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Paul Henry defends
his strategy in the UK



Sustainable winemaking is a complex business when done right, with the added challenge of communicating it to the consumer, finds

Anne Krebiehl

Sustainability is the new buzzword. It's clever and cool but what does it actually mean? Quite literally it's "the ability to endure" but the term now stands for a different way of thinking. Sustainability is the over-arching concept used to assess the economic, social and ecological viability and impact of a business or an industry. Tricky, huh?

Take, for example, organically farmed wine in a heavyweight bottle or a high-yield vineyard crippled by irrigation costs. In a global and complex world it's no longer sufficient to look at single processes in isolation. Sustainability tries to take in the whole picture, from grape to glass and is a huge subject. Considering the already deafening cacophony of carbon neutral, recyclable and Fairtrade claims, consumers and trade can be forgiven for feeling confused.

Beyond marketing tactics

For cynics who regard sustainability as yet another marketing ploy, Jo Wehring, UK market manager for Wines of South Africa, puts it starkly: "I would say the marketing is definitely secondary to the realisation in the late 1990s that if the environment wasn't protected there wouldn't be an industry to talk about."

As of the 2010 harvest, accredited South African wineries will bear a neck label certifying their sustainable status. "About 55% of the industry will have the new seal from 2010 and we expect that to be about 80% from 2011," Wehring says.

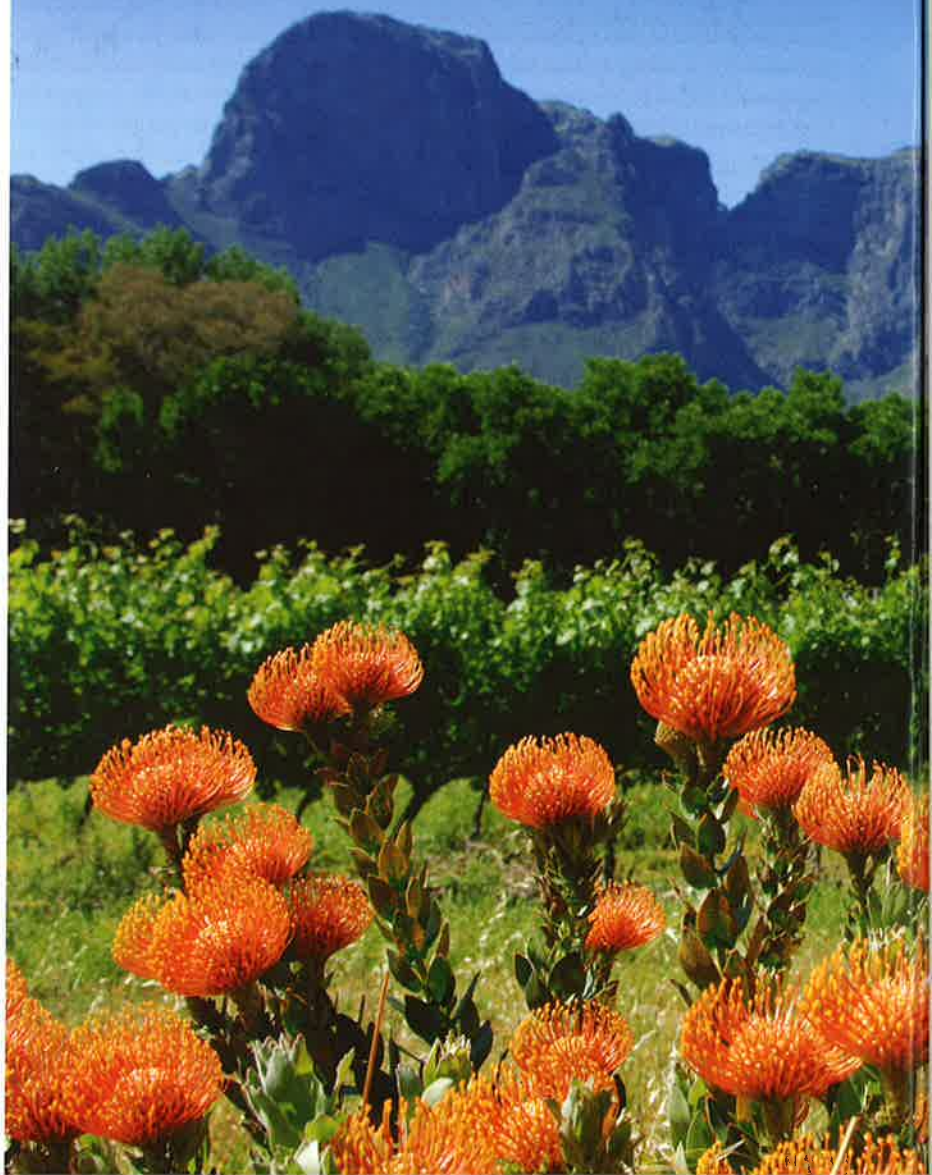
So far only South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, California and Oregon have active sustainability programmes in place, with just South Africa and New Zealand far enough along to certify it on the bottle. Oregon has a bottle logo, but not a fully fledged programme yet.

For both South Africa and New Zealand, it's been a slow process. "The scheme's been going since 1998. We are only now at a point where we are able to put a seal on bottles," says Wehring. Philip Manson, science and innovations manager at New Zealand Winegrowers, started looking at these issues in the early 1990s. "For us it is not a sudden awakening of a market opportunity, it's been a long realisation – not only for the good of the environment but also for our continued presence in export markets," he says.

While South Africa's scheme is still voluntary, NZW aims to have every winery certified by 2012. "A pretty aspirational goal," according to Manson, but membership already accounts for more than 92% of vineyards and more than 85% of wine production.

This uptake, however, is not purely down to idealism. It's a smart choice since sustainability's long-term stance

The bigge picture



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makes business sense. "People think it's the right thing to do and a better way to farm but there is a business case for getting involved," affirms Gladys Horiuchi, communications manager at California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance, whose members represent 68% of the state's wine production and 63% of vineyard acreage.

"People simply like the efficiencies these programmes can provide," she says. This can be as obvious as saving energy and water and doing without expensive agrochemicals. Wehring agrees: "Quite often you find if you adhere to practices that are environmentally sound there is a genuine benefit to the business," she says.

Being sustainable goes beyond being green, it means being efficient and competitive in a global market. Getting everyone to understand this would certainly reduce scepticism. The concept of sustainability is also at the heart of Wine Australia's Direction to 2025 strategy, outlining a vision where being sustainable essentially means being competitive and profitable, where market access, regulation and taxation are as important as ecological conservation.

The consumer challenge

But the generic bodies face a challenge. An issue so far-reaching and complex makes it hard to communicate in snappy soundbites. The main thrust is environmental, spanning biodiversity, pest management, waste, pollution, wildlife preservation, energy, packaging and transport (this list is not exhaustive). The other concepts, such as economic imperatives and social aspects are less well understood. These may cover employer relations, education, training, safety and treatment of seasonal workers, and can stretch to responsible marketing of alcoholic drinks.

"It's still early days in terms of communicating," says Wehring, adding that the scheme "gets constantly updated, the aspects we include grow and develop, and you will probably find those kinds of messages come more to the fore in the future".

David Cox, European director of NZW, believes that "at a time when many different companies, products and people are making all sorts of claims, we have to be very careful to be transparent". He says: "We are about to embark on a substantial programme of communication of our sustainable credentials, starting with our website and cranking up the noise."

"Sustainability is a complicated message to convey to consumers," adds Clem Yates, Sainsbury's BWS product technologist. "Until we understand how we communicate sustainability to the consumer we are focusing on working with suppliers to find out how to make the whole supply chain more sustainable for the future."

It may take more time but supermarkets will have a central role in taking the idea mainstream. Cox believes there are many "ethical shoppers" with whom the idea of sustainability will resonate.

Credibility is not an issue. Externally audited certification "is a really important element of environmental programmes", Manson says. "Wineries need to say 'we've applied a standard here, we've implemented it



and we are being audited to show we actually meet those criteria'."

Wehring says South Africa's scheme is "self-assessed annually but also independently audited". However, she also believes that "there is huge value in initiatives that are powered by voluntary enthusiasm". California and Oregon's schemes also remain voluntary.

As of yet, the various programmes are not comparable. Yates admits "the various standards of certification are confusing". There are some international guidelines, devised by the Fédération Internationale des Vins et Spiritueux, known as GWSESP (Global Wine Sector Environmental Sustainability Principles Project) which have been adopted by the International Organisation of Vine & Wine (OIV) and its members in 2008. However, implementation rests with individual countries.

Angeliki Tsioli, head of viticulture at OIV, remarks how difficult the reconciliation of opposing aims can be. "One given measure could cover environmental guidelines, but its cost or impact on the social level may overcome the affordable limits."

California based its scheme on the ISO 14001 standard. "We knew if our wineries started out with these building blocks it would only be a few steps from international certification," says Horiuchi.

New World takes the lead

The New World is ahead of the game, having a lot less red tape to contend with than some European countries. In Europe such initiatives often just exist on a regional level, although that is changing, too. In Germany, for example, Deutsches Institut für Nachhaltige Entwicklung (sustainable development) was formally founded in October 2009. It is already piloting a scheme based on ecological, economic and social standards which will be unveiled at ProWein 2011.

Initially the programme will be voluntary and self-assessed but certification is planned. The scheme was set up to cover all winegrowing regions centrally to pool resources, share information and avoid duplication. Anna von der Emde, the institute's managing director for wine, says the initiative "is supposed to be very accessible for wineries. We experience a very strong resonance from the regions". ▶

Left: South African wines accredited with sustainable status will bear a neck collar from this year

SUSTAINABILITY IN ACTION

The Hillebrand Group continues to help cut the impact of transport by using its wine train to handle inbound wine shipments for suppliers including Constellation. Containers with recyclable VinBulk flexitanks arrive in Tilbury, Thamesport or Felixstowe (coming into Bristol would add 7-10 days to lead time) and get to Constellation's Avonmouth plant in Bristol via a dedicated, daily train service.

"The combination of shipping in bulk and using rail has not only significantly reduced Constellation's transport costs, it takes 60 truck journeys off UK roads for every train journey made," says David Mawer, managing director of JF Hillebrand UK. "The new services are carrying the equivalent of 9.3 million bottles of wine each week."

According to Hillebrand the service saves an average of 204 miles per road-trip equivalent. By conservative estimates, the saving will be more than 280kg CO₂ emissions per container shipped, equating to at least 1.7 tons of CO₂ savings per year. The new rail terminal in Bristol now also "offers a spin-off benefit in enabling the rail companies to convert more road traffic to rail," says Mawer. He adds that "avoiding waste and working more efficiently does save money at the same time".

Carolyn Moysey, quality and environmental process manager at Constellation Wines, is looking for more efficiency in dispatch, too: "We will be able to offer a rail option going forward. Currently, empty containers are railed back to port, and there is no reason why these cannot be refilled with cased goods sold and railed to sea ports."

Kingsland Wines & Spirits in Manchester started shipping containers by barge on the Manchester Ship Canal from Liverpool port to Irlam Wharf in January 2007. "It's picked up since inception," says David Christopher, Kingsland's purchasing and planning manager. Kingsland is handling approximately 2,000 containers per year and half of them travel by barge. According to Tesco, this takes "50 lorries off the road every week", and has saved tons of CO₂.



The UK Vineyards Association has also adopted a sustainability policy. The impetus "came from the grass roots", says Sian Liwicki, UKVA's general secretary. "It's going to be voluntary to begin with and there will also be training. If there is a strong consensus we will go through an accreditation process."

Chile also devised its own national sustainability code in May this year, which will be implemented in December. There is a lot of exchange and communication between the various initiatives and they are all learning from each other.

Co-operation seems to be a central element of sustainability, too. Hardcore greens may claim sustainability does not go far enough yet, but it certainly is a step in the right direction.

One thing is clear; we will hear a lot more about sustainability in the future. Whoever wants to remain competitive needs to think and act sustainably. Ideally it is a long-term practice of continuing improvement and constant evolution. "Sustainability starts in the mind," says Manson. "It really is thinking about how to do things differently. Is this the best way of achieving what we are looking for?"

Cox brings it back into focus: "We believe it makes better-quality wines." That ultimately is what it's all about. ■



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