

NEW DOGS, OLD TRICKS

American vineyards are adopting traditional livestock techniques.

For many New World producers, sustainable winemaking has started to look like an animal farm, thanks to a wave of critter-driven approaches that are becoming popular in vineyards.

"Animals are an essential part of the winemaking. They close the circle," says Christophe Baron of Cayuse Vineyards in Walla Walla, Washington.

Baron uses Belgian draft horses to plow his densely planted vineyard rows. The plowing keeps weeds down, says Baron, and the horses "deliver a more gentle pressure on the dirt than a tractor does. Less compact soil means more room for nature's microorganisms to nourish the vines."

In Napa Valley's Rutherford appellation, Stephanie Honig, of Honig Vineyard & Winery, is training the new family dog, Honey, to sniff out the grapevine mealybug before it can wreak havoc on a vineyard. Honey's sensitive nose will identify infected vines long before the pest can spread.

Jackson Family Wines takes raptor use to a new level. It brings falcons to the vineyards to scare away grape-loving starling birds during harvest. Katie Jackson, vice president for sustainability and external affairs, says they previously used noisemakers to scare away birds. "What they mostly did was move birds from one block to another block," she says.

The noisemaker program required a full-time staff of seven people. A single falcon can patrol 1,500 acres in a single afternoon and keep at bay swarms that can decimate vineyard fruit. They've saved not just fruit, but money.

"We used to spend roughly \$250 to \$300 per acre on bird management," says Jackson. "Now we are spending around \$67 to \$75 per acre."

Benzinger Family Winery in Sonoma and Pacific Rim Vineyards in eastern Washington State are among a number of wineries that use sheep for weed control. Nicholas Quillé, head winemaker at Pacific Rim, says his herd (some 50 strong) is cost-efficient.

"We used to weed by hand, which was a little crazy because it cost \$250,000 a year in labor," he says. "After we brought in the sheep, our cost dropped to \$30,000."

Like horses, sheep don't compact the soil, plus their manure provides natural fertilization. And, Quillé says, "They really are a nice little animal to have around."

—Katie Kelly Bell

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