

ECO-FRIENDLY 

From the **GROUND UP**

AFTER 50 YEARS, **FETZER VINEYARDS** STILL LEADS THE WINE INDUSTRY IN SUSTAINABILITY AND QUALITY

by Randy Caparoso



Fetzer Vineyards has set a goal to purchase 90 percent of its grapes from certified-sustainable or -organic growers by 2020.



A piece of history: Kathleen Fetzer (center) surrounded by the 11 Fetzer children in Mendocino County, CA, in the 1980s.

Fetzer Vineyards celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, and while the winery's founding is officially on the books as occurring in 1968, Fetzer's story truly began more than a decade earlier.

In 1957, Bernard "Barney" Fetzer moved his family down from Medford, Oregon, to an 800-acre ranch in Mendocino County's Redwood Valley. The family's first property didn't have a fixer-upper more so than a "tear-it-downer": By then, Barney and his wife, Kathleen, were raising eight of their eventual 11 children, and the patriarch and his older sons built a new home together using lots of scavenged material.

The family followed the same self-reliant approach years later while scrapping together their boutique-style winery. The original Mendocino property also came with a vineyard, a handy caretaker who could fix tractors, and the help of a family who assisted in pruning and picking the 27,000 grapevines. (In the beginning, the Fetzers sold off their fruit to a big producer.)

In Kathleen Fetzer's book *Kathleen's Vineyard*, her son Jim recalls that they "farmed organically in the beginning, and there was an abundance of insects, songbirds and other life in the fields." "As we moved to the chemical world of farming, the insects, singing birds, and other life quickly vanished, as did the quality of the fruit," Jim continues. "In the mid-1980s, we changed our farming systems back to organic ways of building life in the soil and encouraging diversity in the field . . . The soils have come to life again, and the fruit has shown to produce a much higher-quality wine. We haven't looked back since."



Ben Byczynski serves as the Director of Grower Relations at Fetzer Vineyards.





Bokisch Ranches owner Markus Bokisch at Liberty Oaks Vineyard in Lodi, CA.

"It's in Our DNA"

By 1992, when the Fetzer family was ready to sell their winery, they had grown the business from 180,000 cases in 1981—the year of Barney's death—to an annual production level of more than 2.1 million cases. At the time, the family was just launching their fully organic sub-label, Bonterra, with much of the sourcing for the project coming from 1,200 acres of certified-organic grapes farmed by the late Robert Fetzer, another of Barney and Kathleen's sons. At the time, it was the largest planting of its kind in the U.S.

According to Director of Grower Relations Ben Byczynski, while the Bonterra brand today remains focused on organic practices, the flagship Fetzer brand "is still a much bigger piece of the puzzle, and for that [the company has] been pushing even further toward the fully sustainable model." Sustainability is such a priority for the company that it employs a full-time Regenerative Development Manager, Elizabeth Drake, to manage all matters of social and environmental impact, including grape-growing, processing, bottling, and packaging.

How seriously does Fetzer Vineyards take sustainability? In 2014, it was awarded a Zero Waste certification by U.S. Zero Waste Business Council (today known as the TRUE Zero Waste Certification from Green Business Certification Inc.), and a certified CarbonNeutral® designation followed two years later. In 2015, Fetzer became the largest winery in the world to be certified as a B Corporation (a label applied

to companies meeting the highest standards of social and environmental performance) by the nonprofit organization B Lab, in addition to being the first recipient of the California Green Medal Leader Award from the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance and the Wine Institute. Just last year, on the eve of its milestone birthday, Fetzer also received an Environmental Leader Project of the Year Award for its use of the BioFiltro BIDA® wastewater filtration system, which uses worms and microbes to naturally transform wastewater streams into reusable byproducts.

"Sustainability sets Fetzer apart," Drake says. "It's in our DNA, it drives our business model, and it is exactly what Barney Fetzer had in mind when he founded the company 50 years ago. It has evolved to a point where we came to realize that it is important to not just certify our own vineyards and winery, but also all the grapes—which now come from regions all over California—going into our wines. We have a goal to purchase at least 90 percent of our grapes from certified-sustainable or -organic growers by 2020."

A Shared Philosophy

Fetzer Vineyards points to one particular grower in the Lodi AVA, Bokisch Ranches, as a poster child for its all-out commitment to sustainability. Owned by Markus Bokisch, the farm comprises roughly 2,500 acres, all of which are third-party certified for Sustainable Winegrowing in accordance with LODI RULES

requirements (a large percentage is also certified organic by California Certified Organic Farmers).

"As our California-appellation wines moved us further away from our original North Coast identity, we began to source from wine regions throughout the state," Byczynski says. "Among our key growers, Markus Bokisch happens to be one of our pillars—someone we want to establish a long-term relationship with—because Markus' commitment to sustainability aligns perfectly with our own philosophy and he farms at a very high level. As a grower who is also a winemaker and happens to own his own winery [Bokisch Vineyards], Markus knows how to capture quality in a bottle through what is done in the vineyard."

From the onset of his relationship with Fetzer Vineyards in 2005, Bokisch says he was drawn to the company's focus on sustainability, which he thought could "help take Lodi to another level" in the eyes of the winemaking world. "When Fetzer was purchased by Viña Concha y Toro in 2011, I was very pleased to see the winery take an even stronger, proactive approach to sustainability and organics," he adds. "Fetzer Vineyards' CEO is Giancarlo Bianchetti, a Chilean of Italian background and also a great guy and consummate manager—very nimble with sales and marketing and very good at building teams and teamwork. They clearly understood what the American market is looking for."

All told, Bokisch Ranches farms 234 acres in five vineyards spread across three AVAs exclusively for Fetzer Vineyards. "The advantage of Lodi is that it is something of a 'sweet-spot' winegrowing region," Byczynski says. "It has the right climate and soils to produce high-quality wine and a lot of diversity in its topographies. Although most of our grapes now come from regions like Lodi, we still strongly identify with Mendocino County. The winery is based in Mendocino, we employ people in Mendocino, and our philosophy of sustainability is ingrained in our Mendocino heritage. What defined Fetzer Vineyards 50 years ago still defines what we are today." ■ **cr**



A Sampling of Fetzer Vineyards Wines



Fetzer 2017 Echo Ridge Sauvignon Blanc, California (\$10) Fragrant nose of lemon-skin/grapefruit citrus with slivers of leafy-green herbaceousness. On the palate, bracingly dry, fruit-driven qualities in a light-medium body are punctuated by the lemony acidity.



Fetzer 2016 Shaly Loam Gewürztraminer, Monterey (\$11) Pungent lychee/white-peach fragrance with the slightest green leafiness. Lush, light-medium body (12.5% ABV) with juicy, medium-sweet, and spicy tropical-fruit notes lifted by balanced acidity.



Fetzer 2017 Sundial Chardonnay, California (\$10) Straw-gold color and honeyed apple/pear/pine-apple aromas nuanced with herbal notes. Rounded, medium-full body with a combination of grip and viscosity.



Fetzer 2016 Flatbed Red, California (\$10) An exuberantly plummy blend of Zinfandel, Petite Sirah, Petit Verdot, and Teroldego. Plush, playful fruit spiced with a dash of peppercorn, a squeeze of pomegranate, and some mocha-coffee smokiness progresses toward a full-flavored finish (13.5% ABV).



Fetzer 2016 Eagle Peak Merlot, California (\$10) It's in its Bordeaux varietal program that this winery currently excels—particularly with this wine, which absolutely soars with its pure, lush, black-cherry varietal aroma filigreed with sprigs of mint and leafy herbs. The flavor profile manifests in perfectly rounded, layered, buoyant qualities on the sumptuous palate. A first-class rendering—as “Merlot” as a Merlot can be at any price.



Fetzer 2016 Anniversary Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, California (\$10) This commemorative bottling way overdelivers, with a focused, concentrated cassis/blackcurrant nose highlighted by beautifully underplayed vanillin-oak flourishes. Full-bodied and deftly structured with modestly muscled tannins, it exudes cassis sensations wrapped in velvet and a chewing-tobacco beefiness toward the finish.

“Sustainability sets Fetzer apart,” says Elizabeth Drake, the company’s Regenerative Development Manager. “It’s in our DNA . . . and it is exactly what Barney Fetzer had in mind when he founded the company 50 years ago.”

