

Good organic wine just got a lot easier to find

By [Dave McIntyre](#)

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Last week, I wrote about a winery executive's call for critics to highlight — even favor — [wineries that practice environmentally friendly viticulture](#). The executive cited the Michelin guides as an example, for bestowing green stars on restaurants that use organic ingredients.

After that article was written, Robert Parker Wine Advocate, a leading subscription website now owned by Michelin, announced that it was offering a filter allowing readers to search for wines certified as made using sustainable, organic or biodynamic farming methods. It also unveiled a special Robert Parker Green Emblem for producers who, the publication said, “have demonstrated extraordinary efforts in the pursuit of environmentally friendly practices.”

Wine Advocate may not be the dominant force it was before Parker — once [dubbed by the Atlantic](#) as “the most influential critic in the world” and “the million-dollar nose” for the insurance policy he took out on his sense of smell — sold the brand and retired. But its team of 10 reviewers maintains a prolific pace, publishing more than 26,000 reviews of wines from more than 5,000 producers last year despite the pandemic. Based in Singapore, the publication is especially influential in fast-rising Asian markets, such as China.

Nicolas Achard, CEO of Robert Parker Wine Advocate, gave a slightly contradictory explanation for the genesis of the green features in an [interview with CNBC](#). He cited a “global trend” of consumers asking for information about “responsible and committed viticulture.” Yet he also said there is “a misconception that organic and biodynamic wines don't taste good.” In information provided by a spokesperson about the new features, the company said this skepticism is particularly strong among consumers in Asia.

So by praising producers who are good to the environment, the publication hopes to drive home the point that “sustainable winemaking is highly compatible with quality of taste,” Achard said.

This is a significant and positive shift in perspective on wine. When I first fell in love with the grape back in the 1980s, organic wines were few and far between and considered inherently faulty because of the lack of sulfites, a commonly used natural preservative that keeps wine from spoiling in bottle. Organic food was wilted, bug-ridden produce available only at co-ops. Then the rise of community farmers markets, Whole Foods Market and other organic-minded grocery stores helped organic go mainstream. Wine went along for the ride.

It hasn't been an easy journey. Confusion persists over definitions, especially in the United States, where the government defines an organic wine as one without added sulfites. That's why we have the "made with organic grapes" designation. Several states and private third-party organizations offer sustainable certifications with similar but differing requirements, and these focus mostly on the vineyard, not the winery. European and other national certifications can differ slightly, especially regarding sulfites. Biodynamics, even with its mystical aspects, may be the most precisely defined. Many wineries may follow eco-friendly practices without going through the expense and effort of getting certified. So there's the prospect of greenwashing — wineries making claims on their labels that consumers have no way to verify. A third-party certification offers some accountability and transparency. Without it, we have to take the winery's word for it.

Certifications are also evolving. The new regenerative and B Corporation certifications are not just for wineries. They establish environmentally and socially responsible practices for all businesses, including a focus on working and living conditions for employees.

Robert Parker Wine Advocate bestowed its new Robert Parker Green Emblem on 24 wineries in eight countries. Five were from the United States: The Eyrie Vineyards in Oregon, Horsepower Vineyards in Washington, and Littorai Wines, Ridge Vineyards and Spottswode Estate in California. The list will be updated annually, and wineries could lose the emblem if their sustainability efforts falter.

The publication's reviewers selected these wineries, which may or may not be certified, for making environmentally friendly decisions such as: avoiding use of herbicides, pesticides, fungicides and synthetic fertilizers; planting native vegetation around vineyards and using cover crops to manage soil between vine rows; using horses instead of tractors to tend vineyards; use of renewable energy such as solar or biomass; manual harvesting; packaging with recycled materials or lower-weight glass bottles; and measures to conserve water and reduce carbon footprint.

Reading this list, I'm struck by how many of those practices are not strictly agricultural but also reflect choices we make as individuals such as putting solar panels on our homes or driving electric cars. We're all on the same Earth, and we're all on it together. Why not seek out wines from producers who make a special effort to take care of it?