

Why Are Wineries Around the World Seeking This Certification?

Certificates of social and environmental responsibility, like B Corp status, have become important markers for wineries that place values front and center.



By Eric Asimov

June 3, 2024

Grape growers and wine producers have long sought certifications testifying to their sustainable farming methods or their commitment to protecting the environment. They have taken great satisfaction in displaying their organic or biodynamic credentials. No less would be expected in a field that prides itself on offering a natural, agricultural product.

Far less attention has been paid over the years to how wineries treated the people who are doing the actual farming and production work. It's been an enormous oversight, particularly as agricultural workers continue to be prime targets for exploitation.

Just last year four workers died in Champagne while harvesting grapes in extreme heat. French prosecutors in 2023 also opened human trafficking investigations into companies supplying seasonal workers. Similar scandals have occurred all over the agricultural world over the years.

Recognizing the long history of exploitation, and perhaps wanting to codify their social values along with their environmental and agricultural practices, a growing number of wine producers have sought certification demonstrating their commitment to what many call social sustainability.

These certifications can come from local wine-oriented organizations, like Napa Green in California, LIVE in the Pacific Northwest, Equalitas in Italy and Haute Valeur Environnementale in France. The Regenerative Organic certification has a social fairness requirement in addition to its agricultural standards. And more and more

wineries are seeking B Corp certification from B Lab, which promotes the notion that companies benefit by working for both profits and the social good.

Roughly 100 wineries worldwide have B Corp certification. They include significant names like Spottswoode in Napa Valley, Felton Road in New Zealand, Bollinger and Charles Heidsieck in Champagne, Sokol Blosser, Stoller, Soter and Chehalem in Oregon, Rathfinny and Ridgeview in England, Avignonesi in Tuscany, Benjamin Bridge in Nova Scotia and many more.

Among the most recent to receive certification is Domaines Barons de Rothschild, the parent company of Château Lafite Rothschild and other estates in Bordeaux, Chablis, Languedoc, Chile, Argentina and China.

Why would a company as prestigious, as aristocratic, as Lafite Rothschild seek B Corp status?

Ms. Rothschild said it is as important for wine estates to state their social convictions as it is their environmental commitments. Yann Werdefroy for The New York Times



“When nature is the core of the product you produce, you have to have extremely strong convictions,” said Saskia de Rothschild, who succeeded her father, Éric de Rothschild, as chairman of the domaines in 2018 and chief executive of Lafite in 2021. “How can we put that at the core of what we are doing? B Corp seemed the most complete and exhaustive commitment to our environmental and social goals. We did it for all of our estates.”

Working in Bordeaux, particularly at a historic, celebrated place like Lafite Rothschild, she said, could be socially “very strange.”

“How can we keep to our philosophy, and make people feel part of a family of estates but make it professional rather than paternalistic?” she said. “Our business depends on balance — in the wines, in our company, in nature.”

Achieving B Corp status is no easy thing. It requires a comprehensive analysis of how a company does business, with different standards for different industries. Wine producers are assessed for how they manage water and waste, for how harmonious their agricultural practices are with their particular environment, whether they promote biodiversity and how they manage their workforces.

That means analyzing the gender and racial diversity of a company's employees as well as its income diversity. The average pay ratio of chief executive-to-worker among S&P 500 companies was 272-to-1 in 2022, according to the A.F.L.-C.I.O. Among B Corp companies, B Lab says, it's 6-to-1. Companies are also asked about their career-development programs, and how their organization relates to their local communities.

"We set standards, and companies must meet minimum thresholds," said Sarah Schwimmer, interim co-lead executive of B Lab, which began certifying companies in 2007. "They complete the assessment. We have analysts who verify. They ask for documentation and they may do site visits. You've got to really want it."

"We want to thrive responsibly," said Alex Sokol Blosser, president of Sokol Blosser in Oregon, which has been a B Corp since 2015. Celeste Noche for The New York Times



Companies are given points in each area, and must achieve a minimum of 80 points to be awarded B Corp status. But that's only the beginning. B Lab points out where companies can improve, and recommends steps toward making those changes. And companies are regularly reassessed.

"It really is like going to your doctor," said Alex Sokol Blosser, the second-generation president of Sokol Blosser in the Willamette Valley. "Your doctor says, 'You need to exercise more, and here are your options.' B Corp says, 'You need to think about your team and your community in how you run your business, and here's how you can do that.'"

Sokol Blosser has been a B Corp since 2015. Mr. Sokol Blosser says it was a decision that followed the values instilled in him by his parents, Susan Sokol and Bill Blosser, who founded the winery in 1971.

“It resonated with my mom,” he said. “She’s a firm believer in the triple bottom line,” the sustainability measure that looks at three areas: people, planet and profitability. “It’s on every one of our labels. We’re proud of it.”

For Beth Novak, chief executive of Spottswoode in Napa Valley, B Corp status has been eye-opening. “The process itself is amazing,” she said. “You learn a lot. All sorts of things arise as you’re answering questions, and, ‘Oh, I hadn’t thought of that.’ We’ve adopted many of them.

Beth Novak, chief executive of Spottswoode in Napa Valley, modeled her winery’s social stance on Patagonia, whose founder, Yvon Chouinard, centered his social and environmental commitments. Rachel Bujalski for The New York Times



She said the only drawback is that not enough people know about B Corp or what it stands for.

“We think there’s a way to operate that’s important,” she said. “Our whole ethic is around the natural environment and taking care of our people. The whole Milton Friedman thing about maximizing shareholder value has not led us to a good place at all in terms of natural environment and workplace.”

Inevitably, when companies promote values that at one time might have seemed idealistic but have now become lightning rod political issues, like diversity, equity and inclusivity, antiracism, social justice and taking care of one’s environment and ecosystem — all at the heart of B Lab’s ethos — some sort of resistance might be expected.

Rainer Seitz, an associate professor of management at Linfield University in McMinnville, Ore., pointed to two recent examples, Target and Bud Light, which have both dialed back vocal support for Pride Month after conservative backlash to their position on L.G.B.T.Q. issues.

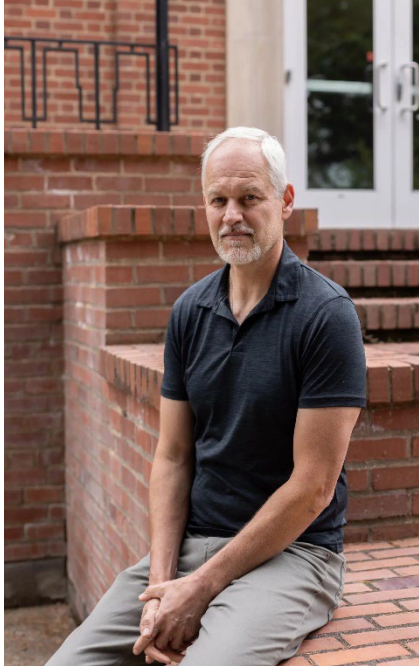
“Companies have to ask themselves whether their stance is counterproductive,” Dr. Seitz said. “Is it central to who we are and to our values? What is the potential cost of doing this? Or not doing this? It is a brave stance to seek out and take on standards.

It's not for everyone.”

The bottom line, he said, is whether it makes good business sense. Apparently, it often does.

“Organizational justice — if you treat people well and fairly at work — lots of good things happen,” Dr. Seitz said. “There's less turnover and higher productivity.”

Rainer Seitz, a management professor at Linfield University in Oregon, said good things happen for companies that treat employees well and fairly, but that taking stances on sensitive political topics required considering the relevancy to their businesses. Celeste Noche for The New York Times



For Napa Green, which has 90 certified wineries and 37 certified growers in Napa Valley, a commitment to racial and social justice is a core value, along with agricultural and workplace sustainability, said Anna Brittain, its executive director.

But promoting diversity is different from creating diversity. Leadership in wine remains overwhelmingly white and male. Yet Ms. Brittain believes wine has a crucial role to play in demonstrating that change can come. “We're at the peak of the agricultural pyramid, so the leadership we show has much bigger reverberations,” she said.

Akilah Cadet, an organizational and management consultant and author of “White Supremacy Is All Around,” works with Diversity in Wine Leadership Forum, which supports initiatives to transform the wine industry. She applauds the accountability that certification requires but warns that, depending on the regulatory body, these certifications can often be performative. She rues the decline in D.E.I. efforts that has come, she said, as people in charge want to feel comfortable again.

“Being comfortable typically excludes women, BIPOC, L.G.B.T.Q. and disabled communities not only as consumers but as experts or contributors to the wine industry,” Dr. Cadet said. “It is time the wine industry moves away from fads and trends and realizes the future of wine is just as diverse as the grapes.”

Both Ms. Brittain of Napa Green and Ms. Schwimmer of B Corp assert that social sustainability not only makes companies work more cohesively, it appeals to the public, particularly to younger consumers, with whom the wine world is struggling to broaden its appeal.

“It seems like a no-brainer,” Ms. Brittain said. “Studies all show consumers want to support values-driven industries.”

B Corp’s own studies show that a majority of consumers agree that environmental and social certifications make a difference in their decisions. Charlotte Levitt, a B Corp representative, pointed to a report from Edelman Trust Barometer, a poll of 36,000 individuals, which concluded, “Societal leadership is now a core function of business.”

For Ms. Rothschild, it’s just good business.

“Wine can be excluding and pretentious,” she said. “The wine industry is super traditional. It’s opening the doors to different kinds of people.”

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Eric Asimov, the chief wine critic of The Times since 2004, has been writing about wine, food and restaurants for more than 30 years.