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NOVEMBER 2019

FUTURE OF WINE
Conference
Exploring sustainability
in the UK wine industry

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WINE REVIEW
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EDITOR'S VISIT
Little Wold Vineyard
Part two of our
Yorkshire special

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Sustainable wines

Moments before Minette Batters, NFU president, declared the 2019 National Fruit Show open to visitors she avowed that the UK's horticultural industry, which in this context includes viticulture, should strive to become the "most sustainable in the world".

Referring to the NFU's new report Achieving Net Zero: Farming's 2040 Goal, Batters claimed that "there is a moral obligation for us to produce more in this country" and that all growers should be able to produce "climate friendly" fruit in a way which the "rest of the world hasn't been able" and one which "really shows leadership in sustainable production".

The NFU's report sets out three pillars of activity that it believes will help the industry to reach its ambitious goal. These include improving productive efficiency; improving land management and changing land use to capture more carbon; and boosting renewable energy and the wider bio-economy.

While aimed at the entire agricultural sector there is much which can be adapted specifically to UK viticulture, from looking at ways to reduce emissions; to capturing more carbon through bigger hedgerows, more trees and woodland; and enhancing soil organic matter.

There is no doubt that climate change is one of the biggest challenges which growers, winemakers and wine retailers all currently face. It is rising rapidly on the political agenda, both at home and globally. 'Climate strike' (defined as a protest demanding action on climate change) has been named the Word of the Year for 2019 by the Collins Dictionary. Last year this accolade was given to 'single-use' (referring to products, often plastic, which are made to be used only once before they are thrown away).

With this in mind, the UK wine industry must look at the way in which it can be more sustainable. Hoping to deal with this exact topic, a conference called the Future of Wine was held on 4 November, see page 24.

While Batters may expect the UK horticultural industry to be a world leader in sustainable production, the UK viticulture scene was slammed at the conference for lagging well behind other wine regions as it does not yet have a functioning sustainability scheme in place. One is due to be launched by WineGB in early 2020; let's hope it fulfils its aim of attracting 150 growers, and then some!

There is no single answer to the climate change challenge, and as the conference outlined too, in reality sustainability digs much deeper than simply deciding to stop using chemicals. While producers, particularly the small to medium sized in the UK, may question what impact they really have as individuals, it is clear that sustainability is going to be the only way forward.

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The Future of Wine

Those interested in how sustainability impacts the business of wine travelled from around the world to the Conduit Club, Mayfair, London for a one-day conference called The Future of Wine.



Held on 4 November 2019, the conference was organised by Sustainable Wine, an online platform and debate-driven business focused on promoting sustainable practises across the wine industry. Over 120 delegates were in attendance from the sector, including estate owners, vineyard managers, leading winemakers, retailers, masters of wine and industry experts.

To facilitate frank and honest conversation on topics such as what sustainability means; how producers can become more sustainable; how consumer expectations are evolving in terms of packaging; as well as what retailers want and the role of sustainability schemes, the conference was held under the Chatham House rule.

"The audience of winemakers, vineyard managers and many others, was incredibly engaged, thoughtful and enthusiastic," said Tobias Webb, co-founder and director of Sustainable Wine Ltd, organisers of the event. "The general mood seemed to be that a holistic approach to sustainability is much needed and recognised. We're looking forward to publishing some follow up podcasts with speakers and will be running more events in 2020."

Defining sustainability in wine

While many speakers and delegates attempted to tackle the definition of what sustainability means to the wine industry, it was ultimately concluded that it is too much of an all-encompassing subject to be fully unpacked.

With a vast array of topics up for discussion, it was clear that sustainability touches every inch of viticulture, winemaking and subsequent marketing and retail. Sustainability is the estate owner thinking about whether vine varieties planted will continue to be suitable in their region as the climate changes. It is the vineyard manager dedicated to producing a bountiful and quality harvest year on year, for generations to come, as weather events become more volatile, without causing damage to the soils, wildlife or water resources.

It is the winemaker looking to offset the Co2 emissions, recycle the water, or better consider the additives and products used in the vinification process. It is the employer considering the economic and social impact the business has on the local community. It is the

marketeer implementing labels and websites with transparent information on the production process. It is the retailer opting to stock wines in alternative non-glass vessels. It is the end consumer putting their money where their mouth is, spending more on a 'sustainably produced' bottle of wine.

The room was also clear in its desire to define what sustainability is not. Although sustainable practices cannot simply come to a halt once a budget is spent, there was a strong desire from growers and retailers alike to move away from the notion that sustainability is synonymous with snowballing costs of production. Instead, producers should be encouraged to start with low risk, low cost ventures that will help nurture a passion for sustainable practices.

It was agreed that this passion would also prevent sustainability from simply being a box ticking exercise. When looking at the wide subject of sustainability, each and every business connected to the wine industry should be able to find methods which they want to implement, and which work well in their individual situation.

Finally, it was emphasised that those putting

sustainable practices in place should avoid creating a hierarchical environment with a “we are better than you attitude” – often a stereotype attached to certified growers. While it was agreed that the beauty of organics is that it is a powerful marketing tool which captures several sustainability metrics under one umbrella, it was also noted that being part of certified schemes can be stifling from the producer’s point of view.

Alternatively, it would be far more beneficial for millions to be trying to do one sustainable thing imperfectly, operating outside of a scheme, than to have no one doing anything out of fear of doing it wrong, not going far enough or being beholden to a long list of requirements.

Vineyard practices

So, what sort of practices are considered to be sustainable and what inspiration can growers in the UK take from the Future of Wine forum?

It was no surprise that terms such as organics, biodynamics and agroforestry were banded about. In a discussion around the long-term future of certain grape varieties in specific regions, it was suggested that trees planted in strategic places could offer shade, and thus reduce the vineyard’s temperature.

Many talked about ceasing the use of herbicides, particularly glyphosate, and there were discussions about the power and potential of cover crops in deterring weeds. Cover crops, such as clover, were considered as a viable method to reduce soil disruption and diesel consumption linked with the use of mechanical weeders, while also helping to increase the vineyard’s biodiversity. Finally, after the crop has finished, there is also the option for growers to add natural nutrients back into the soils.

When discussing chemicals, one organic grower explained that when their government issued an “organic insecticide” to fight a deadly vine virus dubbed the “new phylloxera”, to avoid this moral confusion, the grower decided to take a natural approach. This simply included checking vine rows intently, pulling out damaged plants early and using pheromones to deter the species of butterfly thought to be the cause of the problem.

Another grower talked about the overall importance of not trying to fight nature, but simply finding better ways of dealing with it. After experiencing an increasing number of challenging and sporadic weather events, emphasising that they had witnessed more incidents of hail, frost, heatwaves and the likes in the last decade than two preceding generations had witnesses in their entire lifetimes, the grower joked that they had “invested in a chapel” and had started praying.

Obsessed with soil

On a more positive note, one speaker praised the wine industry for being obsessed with soil. They said that while there are other terroir driven beverages, such as tea, wine is the only sector which promotes the soil not just from a vineyard level, but all the way through the business to the winemaking and the marketing. With this, the speaker stated that wine businesses should be incredibly grateful that the consumer already sees their produce as natural, with a strong connection to the earth, and that this image and dialogue around soil needed to be carefully carried forward by each generation.

On this subject too, soil health specialist Ross Barclay-Beuthin, director of Cloud Agro, explained to the audience how he had revived an unproductive, bankrupt vineyard in South Africa. In just one season, after applying a mixture of water, Lucerne and chicken manure, Ross had managed to “quadruple the vineyard’s output of grapes”.

“The previous owner of the vineyard had said that his 10-year-old vines were not producing a crop no matter how much fertiliser he applied,” said Ross. “On the surface, the soil looked healthy and well fertilised, but digging down to the root level, the soil’s B horizon was desperately depleted. Salt deposits from the foliar feeds and synthetic fertilisers had

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built up, killed the microbial life and the vines were unable to access essential nutrients.”

From this, Ross realised that he had found both the problem of why soils had become so degraded and the solution as to how they could be rehabilitated and Cloud Agro's Smart Feed system (the process of looking at what a vine requires and feeding the soil accordingly) was born.

When considering soil sustainability, Ross' final advice to growers in the audience was to always ensure that they put back whatever they take out.

Working with nature

Also advocating that sustainability in the vineyard is all about carefully managing inputs was Somerset vineyard owner Jane Awty. Jane and her husband Ian planted Oately Vineyard some 34 years ago. Although they are not organic, opting to use phosphites to control downy mildew over copper for instance, they have not sprayed herbicide since the land was prepared for planting in 1985.

“Our approach to sustainability came after discovering that it is much easier to work with nature,” said Jane. “After planting we were



> Chris Foss

faced with a lot of Chamomile and didn't quite know what to do. Instead of using herbicide, we bought a ride on lawn mower. Now we allow alternate rows to come to seed and with this we attract over 50 species of insects, which includes beneficial predators. The only pests we have are wasps, which are controlled by hornets. The birds feed from the ancient hedgerows surrounding the vineyard and we also benefit from a local population of buzzards.”

Jane also emphasised the importance of observing each individual vine. The couple continue to do all their own pruning, using this time to identify poor looking vines which they can later target with an application of horse manure.

Respecting the wood

When it comes to pruning, the Awtys use a pruning method which honours the direction of the sap flow; and interestingly the link between pruning and sustainability was also discussed at the conference.

Growers were reminded that every year the vine is pruned, each cut has a lasting impact on the vine's health, performance, longevity and development of shoots and fruits. Those planting vines need to think about the space which each vine will occupy in the long term. To help vines which have been poorly pruned over the years, growers need to think about the training system being implemented and whether there is a better long-term option.

Most importantly, growers need to invest in training workers to take a sustainable approach to pruning, looking at the way the sap flows, because in the long term it doesn't matter if you are organic, or even biodynamic, if the vines are not being respected.

A question from the floor asked how estates could guarantee retaining these skilled workers after they had invested in their education. The

response was that not only should trained workers feel more valued, but if growers find a way to implement a system which is tailored to the vineyard, the workers would only learn how to operate in your specific site.

Simple solutions and rules to help achieve sustainable pruning practises will be delivered at the UK's first vine pruning school which will take place at Plumpton College, Sussex, early next year.

Social sustainability

One estate owner, new to viticulture, emphasised that while it is important to avoid harmful practices, there is also an economic and social responsibility to ensure that the crop makes it to the winery. Sustainability is about having a balance between doing what's right – mechanical weeding, instead of herbicides; pheromones instead of insecticides – without compromising the end product – not spraying, losing all fruit to disease and having no product for sale.

With this in mind, producers need to find better ways to facilitate open dialogue with consumers to explain what sustainability is in simple terms and why it is perfectly acceptable to use non-organic products and methods in certain situations.

One other speaker who touched on the importance of social sustainability was Tony Milanowski, ex-Plumpton College lecturer who is now winery manager at Sussex's Rathfinny Wine Estate.

As well as basing their approach to sustainability on UN guidelines, implementing a vast number of projects across the whole business, Tony explained that from day one the owners, Mark and Sarah Driver, have been committed to enriching the local economy while respecting the environment.

What was once an arable farm employing just



> Jane Awty

two people, is now a thriving vineyard, winery, cellar door, restaurant and accommodation facility employing up to 300 people during peak times. While other vineyards may source harvest labour from further afield, Rathfinny has successfully attracted the majority of its staff from within an approximate 10-mile radius.

This sense of responsibility to the local community and dedication to providing a future for those involved in the estate was further echoed by another conference delegate. When assessing whether or not moving their bottling facilities to the UK (to save shipping glass bottles halfway across the world) would be a more sustainable business practice, it was decided that the loss of jobs caused by relocating would have such a devastating impact on the local area that the right, most socially sustainable thing to do would be to stay put.

An outdated vessel

It was no surprise that the subject of packaging, particularly the sustainability of glass bottles, was raised in almost every session of the conference.

Questions from the floor throughout the day included: “is changing bottle weight not an easy win when considering how much would be saved in both production of the bottle and shipment of the wine?”; “why do retailers not implement and enforce maximum bottle weight on suppliers?”; “can a reusable bottle scheme not be introduced?”; “what would retailers really say if producers used alternative packaging?”; and “what are the dangers of switching to plastic?”.

Saving the best session till last, organisers Agatha Pereira and Tobias Wood had scheduled an entire debate on packaging and how to manage consumers’ changing expectations which ran through all these topics.

Firstly, in terms of introducing reusable glass bottles, large retailers had concerns over labelling regulations and hygiene issues. If bottles are being cleaned in bulk, it is unknown what impact the sterilisation process will have on the water and energy use of a store.

When it comes to customer expectations, there is most definitely a need to balance what customers want with what is scientifically proven, right for producers and sustainable for the entire wine industry. Otherwise

retailers are just contributing to the problem.

Retailers also said that they are looking at bottle weights,



> Ross Barclay-Beuthin

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and someone from the floor pointed out that some tenders will start stipulating lighter glass bottles, but the main focus within this is on 'right weighting', as packaging ultimately has to be fit for purpose.

For small volume, high end wine ranges too, it is not feasible for retailers to dictate to producers how the wines are made or packaged. The impact on the overall environmental picture is miniscule because of the lower volumes sold, but as the producer could in turn refuse to supply the retailer. This would have an economic impact as it would negatively affect the retailer's wine range and limiting what's on offer could then see customers go elsewhere.

When thinking about light weight bottles, one speaker suggested that what the industry was aiming to do was comparable to "Henry Ford trying to make better horses" and that the industry needed to wake up to the fact that "we are still using a vessel designed in the 19th Century".

As discussed, sustainability is not just about the ability to recycle packaging, and nor does glass' recyclability mean it is sustainable. Customers need to understand the whole lifecycle, including what energy is required to make glass bottles, as well as what impact it has on wine transportation, including the secondary packaging producers invest in to ensure safe delivery. One speaker joked that sample bottles of wine are often sent to trade and press in boxes "big enough to hold a TV". Another emphasised that if wine was invented today it certainly wouldn't be put in glass, and if it all came down to weight, plastic would be the ideal alternative.

Alternative packaging options

In a post-Blue Planet, David Attenborough inspired world, however, plastic is a topic which needs to be approached carefully. Consumers are single minded and currently obsessed with the idea that if they can throw something in the recycling bin they are "saving the planet" and if they have to put it in a normal bin they have just "killed a turtle".

As one person eloquently put it, "sometimes plastic is the right decision, but companies don't know how to say it, and consumers don't want to hear it". With this in mind, it was suggested that the entire conversation around plastics needed altering. As not all plastics are equally as harmful, we should be using polymer names instead of this catch-all phrase.

There has been a lot of development into alternative packaging, with premium bag in box and canned wines coming to the market, but, warned retailers, there is still a long way to go. These forms of packaging are currently very occasion led and although they have effectively encouraged more people to choose to drink wine, they are not replacing bottles. Given that so much wine history is entwined with the glass bottle, the industry cannot expect customers to "forget this overnight and turn to alternative forms of packaging".

Confused as to what the options are, a delegate asked what retailers would say if they wanted to take their range down an alternative packaging route. It was decided that producers should be proactive and not just wait around for others to make the change first, but any sensible business should run a trial before converting all stock and speaking openly with retail partners is also vital.

Sustainability schemes

Finally, the Future of Wine conference discussed the effectiveness of sustainability schemes. The retailers were asked why they cannot simply stipulate that all suppliers be part of sustainability schemes. It was agreed that there needs to be "willing and passion", you cannot simply "beat people with a stick" and, as outlined earlier, it is better to have people taking some form of action without them feeling put off by the whole 'box ticking exercise' approach.

It was widely agreed that to be effective, sustainability schemes should be tailored to meet the individual needs of each wine region, and more importantly, schemes should be fluid and open for review on a regular basis.

However, with this variation, one delegate wanted to know how schemes would remain relevant to consumers and how wine drinkers are supposed to know what they all mean.

In the UK, which was deemed drastically "lagging behind the rest of the world" when it comes to sustainability, Chris Foss said that WineGB was expecting to see around 150 growers sign up for its sustainability scheme, which will be launching in 2020.

While it was questioned from the floor what retailers could do to help the UK move the scheme along, Chris said that in terms of interest and support they were "pushing at an open door", it was just taking a bit longer to get everything started with so many people having joined the platform to discuss sustainability issues and set joint guidelines.

