



A Field Guide to Sustainable and Delicious Dry-Farmed Wines

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Whole lotta irrigation goin' on in Napa.

Irrigation is plainly a function of the modern world. Though the ancient Romans built spectacular gravity-driven aqueducts, drip irrigation for agriculture was not invented until the late 1960s in Israel, and only in the 1970s did water-bearing pipes and tubes first take their place in the world's vineyards. Today, nearly every last vineyard in California irrigates its vines.

It wasn't always this way. For most of history, vines and fruit trees were grown in the absence of irrigated water. The practice, which can be applied in California's relentlessly arid summers just as it can be in those of Spain and Greece, is called dry-farming, and is essentially a matter of locking moisture, provided by wet-season rain, in the ground until the rains begin again in the fall. A great deal of labor is required, as it is the dry-farmer's task to maintain a fluffy, 10-inch-deep layer of mulched soil on top of the land. As moisture percolates upward, the layer of tilled earth prevents its escape, working much like the lid on a pot of cooking rice.



[DoBianchi](#)

Tony Cotturi works on his dry farm.

Only a small portion of California's grape acreage is dry-farmed -- maybe 2 or 3 percent -- but until the 1970s, dry-farming was the way to grow grapes. Tony Coturri, a winemaker in Glen Ellen, remembers those days.

"That was just how you grew grapes," he says. "Everyone dry-farmed."

Then the industry exploded. Demand for California wines accelerated and hundreds of wineries jumped into the game, doing what they could to maximize their yields. That meant pumping the vineyards with water, which can easily triple the tonnage of grapes produced per acre. Pipes were laid for thousands of miles, and dry-farming became a way of the past. Only Coturri and a handful of other small wineries kept at it.

Why? For some, it's about the environment.

"The biggest issue we're facing as a culture, a country, a world, is water," he says.

Streams are being pumped dry in many places, and groundwater supplies are measurably shrinking. As these crises grow in severity, a reversion could occur. With wine being a luxury item and not a necessity, the burden should be on growers to demonstrate an ability to grow their product cleanly and safely -- and never at the cost of wild salmon runs, which were once among California's greatest assets.

Other winemakers dry-farm for the quality of the wine. Dry-farmed grapes, their argument goes, are said to be denser and more intensely flavored; the vines, less liberal in producing fruit, generate smaller grapes with a greater proportion of skin material to juice. This equals more tannins and polyphenols in the wine, and greater structure. In short, dry-farmed wines, their advocates say, are better.

Dry-farming is not possible in all of California's microclimates, yet any wine drinkers with an interest in water conservation and wild salmon should be aware of what wineries do not tap into the local groundwater reserves. [Coturri Winery](#)'s vineyards in Glen Ellen have been dry-farmed since 1975 and produce strictly dry-farmed organic and Biodynamic Zinfandels. [Frog's Leap Winery](#) in the Napa Valley is considered a pioneer in California dry-farming. [Dehlinger Winery](#) in Sebastopol is also a veteran player in dry-farming, as is [Bucklin Old Hill Ranch](#) in Glen Ellen, where owner and winemaker Will Bucklin tends -- but doesn't water - century-old Zinfandel vines. [Paul Dolan Vineyards](#) in Ukiah, too, produces several dry-farmed wines, all Biodynamic red blends. Most of these wines start at \$25, reflecting the hike in price that must occur when a vineyard's yield drops from four tons per acre to just one, as can happen when the water is turned off.



Vale do Bomfim Dry Farmed Wine

In the European Union, meanwhile, dry-farming is as common as vineyards themselves. The practice is the rule, not the exception. This attribute of the region's winemaking culture owes itself to the many, many centuries during which irrigation did not exist. By the time it became available, the traditional ways to grow vines and make wine were established -- their roots set, so to speak -- even in southern Europe, where the summer skies are as blue as California's and groundwater supplies just as scant. The European Union even forbids or severely restricts irrigation in many regions to protect the quality of the wine.

Thus, even in the goat-gnawed, scrubby hills of Greece and southern Italy -- lands as parched as August in Healdsburg -- farmers manage without irrigated water. And in Portugal, the Douro Valley -- a land as rocky and dusty as the thirsty canyons of Santa Barbara County -- is the source of dry-farmed wines. One winery featuring wines both dry-farmed and very affordable (a rare combination on this continent) is Vale do Bomfim, whose "Red Wine" from the "House of Dow" at \$12 a bottle is a good wine to start on. No, it isn't local (nor are your coffee, bananas, or gasoline, so hush) -- but it is grown without tapping into the local watershed, and it just might be sustainable.

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