

It's Past Time for Bird-Friendly Wine

A labeling program could help scientists and grape growers make vineyards better for wildlife, but for now, it's sitting on the shelf.

Wouldn't it be great if you could raise a glass of cabernet after a day of birding and know your libation's producers care about birds as well as grapes?

We already have some bites and beverages that trace bird-friendliness to the source. The Bird Friendly® certification from the Smithsonian Institute's Migratory Bird Center, for example, ensures that your morning pick-me-up supports growers whose farms promote biodiversity good for birds and other wildlife. If you see Audubon's seal on Vermont maple syrup or grass-fed beef, you can rest assured it comes from a sugarbush or grassland managed to benefit birds. And, while it's not a certification program per se, Audubon partners with brewers in the Delaware River, Everglades, and Colorado River watersheds to promote water conservation.

But there isn't a rigorous standard for wine—not yet, anyway.

It's too bad, because bird-friendly adaptations in agriculture couldn't come at a more critical time. In North America alone, it's estimated that we have lost more than a quarter of our bird population in the last 50 years due to human activity. Conventional grape growing can involve pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, excessive irrigation, and land clearing. Oak savannas of the West Coast, such as in California's wine country, are among the 20 most threatened bird habitats in the country, according to the American Bird Conservancy. The Oak Titmouse in particular has been a casualty of habitat loss there.

A few years ago, bird-loving oenophiles were *this close* to a green certification. In 2007, after completing graduate research on bird-friendly coffee in Mexico, Julie Jedlicka, a biologist now with Missouri Western State University, arrived in the rolling oak hills of California's wine country itching to apply what she'd learned to a new crop. If it could be done for coffee, why not grapes? She spent the next seven years studying how vineyard-management practices affected bird abundance, working to lay the foundation of a bird-friendly wine program.

Jedlicka's research was beginning to point toward conservation strategies that were good both for birds and growers. One study showed, for example, that adding nest boxes to vineyards almost quadrupled the abundance of insect-eating avian species—Western Bluebird density alone increased tenfold where boxes were added—which help control outbreaks of plant-damaging pests. She also wanted to learn more about the role of native habitat around a vineyard, and better understand overall how bird populations respond to changes in land management.

But funding to finish the research proved elusive, and in 2015 Jedlicka left California for Missouri to become an assistant professor. Still, the groundwork she built remains. “I have no doubt we could produce the wine label if we were able to find funding for the research,” Jedlicka says.

Just because the bird-friendly label hasn’t yet materialized doesn’t mean that wine producers aren’t acting on their own. In Oregon’s Willamette Valley, Tad Seestedt of Ransom Wine and Spirits says he welcomes the idea of a bird-friendly label. “You might even go further,” he says. “Bird, bee, and bug friendly!” Seestedt, who also produces grappa, whiskey, and other spirits, started following organic practices on his 40 acres more than two decades ago. “We think of our plantings as part of an ecosystem,” he says.

At Wilridge Vineyard, Washington state’s first organic and biodynamic certified winery, winemaker Paul Beveridge lures visitors to the vineyard with birding, hiking, and wildlife viewing. The farmhouse tasting room even keeps a bird list. “Of our 80 acres, only 15 are in production,” he says. “The rest is sagebrush steppe, with quail and Great Horned Owls. Cowiche Canyon next to us has nesting swallows, and a Golden Eagle every summer. It’s a bird paradise.”

Elsewhere in wine country, grape growers are ditching rodenticides, which can kill birds of prey. Instead, to control root-gnawing gophers, they’re putting up nest boxes to attract Barn Owls—nature’s rodent-devourers.

While there isn’t yet a bird-specific certification for growers like Beveridge and Seestedt, environmentally minded wine lovers aren’t on their own. The California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance, for example, certifies sustainable wineries and vineyards that conserve water, protect wildlife habitat, and practice responsible pest management, among other measures. The number of vineyards it certifies grew by 44 percent last year to roughly 1,400. Other sustainability programs certify wines in California, the Pacific Northwest, and Long Island, New York. The Salmon Safe certification, meanwhile, covers Northwest wine growers managing their grape-growing to protect and restore streams—practices that also benefit birds living nearby.

Truth is, there are lots of environmental labels on wines these days, and it might be hard to keep them all straight. That’s why experts recommend talking with your local wine merchant, who should know how the wines they sell were grown. If you live in wine country, try getting to know a grower who can show you what bird-conservation practices they’ve implemented. However you approach your wine buying, before raising a glass, use the opportunity to also raise your voice for birds.

Bryony Angell

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