

# Sipping sustainably

Many winery owners in the Santa Cruz Mountains embrace sustainability, organic practices

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SANTA CRUZ — It was a desire to live a life in harmony with Mother Nature that led vintner Jerold O'Brien to organic farming 80 years ago.

"That's why I embraced the organic culture," he said.

O'Brien owns and operates Silver Mountain Winery in the Santa Cruz Mountains, one of just a handful of local vineyards and wineries that are certified organic. This means no chemicals, of course, but for O'Brien, creating an operation that benefits the environment has always been the larger focus.

"It's the most sustainable winery I'm aware of," said O'Brien, who's had the property for four decades.

The winery's barrel storage is partially underground in an artificial cave, where the high-humidity and stable temperature provides an ideal situation. Plus, O'Brien doesn't have to use power to maintain it.

He also uses gravity when processing fruit. The fruit is driven to the rooftop, where it's unloaded, crushed and pressed, then down the ramp it goes. This process allows O'Brien to use minimum electricity but, more importantly, it preserves the freshness and flavor of the fruit.

"We want to be more gentle and respectful of the fruit," he said. "Pumps bruise the fruit."

The highlight of the winery is the canopy, which O'Brien calls his "crown and glory." The steel structure creates



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The cover crops at Silver Mountain Winery, after they have been mowed, dry and become mulch. The winery's owner, Jerold O'Brien, has had the property near the top of Soquel San Jose Road for about 40 years.

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shade for equipment, including the fermentation tanks, and is the surface for the solar panels that generate enough electricity for the entire property — and then some. The canopy also collects

rainwater, which goes into a limited irrigation system.

"We use the water for everything," he said.

Using solar power, some of the water is pumped to the highest point on the property then fed back

down to the rest of the land.

It's not a huge money-saver, yet, but it creates a self-sufficiency that makes it worth it.

It's important to understand the

differences among organic, sustainable and biodynamic, he said.

If something is certified organic, there's a level of government control. Anything can be deemed sustainable, though

organizations such as the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance now create sustainable practices programs in an effort to create credibility. The term "biodynamic" is not governed by the government, either, rather the private organization Demeter USA attempts to

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control the title.

Sustainable and organic practices are fundamentally similar, O'Brien said. Many farmers produce organic goods but just don't sport the organic logo. Farming organic is easier than the certification process, he said.

Sustainable practices are common at vineyards throughout the county. Storrs Winery, for example, has created a new winery building that is LEED-certified, which stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

They've worked with a local organization to create a wildlife corridor to move deer around instead of through the property, and also bring baby doll sheep into the vineyard in the winter for weed control, according to Mary Lindsay, a partner at Muns Vineyard and the president of the Viticulture Association of the Santa Cruz Mountains.

"In our vineyards, and sustainable vineyard practices prefer that the soil not be tilled," she said. "We till lightly under the vines to keep the weeds and cover crop from growing into the vines, but for the most part growers prefer to not till between the rows to reduce erosion and maintain the soil surface."

Instead, she said, they mow the cover crop rather than plowing it to return it to the soil.

When it comes to vineyards, soil quality is of the utmost importance.

Richard Alfaro of Alfaro Family Vineyards and Winery, which is also certified organic, strives to maintain a balance where there's just the right amount of natural predators to take care of the problematic bugs. In the past, he's used remedies such as introducing

### AT A GLANCE

SUSTAINABLE WINEMAKING

**SILVER MOUNTAIN WINERY:**  
www.silvermtn.com  
**ALFARO FAMILY VINEYARDS AND WINERY:**  
www.alfarowine.com  
**MUNS VINEYARD:**  
www.munsvineyard.com  
**CALIFORNIA SUSTAINABLE WINEGROWING ALLIANCE:** www.sustainablewinegrowing.org

ladybugs to the vineyard so they can feast on soft-bodied bugs such as aphids. Pesticides can kill the bad bugs, of course, but they will likely kill the beneficial bugs, too.

"We have such a healthy vineyard, we don't have any issues like that," he said. "If you have a good environment, bugs take care of themselves."

Alfaro does a number of things to help protect the environment, including using solar panels and using owl boxes to take care of any pesky rodents.

Local farmers respect the land and recognize the balance that's needed for any successful ecosystem.

"They are stewards of their land," he said. "They're trying to improve it."

Before World War II, organic farming was the conventional way of doing things. After the war, "economic advances," O'Brien said, created incentives for farmers to grow as much food as possible, thus placing the emphasis on quantity not quality.

In the past 20 years, farmers have been shifting back to pre-war ideals, which gives O'Brien hope for the future.

"Some people finally realized 'back to earth' would benefit humanity," he said. "It may not benefit my pocketbook, but it will benefit humanity."



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The environmental highlight of Silver Mountain Winery is the canopy, which owner Jerold O'Brien calls his 'crown and glory.' The steel structure creates shade for equipment, including the fermentation tanks, and is the surface for the solar panels that generate enough electricity for the entire property — and then some. The canopy also collects rainwater.



Storrs Winery brings baby doll sheep into the vineyard in the winter for weed control. Not only do they take care of weeds without the use of chemicals, what they leave behind is good for the soil.

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