is applied.

Healthy Soil = Healthy Plants = Healthy People

Why are Cellars changing to Organic Production?

THE HEALTH CONSCIOUS CONSUMER is a growing market sector and they are prepared to pay for quality over quantity. Wines are being marketed for their health promoting qualities such as anti-oxidant content for heart health, youth preservation and stress relief to “chill” after a challenging day at work, as well as the simple enjoyment of drinking a good wine.

Chemical additives and preservatives (like sulphur dioxide and other chemicals used in growing and processing of conventional wines) result in allergic reactions in some sensitive people, the most common being the “hangover headache” or the “asthmatic” reaction that causes breathing difficulty.

ENVIRONMENTAL & SOCIALLY responsible consumers, or the “green consumer” are a desired target market leading the change. This is seen in the consumer campaigns for the conservation of biodiversity such as the Cape Floral Kingdom (CFK), Carbon Footprint or Off-the-Grid such as solar, wind or biogas and Fair Trade which assures that farm workers are not exploited, social upliftment benefits and fair labour practise, including health and safety of working conditions.

CONNOISSEURS & COLLECTORS appreciate the excellent craftsmanship that has gone into the winemaking. Most often the consumers of quality wines appreciate the nuances that are created in organically grown and crafted wines. Food and wine pairing are trendy and are a passionate experience for many.

SUSTAINABLE FARMING “Adapt or Die” the sustainability of the farming operation requires a new approach and organic methods which build soil conditions, conserve water and restore the beneficial natural ecosystems, offer many solutions to longevity of heritage estates and mitigate against the real impact of climate change.

ACCESS SELECT MARKETS by specializing in niche markets is a way of remaining competitive and differentiating in a market that is oversupplied by large commercial producers. The consumer is looking for novelty, variety and wants to support small producers with a passion for their craft. This is seen in a growing demand for Organic wines with personal stories and endorsements, and allows for the easier penetration of new markets like Africa, USA, China, the Far East and Russia and secures traditional European market competitiveness with organic goods growing at 20% year on year.



What are the practical implications?

The most important change that has to be made is the “mindset” that organic methods will be different, but they are productive and workable when managed correctly.

With this conviction do your homework well and choose experienced mentors and advisors and the best input suppliers to support your conversion to organic production on farm and in the cellar. Many failed organic farms attest to the “organic by neglect” or the “cheapest input” attitude, which will deliver similar poor results in a conventional farming and cellar operation.

There are many salesmen pedalling “organic magic” to uninformed farmers who promptly disappear when unsatisfactory results are achieved.

Do your research, make contact with and secure your markets, know the rules, regulations and standards that your target market and their consumer demands and adapt your growing, manufacturing process and your promotional activity to accommodate the change to organic wine.

