

Red, White or Organic?



DREAMSTIME

Robert Louis Stevenson, author of *Treasure Island*, referred to wine as “bottled poetry.” With descriptors like blowzy, cloying, oaky, sassy and voluptuous, the metaphor holds true today. But to people who enjoy wine regularly—from serious oenophiles to occasional imbibers—the one adjective that matters most is flavourful.

Selecting the perfect wine just got a little more complicated.

Or is it? Since the organic movement hit its stride this past decade, there’s more to consider than taste. What goes on the grapes and into the soil they’re grown in can and will affect not only our enjoyment of wine but our health... and we’re not talking alcohol content. Organic wine is not only gaining cachet and respect among connoisseurs, it’s getting a big boost from healthy-living advocates.

To be certified organic, a

winemaker must meet the mandate outlined by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. Regulations stipulate that there can be no genetically modified ingredients (including the actual grapes, obviously), no man-made fertilizers, pesticides or fungicides. Moreover, only wine with organic content that is greater than or equal to 95 percent may carry the organic logo.

Since the 1990s, many vintners, including a couple dozen successfully growing grapes on Canadian soil, have altered their farming practices. Rollingdale Winery in Kelowna, B.C., has been growing two hectares’ worth of grapes to make about 2,000 cases of certified organic wine since 2004.

Like most organic producers, they believe the health of the soil is key. No wonder then that manual labour is preferred and even the stakes used to trellis the grapes are chemical-free. Pressure-treated wood is verboten for fear of toxins

MAY CONTAIN SULFITES

And then there’s the matter of sulphur dioxide. Sulfites are a natural byproduct of the fermentation process but adding extra is a no-no. According to Tony Aspler, author of *The Wine Atlas of Canada* and known as “the wine guy,” many producers grow organically and still use sulphur in the wine cellar. “Sulphur preserves wine and keeps it clean,” says Tony. “Wines made completely organic don’t last as long and you should drink them within a year of bottling.” To be considered organic, the presence of naturally occurring sulfites, ranging from 6 to 40 parts per million, is accepted.

leaching into the soil and spoiling the integrity of the grapes, not to mention nullifying organic accreditation.

Frogpond Farm winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, takes organic a step further by using 100 percent green electricity. Renewable

energy and the use of rain-water whenever possible give the winery a leg up on sustainable farming.

Of course, not everyone plays fair. According to one organic inspector who visited over 500 farms across North America, about 25 cases were very questionable. “I’m sure the honest vineyards are in the majority,” says Mischa Popoff, “but even if only one percent is breaking the rules, why should they get a free ride?”

Like real estate, much depends on location when growing organic grapes. If it’s dry, you don’t have to spray fungicides. Back at Rollingdale in Kelowna, head winemaker Joe Slykerman says the warm, dry, growing season helps deter mould and mildew. “Proper thinning and canopy management allows the almost constant breezes of the valley to keep humidity low around the fruit.” Joe says that after November, temperatures often dip below -25°C, which is great for keeping most grape pests at bay.

And what about the actual fruit? Do some varieties make for better organic grapes? According to Joe, different grapes require different considerations with respect to site selection, trellising method, canopy management, nutritional needs and more, but “all grapes are suited to organic farming,” he says, “because all were domesticated long ago and bred under essentially organic conditions.”

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