

GREEN

Fingers

With a growing interest in everything organic, wine and wine farming is no exception. **Christine Grové** talks to two prominent eco wine farmers, known for keeping their farms green and their wines superb

What exactly are we eating and drinking and is it good for us and the environment? These are questions that South African consumers are increasingly asking. Two leading wine farmers shed some light on where green wine farming is today. Jonathan Grieves (JG) from Avondale Wines is the innovative creator of the Biologic farming method, reintroducing natural cycles, organisms and processes into the ecosystem, completely eliminating chemicals altogether. Paul Cluver Wines won the Nedbank Green Wine Awards 2011 for best environmental practices, and its winemaker Andries Burger (AB) was behind it all.

With organic food and beverages growing in trade, how does this affect the wine industry?

AB: The market for organic wine is still small. Organically produced wine still has a very short shelf life due to the restrictions on the use of sulphur as a preservative.

JG: I think it is very evident that there are a lot of 'green initiatives' currently happening in the wine industry. As a whole, the South African wine industry is one of the greenest in the world and has been recognised as such internationally. We have some great initiatives such as the Integrated Production of Wine (IPW) which regulates the responsible usage of chemicals, various ISO environmental certifications, and our own Biodiversity and Wine initiative (BWI) which is an amazing drive set up to preserve the natural fynbos. On the other hand, there are some producers that seek certification in accordance with internationally recognised organic and biodynamic standards. These standards focus on the true nurturing and preservation of nature without the use of any chemicals. This is also the only way to cut through the 'marketing speak' and ascertain whether the wine in question is truly natural.

I've heard that labelling a wine with an organic or biodynamic certification is less desirable, as it could push the price down or scare the consumer off. What are your thoughts?

AB: As mentioned, the perception regarding organic wine is the ability of the wine to age. The consumer needs to realise that there is a very big difference between organic production and biodynamic production sulphur is still used in the winemaking. Internationally and locally a lot of producers claim to farm biodynamically but very few are actually accredited. Consumers need to, and are in the process of educating themselves, learning the differences and also making their choices based on this.

JG: This was certainly true in the past but things are changing. I believe that the knowledge and techniques have really evolved to show that not only are natural wines as good as their counterparts, but in many cases actually better. More importantly, Avondale focuses completely on producing extraordinary wines approved by Mother Nature. There is a huge amount of detail and effort that goes into our winemaking process. The organic and biodynamic principles are key to how we achieve this quality and expression down to the bottle, but first and foremost it needs to be a quality product. We don't necessarily compare ourselves to other organic producers, but rather with other top-end producers both locally and internationally.

Why isn't everyone going green?

AB: Going green is not always sustainable and a lot of practices used in organic farming may be less harmful to the end consumer but it can be more harmful to the environment, like the use of copper sulphate as a fungicide (Copper is a heavy metal and does not break down). Most organic production started out of fear of what people are consuming and not what is better for the environment.

JG: I think the biggest problem is due to lack of knowledge and understanding. If you look at any tertiary education programme in agriculture very little focus is on natural farming. The fact is that most tertiary institutions are heavily funded through multi-national companies who stand to lose a lot ▶



if natural farming really 'takes off'. Most research is also funded by these same companies, which also explains to a large degree why there is very little exploration on this side. The organic/biodynamic approach is much more involved and you really see the rewards of what you implement both on a basic farm level but more importantly in the end product - which is also reflected in your customer's enjoyment of the wines.

What have been some of your biggest challenges in terms of new farming methods?

AB: The challenge is finding the best practice for your own situation, also farming can never be done by a recipe, vintages change and climatic conditions of this year differ from last year - one has to adapt to the environment. This is the real challenge; being able to read the elements on your farm, implementing an approach that will best suit all aspects of the wines, fine tuning from the very beginning to the very end, including the environment, the processes, people and of course the quality of the wine.

JG: The biggest challenge was that when we started it was difficult to obtain valuable knowledge resources. When we started there were very limited resources in South Africa and I relied hugely on research abroad throughout all types of farming disciplines. Luckily the organic/biodynamic community worldwide is a very open and sharing one. The other big challenge in the early days was to convince people that organic/biodynamic wines can be premium wines, and in fact can often express themselves more richly than their conventional counterparts.

Are sustainable farming practices more or less expensive than conventional farming and how easy are they to implement?

AB: In the long term, sustainable farming is more cost effective, because as the word says, it is sustainable. It is all about taking the best of all farming practices, conventional, biodynamic and organic, putting them together resulting in what is best for long-term health of the environment and applying that to your approach to farming.

JG: In essence, a farm is like a household and our soil is like the pantry. If the pantry is empty it costs money to restock it. In the Western Cape we have some of the oldest soils in the world, which have been exposed to huge weathering. This, combined with the modern chemical farming of the last seven decades, has resulted in greatly depleted soil. However, the amazing thing is that when we get a natural system working and thriving with a "replenished pantry", it becomes self-sustainable. If we are truly farming naturally and letting the natural system work for us through broad spectrum nutrition, living systems and biodynamic practices, your costs will then reduce dramatically. Most importantly, we are not directly tied to the chemical industry and subsequently held to ransom. 💎