



One way the wine industry is meeting demand for more sustainable product is through certification.

Lessons From Sustainable Vineyard Farmers

By **BETH VUKMANIC** | *Executive Director, Vineyard Team*

While “sustainable” is a common term in agriculture today, this was not the case in 1994, when a small group of vineyard growers got together on California’s Central Coast to talk about critical resource concerns like safe pest management, soil quality, and farmworker training.

Nearly 30 years later, that small group of growers has expanded to include hundreds more, representing over 80,000 vineyard acres.

They are members of the non-profit organization, Vineyard Team. The organization continues to uphold the original growers’ mission: bringing together experienced growers and researchers to educate the industry on sustainable winegrowing practices. Today, sustainability is accessible to growers across the globe through in-field meetings, digital resources, and third-party certification.

Founders Dana Merrill of Mesa Vineyard Management, Steve McIntyre of Monterey Pacific, and Don Ackerman of Constellation Brands reflect on three decades of sustainable research and education.

How the Concept of Sustainability has Evolved

Consumers continue to prioritize their health and wellness as we enter the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic. But consumers' health needs have evolved beyond the basics of physical well-being. With increasing concern for the future health of our families, communities, and the planet, many consumers are seeking brands and products that promise a better tomorrow. In a 2021 study conducted by Simon-Kucher & Partners, 85% of respondents indicated they have shifted towards purchasing sustainable products over the last five years.

One way the wine industry is meeting this demand is through certification. Programs like SIP Certified verify that the vineyard and winery are implementing practices that protect the people and planet. The process requires that growers and winemakers adhere to specific practices and complete audits with third-party inspectors to verify compliance.

"Within the industry and the world, sustainability has become a guide for best practices," says Don Ackerman. "Acceptance and participation have snowballed." Dana Merrill concurs, "Today, sustainability is a standard operating procedure. Most buyers expect a sustainability certification."



According to Don Ackerman, owner of Constellation Brands and co-founder of Vineyard Team, sustainability has become a guide for best practices within the industry and around the world.



Steve McIntyre, owner of Monterey Pacific and co-founder of Vineyard Team, said that the goal of sustainability is to regularly improve at a farm level.

Do Growers Care About "Sustainability" or is it Buzz Word?

Consumers today are growing increasingly environmentally conscious. WWF commissioned global research by Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) in 2021 (An Eco Awakening) that found that searches for sustainable goods have increased globally by 71% since 2016.

Growers agree, certification is not just a marketing tactic.

Don Ackerman says, “We can do well by doing good.” Many certification programs began as an educational self-assessment tool. Today, certification enables winegrowers to better manage their practices.

Regular peer reviews with university Extension programs and professors, and industry experts ensure that the latest research and technology are incorporated into the SIP Certified program so participants implement new sustainable practices as they go through the certification process. Steve McIntyre reinforces that the goal of sustainability is to regularly improve at a farm level, “It is a competition with yourself.” Wine consumer demand for sustainable products increases annually, and winegrowers should communicate their good work through certification in order to be visible to consumers who are looking for sustainable wines. Incorporating science based, best practices is good for the environment and communities, and meets consumer demand.

Major Issues in Vineyard Sustainability Today

From Integrated Pest Management (IPM) to irrigation efficiency to labor supply, farmers need to balance numerous issues that impact sustainability in order to bring a marketable product to consumers. At its core, sustainability is a holistic approach to the business of winegrowing. A single practice can have an impact on more than just one specific area of production. A generous employee benefits program

will create labor stability for the vineyard and job stability for the employee. Decreasing irrigation reduces both water and electricity use.

When asked what they see as major issues in sustainability today, the founders mentioned the health and safety of workers, regenerative agriculture, technology, and pest management. The resounding theme in all of their responses was thinking about the cumulative impacts of a decision.

Sustainability encourages growers to consider multiple management options. Pest management is a great example of an area where the vineyard manager uses all of the tools in the tool box. IPM strategies begin with cultural practices, like leafing to reduce mildew pressure. These kinds of practices in turn reduce the load of pesticides applied to the vineyard, which improves health and safety conditions for workers, and often lowers costs to the vineyard.

“Farmers are continually looking for ways to do more with less,” says Steve McIntyre. His company addresses weed control by using multipurpose equipment. This practice decreases tractor passes, thus burning less fuel and reducing pollution.

Dana Merrill explains that good soil quality creates healthier plants so there is less need for chemical pest management. “Sustainability means farming the same ground hopefully forever because you have created a healthy system.”



At its core, sustainability is a holistic approach to the business of winegrowing.

Sustainable and the Ag/Urban Interface

In 2020, direct on-farm employment accounted for 2.6 million of the 19.7 million jobs related to the agricultural and food sectors -- just 1.4 percent of total United States employment. Building relationships between agriculture and residential neighbors is very important because few people have direct experience with agriculture. Safe farming practices like night sprays that prevent drift and protect workers from heat stress can be misunderstood. When farmers proactively get to know their neighbors, they open the lines of communication. This builds trust that can mitigate conflict and misunderstandings.

Dana Merrill explains that, “The more people understand sustainable the better they feel about being a neighbor to a working farm.” The requirements of being certified sustainable help to create good neighbors because sustainability necessitates consideration for the health and well-being of all members of the community. Don Ackerman believes that being considerate to neighbors is part of the ethos of sustainability. “Sound farming practices protect the environment for neighbors and the community.” Ultimately, sustainability helps farmers tell their story of stewardship. The Future of Sustainable

In viticulture, sustainability is a grassroots movement. In three decades of promoting sustainable winegrowing, countless growers have told Vineyard Team that they continue their education, trial new practices, push the bar, and get certified because “It’s the right thing to do.” Thirty years later, all three Vineyard Team founding members still see sustainability as the future because it is a doctrine that keeps evolving and improving so that winegrowers can have a positive impact on more acres, neighborhoods, and communities for years to come.