

Growing with Wineries: Partnerships with North Bay Specialty Crop Growers

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Partnerships

World-class wine and cuisine go hand in hand in the North Bay Area. Strong demand for local food and high-quality wine fuels local chefs' and winemakers' creative pursuits. Winemakers and farmers will tell you that the grapes and food that they grow are inseparable from the local sense of place. The climate, soil, and terroir set the stage for high crop quality, which growers then enhance through sustainable practices and winemakers and chefs bring into the spotlight. High quality local food and wine create a distinct sense of place and put our region on the map as a destination for top tier agrotourism.

Many wineries employ or work closely with local vegetable, fruit and flower farmers to bring more crops to the table that complement their wines. Some wineries set aside several acres for production on site or nearby. These partnerships allow farmers to access land for growing specialty crops while providing crop diversification for wineries and grape growers. In this way, developing partnerships between specialty crop farmers and wineries can help increase production of food crops in the North Bay Area while supporting the wine industry. This blog post will explore benefits, challenges, considerations, and practical tips from successful partnerships between wineries and specialty crop growers.

Benefits, Challenges, and Considerations

Farmers gain access to many benefits by growing specialty crops on land owned and managed by wineries and viticulturalists. This approach can provide access to land, infrastructure, skilled labor, and irrigation water for crop production. They often have access to a wash/pack area, cold storage, irrigation system, and field equipment such as a tractor and implements. Many farmers growing with wineries benefit from the support from vineyard operations, shared equipment, and assistance from skilled vineyard professionals as needed. The crops they grow have relatively stable markets

such as chefs and restaurants based at wineries. Often, farmers in this situation are then able to focus more on farming and less on marketing and securing sales. Some wineries provide culinary gardeners/farmers a consistent salary and benefits such as health care. Permitting is typically already in place, which can otherwise be a substantial hurdle.

Wineries and viticulturalists gain economic and environmental benefits from crop diversification by working with farmers who grow other crops besides grapes. This can help boost economic resilience and buffer wine price swings while enhancing biodiversity, soil health, and building climate resilience. This can be a great opportunity to use agrotourism to attract more customers through strategies like u-picks and farm-to-table events. In addition, partnering with specialty crop farmers allows wineries and associated culinary professionals to collaborate closely with the farmers growing food for their creative endeavors. This means they can work together to plan crop selection and explore niche varieties. Due to their proximity to the growing location, they gain access to fresh, high quality, high value crops that complement seasonal wine selections. These products offer an additional way to attract visitors and can be included as gifts or bonuses in the wine club. Growing other crops can help improve employee retention year-round by providing farming activities outside of the vineyard during relatively slow times of year for viticulturalists.

However, crop diversification inevitably brings operational complexity which can pose challenges. Equipment and irrigation use needs to be coordinated across different crops and fields. Avoiding alternative crops that harbor grapevine insect pests and diseases can help reduce the risk of increased pressure in grapevines. For instance, cane berries are breeding hosts for blue green sharpshooter and could increase the risk of Pierce's disease, so it may be advisable to avoid planting cane berries near vineyards. Similarly, citrus can host glassy winged sharpshooter, though this may be more of an issue on the central coast.

Input from Specialty Crop Farmers

Here are some success stories and perspectives from farmers who grow specialty crops in partnership with wineries.

From Tessa Henry, Clif Family Farm Manager:

“Hello, I have been growing a selection of crops for Clif Family Winery for 8 years and farming diverse crops in the Napa Valley, the place I grew up, for a total of 18 years!

As a young college grad with some background in native plant restoration, the first thing that drew me to organic farming was its emphasis on diversity. As anyone interested in ecology knows, the more biodiversity an ecosystem has, the healthier and more resilient it is. This basic ecological principle is still what drives my farming practices and is the reason I believe diverse ecological farming is so important. Most farmers I know who grow many different types of organic fruits and vegetables also choose practices that promote soil health, increase native pollinator habitat, and create a healthy farm system that require less inputs. Farming with the whole system in mind can create biodiverse hotspots; healthy epicenters for all inhabitants to enjoy and thrive.

These vibrant farms easily inspire creativity in local chefs who create unique culinary experiences. For example, this year Clif Family Winery is launching 4 seasonal dinners; one for winter, spring, summer and fall with an emphasis on locally farmed produce. I personally work with our Executive Chef, Magnus Young, to order seeds and design bed space that is specific to the varieties and amounts that are best for his team. When the farm provides an abundance at once, the culinary team is quick to pickle, ferment, and dehydrate, so that many of these flavors can be used over the entire year. I also work very closely with our Preserved Food Production Manager, Dulce Noonan, who cooks jams, jellies and hot sauce from fruits and vegetables I grow at the farm. This year I planted 2,700 Cabernet Onions for Clif Family’s Savory Onion Jam and am currently tending to 1,700 pepper seedlings for Clif Family’s Napa Nash Hot Sauce. Items like these add to our culinary program and wine pairings at Clif Family Winery’s tasting room in St. Helena.

TIPS for success:

- Work with a flexible team who can understand and adapt to the dynamic world of farming. Facing climate crisis, unpredictability will increase. Have a backup supplier when crops underproduce and freezer space and/or a local food distribution hub to donate to when they overproduce.
- Know that a successful diverse farm/garden requires seasoned farm knowledge and is labor intensive. Too often I hear stories from colleagues of employers wanting top-notch gardens without providing top-notch resources for them to accomplish their work. Diverse farms provide many benefits to ecology and marketing, so should be valued and resourced accordingly.”

From Jess Arnsteen, Long Meadow Ranch Culinary Farm Manager:

“Farming for the wine industry brought me to California and this has become my career for the last 15 years. I’ve farmed at 2 different wineries, one in Mendocino where I grew crops for the employees as a benefit of working there, just like health benefits. That included twice a week produce pickups, weekly eggs, and lamb and pork 4 times a year. That was an interesting model where it’s done for the benefit of the people working there.

Where I currently work, our farm provides food to the restaurant and farmers markets which is an obvious fit if you already have a food component in the winery tasting room. But even if you didn’t have that component already, to be able to offer a fresh produce box with the wine club pickup, or to have a seasonal item for sale in the tasting room, really ties it all together. Wine by itself is fine, but wine with food is a lot better. It helps wineries show their values. So for a winery thinking about it, you’d want to know who is going to value it—is it your customers, employees, etc. with the goal to add to the culinary wealth of the area.

From the standpoint of why and how does it work? Wineries and vineyards have skilled manual labor, equipment that can work the ground just as well for vegetables as for grapes, access to irrigation, access to fertility in the form of grape pomace compost. And they also have all the administrative aspects in place like permitting and human resources to hire people. So there’s a lot of reasons to do it—there are actually relatively few reasons not to do it.

As a farmer, I highly recommend it! I don’t have to buy my own land, hire my own team, or deal with every administrative aspect of running a compliant farm. Yet at the same time, I still feel a great degree of ownership of the farm, even if it’s not actual capital ownership. I feel pride. If you’re a farmer who’s willing to work as an employee rather than an owner, I think you could make the case to a lot of different wineries, tasting rooms, and vineyards that you’re a valuable asset. Of course, if they’re not willing to pay a full salary, then the compromise is some kind of exchange: a free lease, access to water and equipment, exchange of food and services, etc., a mutually beneficial set up if you’re not going to be an employee. You’re providing a value to that operation. Someone producing food and benefiting the ecology there is a win for everyone. I’m a strong proponent for it.

For farmers, you're going to want to find a place that values you as a grower. You can start with places where you like their wine, their location, how they do business—that's important. Explore your options, look for shared values, check job boards and farming listservs. When I applied for these positions, one was posted on a biodynamic farming website and the other was on a website called Farms Reach. Just because you're a farmer and you know how to grow your own food doesn't mean you have to do it on your own--there are actually people who need you and value you. There's no problem with cold calling a winery you appreciate or vineyard that you like. Bring them a box of produce or something that you grew and say, I'd like to meet with you about growing this great food on your land."

From Kristin Morrison, Farm Manager at Preston Farm and Winery:

"Twelve years as the Farm Manager at Preston Farm and Winery has allowed me to witness many changes in our operation and environment. I started here in a drought year, 2014, which immediately swung into a very rainy year in 2017, then back to extreme drought in 2021, and we are still rolling with the weather whiplash. A strong, resilient ecosystem supporting our vineyards and seasonal food crop production acres has helped us quickly recover from heat waves, fires, and floods. The diversity on display from our creek beds to our interspersed hedgerows speaks to owner Lou Preston's commitment to breaking up the monocrop often associated with vineyard farmland.

Our 125 acres have not always been so diversified. When Lou and his wife Susan bought the farm in the early 1970s, they set about removing old peach, pear, and prune trees (Healdsburg was the buckle of the Prune Belt, after all), planted grapevines and olives and maximized their wine-growing acreage. However, in the early 2000's, Lou attended the EcoFarm conference and began ripping out grapevines and setting aside small vineyard sections for organic vegetable gardens. His vision changed and needed to incorporate a more diverse crop planting. Farming in rhythm with nature as opposed to against it, leads to healthier land, healthier people, and stronger healthier plants. As the gardens grew, so did our need for an outlet for all our produce. We set up an on-site Farm Store where customers could purchase farm-grown tomatoes, zucchini, lettuce, strawberries and more. With his son Tim Preston, Lou started growing heirloom grains to bake sourdough bread in a wood-fired oven he built. As the farm grew, the need for more dedicated staff increased, so he hired a full-time farmer as well as an assistant. I started as the assistant in April 2014 and became the head farmer in 2017. My background is in Anthropology, but the crossover between organic farming, food systems, and human nature blended well.

Growing food crops alongside wine grapes can sometimes seem contradictory. Annuals and perennials growing together peacefully? But we make it work and think the two can be grown in tandem rather well. Our farm encompasses perennial fruit trees—including walnuts, peaches, plums, apples, pears, quince, persimmons, and pineapple guava—as well as seasonal annual crops. These are interspersed between acres of winegrapes and offer additional revenue streams for our business. Capturing the sequential harvest of spring, summer, and fall fruits allows us to supplement our annual crop production, increase diverse offerings at the Farmers' Market and CSA boxes, and provide our wine tasting customers easy, enjoyable access to our produce while they taste wine. We dream of incorporating a food and wine pairing or tasting menu for our wine guests. Furthering our visitors' connection to our farm, our produce, and our people is really important to us.

All food farmers can relate to the challenge of mitigating waste that occurs when cucumbers grow too large, zucchini sales suddenly drop, strawberries overproduce, or even restaurants can't keep up with the supply. We experimented with fermenting our surplus to create another educational and tasty product. We use lactic acid to kick off a fermentation process that produces the crispiest and slightly salty cucumber "pickles." We have also fermented a carrot and hot pepper "slaw" that sells out before we can even bring it to market, and other crops as they come in: string beans, zucchini, even once okra! These are all value-added products we can keep shelf-stable for a few weeks at a time in our Farm Store and bring to Farmer's Market, distinguishing us even further.

Growing food crops with winegrapes may seem odd on paper, but it speaks to a creative land use that benefits not just the food farmer, but also the vineyard manager, the winemaker, the Tasting Room staff, and the vineyard employees. If everyone has greater access to locally grown, pesticide free, nutritious produce, your staff will be healthier, happier, and feel even more connected to your mission. They are excited to discuss vegetables and fruits with customers, who in turn are able to build a deeper connection to where their food and wine are grown. Restaurants take notice and buy cases of zucchini and cases of zinfandel! Suddenly a reciprocal relationship is built around an age-old love: food and wine. A perfect pairing!"

Input from Winery Chefs

Here are some success stories and perspectives from winery chefs who partner with specialty crop growers.

From Dulce Noonan, Clif Family Preserved Food Production Manager:

"As a chef who specializes in preserved foods, turning farm-grown fruits, peppers, and onions into jams, jellies, and hot sauces, I see firsthand how this synergy creates a

region known for exceptional agrotourism. High-quality local food and wine do more than pair well: they define the character of the North Bay.

Many wineries now collaborate closely with vegetable, fruit, and flower growers, or even dedicate acreage to diversified food crops on their estates. These partnerships are opening doors for specialty crop farmers while offering wineries new creative and economic opportunities. This blog explores the benefits, challenges, and practical considerations of these collaborations, through the lens of someone cooking with the literal fruits of these partnerships.

Farmers who grow specialty crops on winery land gain access to resources that can otherwise be barriers, a huge advantage in a region where land and infrastructure costs run high. When wineries partner directly with specialty crop farmers, their chefs get immediate access to ultra-fresh, high-value ingredients that complement their wines.

For chefs like me, proximity to the crops transforms the creative process. I collaborate closely with our farm team to plan unique pepper varieties, heirloom fruits, and specialty onions for the preserves we make. These ingredients become jams served alongside cheese boards, hot sauces paired with seasonal tasting menus, and gift-ready preserved goods for wine club members. Finally, growing food crops offers wineries a way to retain skilled agricultural staff during the slower periods of the vineyard calendar.

When wineries grow food alongside wine grapes, they create more than ingredients, they build relationships, deepen their sense of place, and create stories that resonate with guests. As a chef working with farm-grown produce every day, I can say this work is incredibly rewarding. The jams, jellies, and hot sauces I create aren't just products; they're expressions of collaboration, ecology, and creativity. This is the future of culinary wine country: not just pairing food and wine but growing them together."

From Magnus Young, Clif Family Executive Chef:

"-A close connection between the chef and farmer is super helpful for menu planning and staying up to date with what's in season, it's also helpful for knowing what will be in abundance to plan for preservation projects if necessary.

-It's super fun when I have an idea for a dish needing a certain vegetable or garnish component, and when I ask you about it, you're always down to try growing it.

-Having an interconnected Farm and culinary team really helps with story building and branding when sharing with the guests.

-Plan for additional labor, receiving produce directly from an organic, ecologically diverse Farm requires much more processing than what you will typically find from a produce vendor or supermarket. Finding ways to utilize the odds and ends of produce can challenge your creativity and what you can make that would otherwise be discarded by the average cook into something delicious.”