

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

20% by 2020: Growers drive campaign to turn New Zealand's vineyards organic

Organic wine producers in New Zealand have announced a bold new goal: 20% of New Zealand vineyards will be organic by the year 2020.

"By 2020, even if we only achieve 20% of the vineyards in our country as being certified organic and biodynamic, it will be a giant step towards enforcing our very precious environmental image to wine connoisseurs all over the world," says organic grower and winemaker James Millton, chairman of Organic Winegrowers New Zealand (OWNZ).

OWNZ is a 140-member national association, led by growers seeking to share and promote the organic way.

"Organic winegrowing encompasses the goals of social, environmental and financial sustainability for our nation," Millton says.

New Zealand Winegrowers, the national organisation for New Zealand's grapegrowers and winemakers, is strongly supportive of the "20% by 2020" goal set by OWNZ, according to NZW CEO Philip Gregan. "We see the expansion of organics over the next decade as an important component of the industry's commitment to sustainability and are confident it will strongly support our brand positioning in global markets."

The amount of NZ vineyard land under organic certification has tripled in the past three years. The country's organic wine and grape industry has taken off as growers pursue environmental quality and wine quality, striving to differentiate themselves in a tough wine marketplace.

Nationwide, nearly 1500 hectares of vines on 115 vineyards are now managed organically – representing 4.5% of all vineyard land.

In 2010 OWNZ and New Zealand Winegrowers signed a Memorandum of Understanding to promote organic production together, through education, research, and marketing initiatives, with funding from wine industry levies. The agreement made the wine industry the nation's first to make such a formal long term commitment to supporting organics.

Making the switch

It is not just small artisanal growers who are turning green; many major New Zealand wine companies are now going organic. "We are attracted to the natural

approach to growing, which is the core of our business,” says Caine Thompson, viticulturist for Mission Estate in Hawkes Bay, New Zealand’s oldest winery.

This season, Mission Estate became the first “Organic Focus Vineyard” in a three-year research and education project. The project, funded by NZ Winegrowers and run by OWNZ, is comparing the merits of organic and conventional vineyards growing side by side. Growers nationwide are watching the trial unfold in real time, through field days and through a website at <http://organicfocusvineyard.com>.

And the results so far? Both the conventional and organic blocks are progressing in good health – and the organic block has actually been slightly cheaper to operate.

“Growing organically has been very fascinating and satisfying,” says Mission viticulturist Caine Thompson. “I’m finding that organic growing has raised awareness within myself and staff about how the vineyard block is looking and feeling. Blocks are visited and monitored more often, resulting in a genuine attachment to the land and the vine growing within its environment.”

Crazy – in a good way

No synthetic chemical fertilisers, pesticides or herbicides are permitted in organic vineyards. Instead, organic producers must work with ecological processes, biodiversity, and naturally derived products.

“The main outcome with organic winegrowing, and any other form of growing organic plants and animals, is that a closer relationship is established with Mother Nature,” says OWNZ Chair James Millton. “If you are good to her she always repays you.” The latest repayment for the Millton Winery: one of the highest honours in the recent Air New Zealand wine awards, a champion trophy for their 2009 Riverpoint Viognier.

When James Millton and his wife Annie started their organic vineyard in Gisborne in 1984, they were the only ones doing it in New Zealand. Says James: “In 1984 they thought we were crazy. We’ve just spent the last 28 years proving to everyone that they were right. We are crazy. But now it seems everyone wants to be crazy too and it’s just what this planet needs.”

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