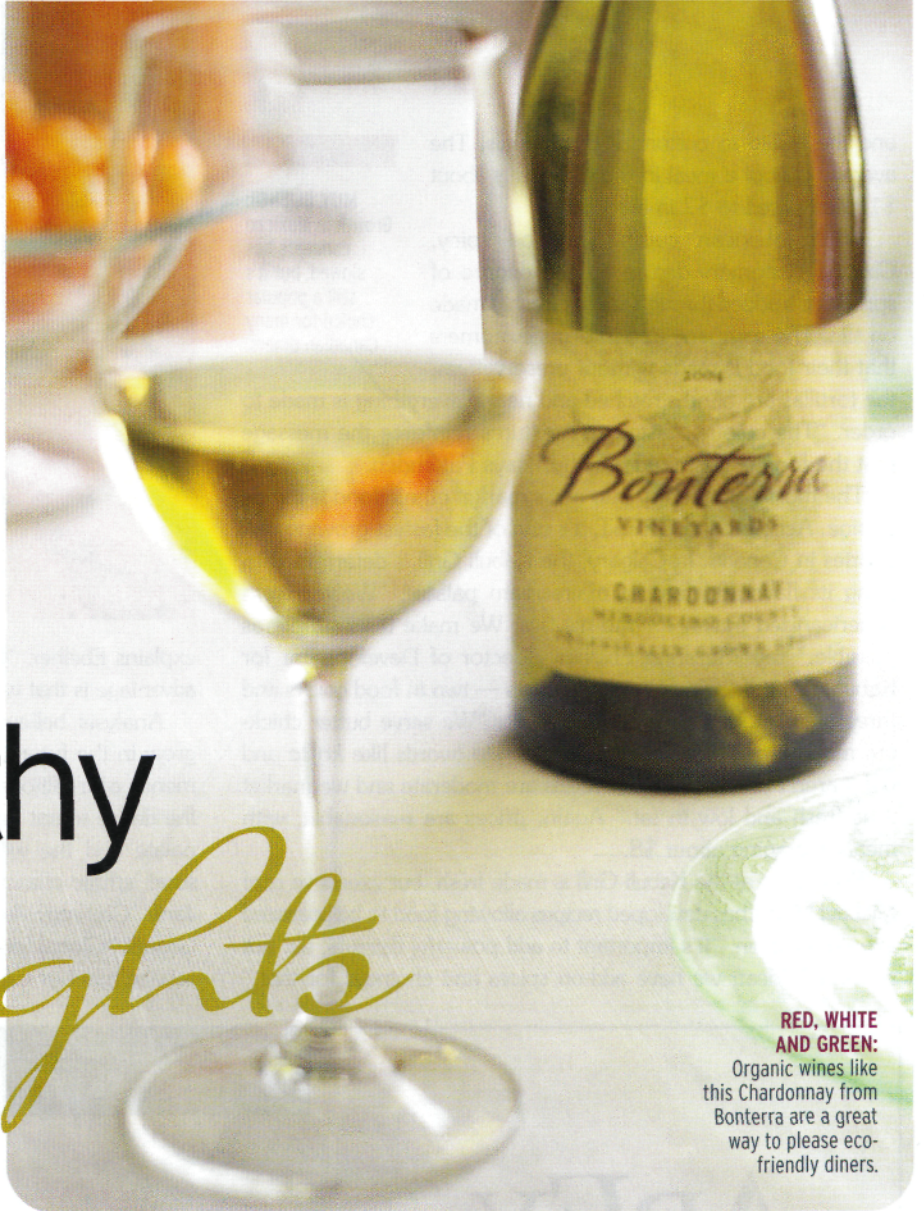


pouring for profits



Earthy *Delights*

Can lunar energy really make your Cabernet taste better?

BY MARGARET SWAINE

RED, WHITE AND GREEN:
Organic wines like this Chardonnay from Bonterra are a great way to please eco-friendly diners.

With concern about the environment top of mind, organic wines are no longer just a back of the shelf choice for the Birkenstocks and granola set. Today, consumers regularly seek out sustainable organic products from every industry. As more and more wineries around the world go organic, savvy restaurateurs are making room on their lists for earth-friendly options.

At Milestone's restaurants, patrons can select a variety of bottles in the \$20 range from Bonterra Vineyards, a Mendocino, Calif.-based organic winery. "Bonterra is a solid and refreshing quality offering," says Ian Tostenson, a strategist and advisor to the Cara Operations-owned Milestone's. "The fact that it's organic is a bonus." Tostenson, a member of B.C.'s Climate action team, says

stocking Bonterra raises a diner's awareness of how innovation related to climate change can occur in the vineyard.

But Milestone's isn't the only Canadian chain serving organic wines — Prime Pubs (part of the 150 eateries franchised by Prime Restaurants) has also added Bonterra to its wine list. "Offering organic wine speaks to consumers' desire to understand the source and means of production of the items they are consuming," says Nathan Cameron, beverage systems manager. "It adds another signifier to the wines character and source."

At The Living Vine, Mark Cuff's Toronto-based wine agency (which services most of eastern Canada), the focus lies solely on organic, biodynamic and sustainable producers. "The Living Vine

has really grown, but consumers won't buy a bottle just because it's labelled organic or biodynamic," says Cuff, who sells wines from more than 30 different producers. "It has to be great, and on par with wines that are not organic."

Cuff says it's taken him years to seek out top producers from around the world to put together a portfolio that works. These include Coulée de Serrant (France), The Millton Vineyard (New Zealand), Nikolaihof (Austria), Stella di Campalto (Italy), Sequillo (South Africa) and Organic Vignerons of Australia. "Ultimately, we hope the success of The Living Vine and its wineries will increase the amount of land under vine that's being grown with more sustainable methods."

In Toronto, a who's who of top restaurants offer wines from The Living

Vine including Jamie Kennedy Wine Bar, ByMark, Canoe, Cava, and more. And according to Cuff, sales have been strong and are growing.

Cuff also helped organize the organic-focused “Return to Terroir” wine tastings, which took place in Montreal and Toronto this past February as part of a world tour. This unique, international festival brings together 50 like-minded wineries from four continents to showcase their wines and demonstrate a shared commitment to biodynamic/organic grape growing and winemaking. Founded by Nicolas Joly in 2001, its board of directors include owners of some of the world’s most revered wineries.

WHAT MAKES WINE ORGANIC?

According to wine industry trade magazines, 2008 could be the year organic wine really takes off. But what’s it all about? Let’s start with the basics. In general, three types of farming are used to produce wine — conventional, organic and biodynamic. The latter elevates organic to the stratosphere by taking into account the plants’ natural seasonal rhythms as well as lunar and cosmic energy.

In organically farmed wine, no chemicals, herbicides or pesticides can be used in the vineyard. Soil health is maintained naturally by aeration

How to spot organic wine

On Dec. 14, 2008, the federal government’s new Organic Products Regulations, passed in 2006 under the Canada Agricultural Products Act, come into force. Two national organic standards entitled “Organic Production Systems General Principles & Management Standards” and “Organic Production Systems Permitted Substances List” were published in parallel by the Standards Council of Canada. These standards set out requirements for all food products sold in Canada that claim to be organic or made with organic ingredients. In Ontario, the LCBO has already announced that all wines claiming to be organic must comply with the new federal regulations. They must also carry the new “Canada Organic/biologique Canada” logo with the name of the certification body stated.

That’s good news for eco-conscious oenophiles. Soon, spotting and enjoying an organic wine will be easier than ever.



and composting. Three years of uninterrupted organic cultivation is necessary to obtain certification. (Random soil samples are taken a minimum of once a year to check for pesticide residue.) The use of synthetic products is banned. Sulphur, copper, natural micro fauna and pheromones are used to control vine diseases and pests. No chemical fining (where a chemical agent is used during production to aid in the clarification of a wine) is allowed in the winemaking and the use of sulphur is more restricted. Most countries

DID YOU KNOW?

Two excellent books, *Wine from Sky to Earth* by Nicolas Joly and *Biodynamic Wines* by Monty Waldin explain the concept of biodynamic wines in detail.

France

Loire: This biodynamic hotspot is home to top producers such as Domaine Huet and organic wine pioneer Nicolas Joly at Coulée de Serrant. The Chenin Blanc-based whites are long lived and vibrant on the palate with a lingering finish. Their good acidity matches well with seafood such as crab and fish. (\$50 to \$115 for the Joly wines. \$25 to \$30 for Huet.)

Austria

Nikolaihof winery in Wachau makes well-structured and complex Grüner Veltliner whites, perfect to serve with all manner of seafood and poultry. (\$35 to \$150.)

New Zealand

Millton's Chardonnay, Viognier and Chenin Blanc whites are crisp with the minerality that comes from deep-rooted vines. The juicy Pinot Noirs are perfect with salmon and marlin. (\$25 to \$55)

have a recognized organic farming system with third-party organizations for certification.

Biodynamic farming also prohibits the use of all chemicals and synthetic products, but it's much more complex. Biodynamics considers the farm in its entirety as a living system. (Soil, for example, is an organism in its own right.) It's based on the beliefs of Rudolf Steiner, the father of anthroposophy, which he dubbed the spiritual science.

Here's an example of how the three farming methods differ. After harvesting, the conventional farmer will spray chemical fertilizer onto the vines and start pruning. The organic farmer will spread organic compost onto the soil, plough it in and start pruning. The biodynamic farmer will spray natural biodynamic solutions (such as cow manure fermented in a cow horn that was buried and overwintered in the soil) and start composting but not pruning. (The biodynamic farmer will only prune in the winter when the sap has sunk into the root system away from the vine shoots to be cut.)

Organic farming is more costly than conventional methods. The regular application of green practices at every stage is necessary to maintain soil and vine health. Labour costs are higher, as are the price of treatments, and subscriptions to certifying bodies need to be made. Biodynamic

farming is even more expensive and time consuming, and it's considered manageable only on small vineyards.

CAN YOU TASTE IT?

Organic and biodynamic practices are certainly healthier for the environment but they don't make much difference to the wine. Organic wines don't contain any pesticide residues but then conventional wines rarely do either — the fermentation and filtration process they go through clarifies them, removing pesticides. "We test everything and hardly any wines have detectable levels of pesticide," says Dr. George Soleas, vice-president, Quality Assurance at the LCBO. "Organic wines are not hugely different from other products."

Soleas says if he were buying strawberries or peaches, he'd buy organic, as he'd be eating the final product. But when it comes to wine, "the vinification process is an excellent filtration system."

But to a growing number of wine critics' tastes, organic wine has a special vibrancy on the palate — especially in the biodynamic category — that many commercial wines lack. Nevertheless, at the end of the day an organic wine's much friendlier impact on the environment is what makes it compelling. □