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Some vintners grow sustainable grapes for a bigger payout thanks to Lodi Rules

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Dan Evans/News-Sentinel

Marcus Niggli, winemaker for Borra Vineyards, explains the difference between top drip and underground irrigation systems while in the local winery's vineyards on Elliot Road in Acampo on Monday, March 26, 2012. Niggli supports Lodi Rules, a set of 70 "green" regulations adopted by some local wineries.



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By Sara Jane Pohlman/News-Sentinel Staff Writer | 0 comments

From a lofty perch about 15 feet above the soil, a family of owls lay claim to the vineyard stretching out below. They only come out of their box at night. A small collection of mice and gopher skulls piles up on the ground after meals.

But the landowners don't mind these birds with a healthy appetite.

Sneaky rodents like to burrow into the damp roots of grapevines to chew them up. Growers have to poison them, shoot them, or gas them out of their homes to keep their grapevines whole. Owls take care of the problem naturally without the grower lifting a finger.

Installing owl boxes is just one of more than 70 regulations growers must abide by to qualify for the Lodi Rules Sustainable Winegrape growing certification. It is the first third party-certified program to regulate sustainable winegrape growing in the state, and about 20 percent of the Lodi Appellation has bought in.

In 2005, this was the first program of its kind in California. Lodi Winegrape Commission created the program because they wanted to improve prices and demand for Lodi wines. The plan is for this certification to work alongside marketing, education and ongoing research.

"It's good to have formalized accreditation. Nobody could argue against growing more sustainably," said Spencer. "It works because it was built from the ground up, by growers and wineries."

But the overall theme is in keeping the vineyard resembling native ecosystems as much as possible by introducing native plants, maintaining vernal pools and protecting endangered species.

The rules range from how much water is used on the vines to the kinds of pesticides growers employ. It can be a hassle to keep up with the paperwork, but growers say it's worth it.

Qualifying for Lodi Rules begins with creating a sustainable vision for the farm. Growers assess their own land and come up with a plan for the year. The closer they stick to that plan, the higher score their vineyard will earn in the end-of-the-year audit.

How to certify your vineyard

A Lodi vineyard qualifies for certification if it meets the following criteria:

- Scores 50 percent or higher for each chapter of The Lodi Rules.
- Farming practice points overall must exceed 60 percent, without a fail in any chapter.
- Environmental impact units must not exceed 50 units during the year.
- An independent auditor from Protected Harvest evaluates the vineyard each year for approval.

If more than 85 percent of the juice going into a bottle of wine comes from a certified vineyard, the bottle has earned the right to feature the Lodi Rules seal.

— Source: www.lodiwine.com

Another aspect is dealing with pests naturally. Instead of a regular spraying schedule, growers keep close track of pest numbers and introduce their natural enemies, like owls, to take care of mice.

Cover crops of oats, mustard and clover flourish between every other row. They help to reduce dust and improve air and soil quality.

Water management is a big factor. Growers use as little as possible by keeping a close eye on the vines and giving them the minimum amount of water through drip irrigation.

Growers can also earn extra points by employing solar energy systems.

"It's not an easy program to go through. Certification requires extra things. But some growers are already doing those things without thought, or formal recognition," said Stuart Spencer of the Lodi Winegrape Commission.

The difference? Lodi Rules growers are required to keep close records.

Take pesticides, for example. Growers keep track of what kind, how much they use, how often they use it, where in the vineyard it was used, and how much of an effect it had on the pests in question. This is recorded to mark each use. Multiply that by 70 regulations and it's easy to see how the paperwork piles up.

But if 85 percent of the juice used for wine has jumped through all of those hoops, wineries can use the Lodi Rules seal on their label.

Keeping up with the regulations means Markus Niggli, winemaker for Borra Vineyards, is walking the rows daily to note any changes he might need to address.

"The grapevines are talking to you. You have to see what they are telling you," he said.

The numbers give growers a benchmark to work towards. Niggli says the real test is in the taste of the fruit.

Spencer says the program is still in a growth stage since it began five years ago. In that time, more than 20,000 acres, or 20 percent of the Lodi Appellation, has been certified.

Protected Harvest, based in Soquel, Calif., is the third-party auditor that keeps tabs.

The actual certification process is two-pronged. The first is making sure growers follow the physical practices. The other is measuring how any chemicals and pesticides used in growing grapes affects the land, known as total toxicity.

Some growers are reluctant to sign up due to the cost. There's a fee of a couple grand to apply, plus a yearly assessment that falls on the shoulders of the grower. The program is strictly voluntary.

At first, it was open to only Lodi growers. But wineries buying Lodi Rules-certified grapes wanted the same quality and standards from their other growers. The program has expanded accordingly, but it costs more for growers outside the Lodi appellation to participate.

The cost does cause some growers to shy away. But some vineyards are so eager for the premium crop that the big players now either refuse to take grapes that aren't certified, or pay more for grapes they say are of better quality.

Kevin Phillips, vice president of operations for Michael David Winery, says the process of keeping his fields certified has made him a better farmer, with a boost of quality in the grapes.

"There's the secondary benefit of positive marketing, and that's great, but the true reason is that it makes people better, more conscientious farmers," he said.

The winery now requires all their fruit come from certified vineyards, and offers growers a bonus for complying.

In the first few years, participation was voluntary at the winery. Some growers were already pretty progressive and became certified to earn more money for their grapes. About 75 percent of his growers jumped on the bandwagon without complaint.

"Getting the final 25 percent was harder than the original," Phillips said.

Growers earn 0.75 percent of the base price, which adds about \$70 of each ton sold. As prices for grapes rise, so does the bonus.

It was a risky move to create this kind of program. There are always challenges to asking hard-working people to do more work, Spencer said. But it's paid off on the world stage.

The program is recognized by buyers in Australia, New Zealand, Portugal, Argentina, Japan and other countries. Winemakers there have also looked into their own certification programs, but it's not an easy thing to pick up and create.

The standards are based on a workbook with self-assessments and evaluations that Lodi growers were already using. Growers around the world have picked up the workbook to apply to their own vineyards.

It's also become a marketing device.

Consumers look for price first, then quality when seeking out wine for the dinner table or special occasions. A promise of sustainable growing practices is a final push on the sales front.

But Spencer says that final push is more significant.

"There's a growing interest among consumers to find out how their food is grown," he said. "And there's a growing interest among retailers to turn around and look at their suppliers to find out how products are made."

Contact reporter Sara Jane Pohlman at sarap@lodineWS.com.

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The Florida case of Trayvon Martin's death at the hand of George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer, has become a lightning rod for national media. How well do you think the major news outlets have handled their coverage of the story?

What I've read and watched has seemed fair to both parties.

The media is unfairly biased toward Trayvon, showing him as an innocent child.

The news is definitely on George's side, showing him as a man defending his neighborhood.

Both Trayvon and George have been exploited by the media coverage.

I'm trying to stay out of it. It's just more bad news.

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