



BACK TO  
Back to the Land

Regeneration from generational farmers in California's greenest AVA.

BY  
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Grazing sheep at  
Navarro Vineyards



Bonterra's McNab Ranch barn

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Whether driving up 101 through inland Mendocino or veering west on 128 through Anderson Valley, it's clear why Mendocino County AVA is reputed as California's greenest wine region. Where else does vine land kiss ancient redwood forests?

Images may be worth 1,000 words, but numbers don't lie: 25% of Mendocino County's vineyard acres are certified organic (accounting for a third of certified organic vineyards across the Golden State); 1,094 acres are Demeter Biodynamic. Then add on 10,626 acres of certified Fish Friendly Farming and the 8,179 acres certified through California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance ... and you start to get the idea.

"Mendocino County's wine industry has long been at the forefront in terms of conscious viticulture in the United States," comments Mark Wentworth, proprietor of Wentworth Vineyards. "Whether the ethos of any one particular producer is defined as organic, biodynamic, regenerative or even sustainable—certified or not—as a region the vast majority of producers fit within the broader tapestry of an effort to farm well and honor the land by promoting healthy soils, good groundwater and biodiversity."

So it is that Mendocino, too, plays a leading role in the revitalization of regenerative agriculture.

"Because it's so doable," says Joseph Brinkley, director of regenerative farming for Bonterra Organic Estates, commenting that the region has one of the most idyllic climates for vinifera, particularly in terms of low pest and disease pressure. "Another piece is that Mendocino had a fair amount of people coming north in that first wave of 'back to the land' movement in the '60s and '70s. And I'd say most, if not all, were interested in pursuing a way of life that isn't heavily chemical dependent."

Indeed, the majority of the region's 570 vineyards are small family farms, with a median vineyard size of just 14 acres, many of whom live off the land they cultivate.



Sunlight filters through the redwoods, burning off morning fog near the Mendocino Coast.

## FIRM FOUNDATION

Sarah Bennett calls her Boonville dual dairy farm-vineyard, Pennyroyal Farm, “the next step” in the regenerative foundation her parents laid for her.

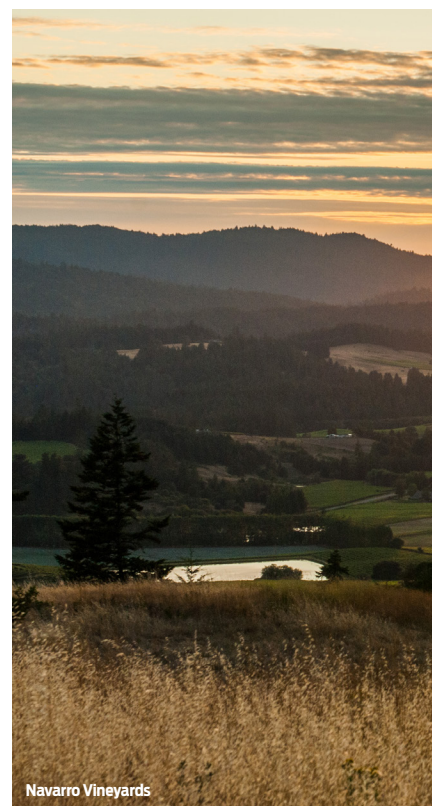
Bennett’s parents, Ted Bennett and Deborah Cahn, established Navarro Vineyards in 1973, first as a sheep ranch, planting the first vines in 1974 and transitioning business focus toward grapes and wine. “They lived in the middle of the vineyard—and all that means—and adopted many of the regenerative practices we use today: no synthetic insecticides or herbicides, limited tilling and composting,” says Bennett. Living off the land in the midst of the Navarro watershed, these practices were intuitive—how

they farmed directly affected their health as well as that of the surrounding environment.

After completing her master’s in viticulture and enology at UC Davis in 2005, “I wanted to dive deeper into soil health and sustainable practices, particularly limiting the use of fossil fuels,” says Bennett, who was “blown away” by how much fuel the family was using by *not* using chemical inputs. She started with a holistic grazing program, significantly reducing tillage throughout both Navarro Vineyards and Pennyroyal. The other advantage of keeping animals on-site year-round, she adds, is the natural “input” they provide. “They

make our composting program completely self-sustainable—a closed-loop system.”

Beyond soil health and animal welfare, worker wellness is a big component to regenerative practices. “My parents, back in the early days, were big supporters of creating a healthy workforce,” says Bennett who, like her parents, employs full-time in-house staff with all the expected benefits. “It’s great for me as the second generation in the family business to have grown up with Navarro’s employees’ kids. I pride myself on being an active part of the community and think the social, cultural part of regenerative is hugely important, not just the farming portion.”



Left to right:  
Michael Frey, Nicole,  
Dan and Vicki Dooling

*“I’ve been doing this for 25 years. If someone asked me to farm conventionally, I wouldn’t even know how.”*

—HEATH DOLAN,  
DARK HORSE FARMING CO.



## GENERATIONAL SHIFTS

“It’s a bit hippie dippy out here ... but in a good way,” jokes Michael Frey, head of operations of Mariah Vineyards, referencing that same “back to the land movement” that initially inspired the region-wide regenerative approach to farming.

His wife, Nicole Dooling, second-generation proprietor and farmer whose parents, Dan and Vicki Dooling, established the family estate back in 1979, agrees but adds, “Mendocino is much more diverse in its agriculture, in terms of types of farming, and the vineyards are much more spread out. There’s more space and there’s a lot less chemical drift.” This is particularly true in the Mendocino Ridge sub-AVA, where her family’s Savory Institute Land-to-Market verified regenerative property sits at 2,400 feet elevation.

“Regenerative agriculture is what brought me back home,” says Dooling, who grew up off the grid among 30 acres of vines and today splits her time between working the farm and working as an ER trauma nurse in San Francisco.

It was at the 2019 Regenerative Earth Summit where the couple became inspired by regenerative practices—processes, they say, that have

been proven to create and enhance a lively ecosystem, a balanced relationship between life above and below ground. “Not that my parents were doing anything *wrong*,” says Dooling, who notes that their remote location coupled with their fertile timber soils and adequate rainfall has allowed her family to establish and cultivate a dry-farmed (non-irrigated) vineyard. “But it was the idea that we can do things *better*. That’s what brought me home—this inspiration to learn and to become a better farmer.”

Dooling and Frey have since been instrumental in transitioning the family farm toward fully regenerative practices and achieving their certification. It’s a blessing, they say, to be able to simultaneously learn from Dooling’s parents, who’ve been working the land for the last 40 years while also adding their own learnings from the regenerative agriculture community.

Shifting the “old school” generational mindset was not (is not) without its challenges; there have been back-and-forth conversations about certain practices, such as vine row management and pruning techniques. But, “Regenerative agriculture is all about relationships,” comments Dooling. “My father’s come a long way.”



Sheep keep the grass trimmed at McNab.

## ANY OTHER WAY

“I don’t know any other way to farm. I’ve been doing this for 25 years. If someone asked me to farm conventionally, I wouldn’t even know how,” says fifth-generation grape grower and proprietor of Dark Horse Farming Co. Heath Dolan.

Dolan is the son of the late Paul Dolan, who is famed for his work at Fetzer, cofounder of Truett-Hurst Inc. and a legacy leader in organic, biodynamic and regenerative viticulture.

Remembering his father, Heath comments that when Fetzer first began farming organically in 1987, “people jumped on board,” referring not just to the local community, but the wine industry at large. But, Dolan adds, from his perspective there are actually *fewer* Mendocino vineyards certified today than in the past. His own property, previously certified both organic and biodynamic, hasn’t held the Demeter certification for the past two years.

“People realize they don’t need the certification, but a lot of those lessons learned about farming better, I think just really stuck,” says Dolan. “And organics logically leads to regenerative. It’s the next natural step. With biody-

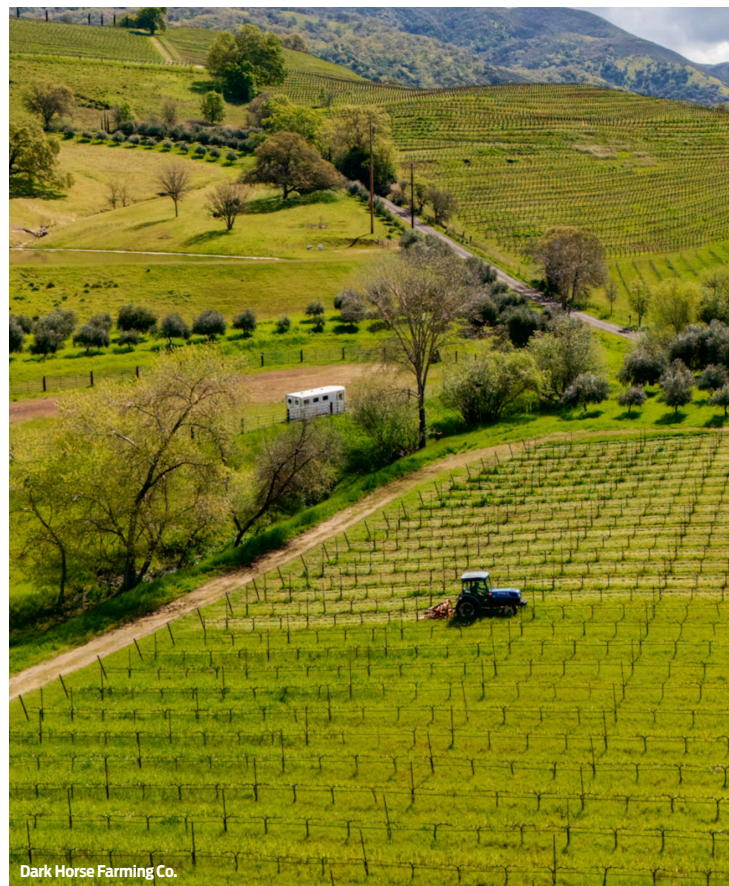
namics, there’s too much barrier, the voodoo and understanding of it. With regenerative, though ... the farming part is easy for a lot of people.” Dark Horse has maintained its CCOF organic certification and is in the process of completing the Regenerative Organic Certification (ROC) through the Regenerative Organic Alliance (of which his father was a board member) in time for harvest 2024.

Certifications are nice indications, but it’s the back-to-the-land, community mindset that really propels the region forward in its position as a leader in regenerative practices—a region where generations of farmers continue to learn from one another.

“It’s producers like Barra, Frey and Bonterra whose wines and reputations all helped attract me to the area originally when I worked in other industries,” says Mark Wentworth, acknowledging the influence bigger names have had on sustainability efforts throughout the region. “They’ve long sought to do right by the planet and produce delicious wine.”



The Redwood Highway  
near the border of  
Mendocino and  
Humboldt counties



Dark Horse Farming Co.



Lavender tower  
riparian corridor  
at Bonterra's  
McNab Ranch

Bonterra Organic Estates is undoubtedly one of the most influential. The company has a long list of certifications, including organic, BCorp, Climate Neutral and Zero Waste—among others. But Brinkley points to its regenerative organic certification as the true talking point. “When we speak of all those others, some are ag-focused; some are business-focused,” he says. “But workers and laborers were never part of the conversation. Now, it’s not just about farming without exploiting the land but also without exploiting animals and people. That’s a critical piece. There’s no way to have a serious impact in farming if we don’t address labor.” Certifying through the ROC gives full transparency in every aspect via the third-party verification process.

Bonterra is the largest certified regenerative viticultural

business in the U.S., with 865 certified acres planted to vines. And the company does not take that role lightly. “We don’t want to be the only ones doing this,” says Brinkley, pointing toward the ways in which they help educate the wine community both on an intimate, local level as well as on a larger, national one. In fact, Brinkley has (a few times) pled the regenerative organic case in Washington D.C., in an effort to enhance farmer incentive to move toward this more ecologically sustainable farming technique.

“There’s the individual business need, but then also the bigger need. We all have to start rowing in the same direction. It’s that rising tide idea,” says Brinkley. “If more growers farm this way in Mendocino, then the North Coast, California, the U.S.—the world? Then we all benefit.”

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