

Sustainability at Bannock Brae Estate

Crawford Brown: Hello again; Crawford Brown on Bannock Brae Estate. Just thought I'd mention or try and answer a question which I'm often asked here, or we are often asked. The question is, are we an organic vineyard? And I always give the reply, "Well, not quite." And people say, "So, what do you mean by 'not quite'? Why not?" Well, the reason is fairly straightforward, it's because we use Roundup, or glyphosate, a weed control, between our rows. If you see down here by my feet, there is no grass and there are some very important reasons why we need to do that. We need to remove weeds and grass from this area, because we are very much a frost-prone site, which is often the case with ... when you are growing wines on the edge. You get the most stunning wines, but you are up against some quite difficult hurdles.

Frost is our greatest natural enemy, so to protect ourselves from frost we use we use a number of techniques. One of them is this is high wire trellising. See, it's almost up to my shoulders, which raises the vines above the ground. Secondly, we want to remove the grass because every blade of grass or weed acts as a wick from which warm air can escape into the sky and lower the ground temperature. So it's important that we do that. Also, in the summertime, the bare earth here reflects a lot of the heat back onto the grapes. So for those reasons, we have to control the growth at the base of our vines.

Now we have chosen to use glyphosate, or Roundup. People say to us, "Well, surely there are organic materials available to do that"; and, yes, there is. But I believe that they are far more harmful to the environment and to our vineyard than Glyphosate. For instance, there is a rather expensive herbicide that's extracted from pines needles that really does make an excellent job of killing grass and weeds that is 100% organic; but it remains in the ground for a very, very long time, doing untold damage to microflora and the microfauna in the soil; I am talking about insects, molds and bacteria. We don't believe it's right to destroy them. So we do not use that type of herbicide.

Another herbicide that's very effective and totally organic is steam, but think about the ramifications of that. If we use steam, we've got to tow an oil-burning or gas-burning boiler behind a tractor and then spray steam at about a 120° C onto the ground. Sure that will kill the weeds, but what else does it do? It also kills all the insects lying there and we need these insects, especially earwigs, because they break down the detritus, the bits and pieces that have fallen down from prunings the previous year. They break them down and put those materials back into the ground again for us. So with steam you've lost that, but you can say that you're organic.

So we have nothing to do with political correctness; we are much more interested in what's right and good for the vineyard. It's important for us that we are sustainable and continue that way. So, no, we are not totally organic. We think we are a bit better than that. We are definitely sustainable, and we will continue to use glyphosate.

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