



Fetzer Vineyards: Champion of Sustainability

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Wine Notes by Heidi Cusick Dickerson

Fetzer Vineyards' contributions to making Mendocino County "America's Greenest Wine Region" are innumerable and impressive. Let's start with its latest accolade. Just this week Fetzer was recognized for the second time in five years with the Governor's Award for Environmental and Economic Leadership for the many ways the winery is reducing its carbon footprint and continually developing environmental innovations.

"The seeds of sustainability started at Fetzer in the late 1980s before green' and sustainable' were popular terms," says Ann Thrupp, Manager of Sustainability and Organic Development. The Fetzer family planted the organic fruit and vegetable garden that put Fetzer on the culinary and wine map. When they realized the remarkable quality and flavor of organic food, the Fetzers' decided that going organic in the vineyard would make their grapes even better as well. In the 1990s the Fetzer family began growing all their grapes organically.

Fetzer was one of the first to redesign vineyards to include riparian borders as natural habitat corridors for native wildlife. Cover crops and flowering plants like clovers, bell beans and vetch are planted between vines to enhance soil quality, reduce weeds and keep away harmful insects. In the 1990s, the goal of zero waste translated to all cardboard being packed and recycled, the grape stems, seeds and skins (pomace) composted, and all glass, plastics and metal materials recycled.

Fetzer sports the wine industry's largest array of solar panels which supply 1.1 million kilowatt hours of clean electricity annually to the bottling plant.

Fetzer's barrel room was built against an earthen berm, adding to its cooling quality and allowing flowers to grow on the outside wall. The administration building was the first commercially built rammed earth construction in Mendocino County. Electric carts carry workers around the grounds. Heavily insulated tanks reduce cooling expense. Winery workers carpool in vans supplied by Fetzer. Fetzer published a handbook on growing organic and sustainable winegrapes, which has been distributed widely to growers. In addition to its Manager of Sustainability Fetzer has a longtime winemaker and many other employees who are committed to the sustainability mission.

Ann Thrupp and Dennis Martin play different roles at Fetzer. Whereas Thrupp does outreach to grapegrowers and the public, Martin takes the grapes and oversees the crafting of consistently great affordable wines.

On a visit during harvest, trucks are waiting to unload grapes, which travel by conveyor belt to bins. The grapes are gently separated from their stems. The white grapes are pressed and the juice flows into well insulated tanks for a temperature controlled fermentation. The red grapes move into stainless steel tanks where they will stay with their skins until the right amount of flavor is extracted and then they are pressed and the juice piped into barrels. As I walk around the winery with Lucas Boek, an assistant cellar master, the air is thick with sweet grape juice aromas. Forklifts carry bins of stems and seeds off to the compost. We stop to watch a robotic machine that cleans and sterilizes equipment. Boek describes the commitment to cleanliness. "It's about wine quality," he says. "One bit of bacteria in a tank can ruin a lot of wine."

"I'm accountable for all the winemaking at Fetzer," says Martin, who is checking the "war room" where a white board denotes which tank holds which varietal and where it is in process. While overseeing six assistant winemakers, Martin strives to continue the style of winemaking that Paul Dolan, now one of the wine industry's foremost leaders in sustainable business and viticulture practices, developed along with Fetzer's founder Barney Fetzer.

Martin has been making wine at Fetzer for nearly 24 years. He grew up on a ranch in the Central Valley, where his family grew Thompson seedless grapes as well as peaches, plums and nectarines. His dad was a ranch manager and Martin "appreciated growing up farming." He went on to get a degree in Agricultural Business in 1973 and a master's degree in Enology and Food Science in 1975 from California State University at Fresno.

When Martin was at graduate school at Fresno State, he met Dolan. "Paul was a great mentor," says Martin, adding, "I owe my success to Paul's friendship and leadership." Dolan has received wide acclaim for his sustainability ethic and is now a partner at Parducci Cellars and Mendocino Wine Company. He was also instrumental in Thrupp coming to Fetzer.

"I joined Fetzer because of its leadership in sustainability and organics," says Thrupp, who has been here for six years. Previously she worked on sustainability projects for the World Resources Institute and the Environmental Protection Agency. She thought it would be a wonderful opportunity to work at Fetzer and wrote a letter to then president Dolan inquiring about a job. It so happened there was an opening, she was hired and she hasn't looked back. In addition to her own accolades and a year on the road with Fetzer's Eco-Tour, Thrupp served as the part-time Director of the CA Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance for two years and continues to consult with the program. She was recently appointed to the National Academy of Sciences National Research Council's Committee on 21st Century Systems Agriculture.

Within Fetzer, awards are given each year to an employee who comes up with a new sustainability project. One year it went to one of the backhoe drivers. He put recycle bins at each building for the employees to compost lunch and snack leftovers. Last year the award went to someone doing an innovative label. The awards originally known as E3 (for the company's commitment to environment, economics and social equity) have been renamed for the late Patrick Healy, a beloved employee and long time environmental champion.

The innovations and awards are too many to cover here but can be found on Fetzer's comprehensive website where you'll also find many details on the 13 wines with the Fetzer label. There's a wine for every taste from the slightly sweet Gewurztraminer and White Zinfandel to the bone dry Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Grigio and the food friendly Chardonnay and Syrah Rose. Reds include Syrah, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. The website has an excellent food and wine pairing chart and recipes to go with all the wines.

When you drink Fetzer's wines and learn the story of how the grapes are raised and where the wine is made, it's understandable why they are called Earth Friendly Wines.

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