

The Drinks Business

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IT'S ALL DOWN
to biology

Australia's De Bortoli winery treats waste water the natural way, to the benefit of the environment and its wines, finds **Jane Parkinson**

AUSTRALIA IS the driest continent on the planet. Understandably then, efficient water management is meteorically high on any Australian producer's list of environmental priorities and a case in point is De Bortoli in Victoria's Yarra Valley.

Following the country's much-reported, record-breaking droughts in recent years and changes to weather patterns attributed to climate change, a growing population and serious salinity issues as well as river degradation, De Bortoli has implemented a huge number of water-saving and recycling initiatives in its vineyards.

The results are a huge success, both from an environmental and economic point of view, and as an example are illustrated by the upgrading of the producer's waste water treatment facility at its Bilbul winery in the Riverina district.

During these early stages of the redesign of the waste water treatment facility, sodium was identified as a major environmental threat. So De Bortoli eliminated all sodium-based chemicals from its production and cleaning processes which facilitated the irrigation of grain

and fodder crops grown on a neighbouring 65 hectare property (because the water has been "cleaned"). The crops were then harvested and sold for profit, helping the Bilbul site achieve its Zero Waste Wine Company status.

Being able to use this title is big business for De Bortoli, as Sarah Fagan, the producer's Chardonnay winemaker explains: "We wish to 'own' this space; the Zero Waste Wine Company concept refers to a series of research and development projects that De Bortoli has conducted over the last three years." Indeed, the





Sarah Fagan, De Bortoli



Incorporating mulch into compost at De Bortoli

producer has spent more than A\$2.5 million (£1.5m) researching waste water reuse. It has also activated a new low-energy aerator, which has been used to treat waste water and has reduced the amount of energy used by 90% in the process, something which has contributed to an annual saving of more than A\$200,000 in electricity costs for the firm.

Fagan explains: "At our Yarra Valley winery, an aerobic biological water treatment plant allows us to recycle all our waste water streams from the winery, restaurant and tourism facilities for irrigation purposes."

It is this biological approach, where it has adopted the biological farming techniques of Dr Elaine Ingham from Soil Food Web Australia to improve the microbial activity and water-holding capacity of our soils and move away from conventional chemical use, which has been the focus for De Bortoli for the last

"By moving towards biological farming, we feel we're going to potentially express our site even better than before. Biological farming is in essence a movement towards sustainability, and as a family owned company this is a key factor. The soil, first of all, is alive – full of biodiversity which is a huge key for soil health. Without a healthy soil, you cannot expect to grow anything well," she adds.

TASTE THE PLACE

But it is not just the soil that benefits from biological farming. "The vines are supporting themselves and fend off disease and pests," she continues, "we are finding we achieve flavour ripeness at lower sugar levels, and hence alcohol levels. This all means we're picking early, have more natural acid as well as brighter and fresher fruit flavours. We don't need to do much in the winery and hence our wines then express the vineyard much better."

While such a move is admirable, how difficult was it for a producer of De Bortoli's standing and reputation to make a move (to biological farming) that could have potentially completely changed its wines' characters and consequently potentially driven loyal customers away?

"As a company," Fagan answers, "especially where we are based, we are committed to making our wines taste like they come from our site – in broader terms, taste like they come from somewhere."

"Too often in the current market, wines are tasting of oak, [heavy] extraction, alcohol and direct winemaking influences. There is no definition. I think if anything, the wines are going to be more expressive of our site in the Yarra by moving towards biological farming. I

Quick summary

- ▶ Over the past six years there has been a radical change in the winemaking philosophy at De Bortoli Wines
- ▶ It has adopted biological farming techniques of Dr Elaine Ingham from Soil Food Web Australia
- ▶ De Bortoli has spent more than A\$2.5m on research to achieve its goal of becoming a Zero Waste Wine Company

hope that when consumers buy a product that is labelled either by vineyard or region, the customers actually want to see the site in the wine," a point which Fagan illustrates with Pinot Noir, a variety with which De Bortoli has had particular commercial success.

"If Pinot is grown in a poor site, is over-cropped and grown on pretty unhealthy soils, you'll see evidence of this in the wine; it will look diluted, thin and not expressive of anything. We want people to understand that we are trying to express particular blocks of each variety as best as our site can."

Of course, De Bortoli has taken the bull by the horns in this respect, leaving no stone unturned in its quest to achieve its Zero Waste Wine Company goal. Its only hope now is that other companies follow suit, to ensure the Australian wine industry's contribution is collective and consequently, makes enough of an impact as possible. Fagan concludes: "A lot of [Australian] companies are trying to reduce waste, recycle where possible and limit their effect on the environment, but I believe the next step for these places is to focus on their vineyards." db

- To read De Bortoli's full commitment to the environment, visit www.debortoli.com.au/environment

WE ARE COMMITTED TO MAKING OUR WINES TASTE LIKE THEY COME FROM OUR SITE

six years, and Fagan believes this sets De Bortoli apart from many other wineries, and certainly many in Australia.

"In Australia at the moment, there's definitely a move away from synthetic chemical use in viticulture and agriculture. Be this organic, biodynamic or biological. However, as far as biological farming goes, there are not even a handful of vineyards being treated this way.

