

{ winery spotlight }

Sheep provide natural weed removal and fertilizer.



green
to its
ROOTS

FRANK FAMILY VINEYARDS IS EMBRACING
SUSTAINABILITY FROM THE GROUND UP

by Stacy Briscoe

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Richard and Leslie Frank are co-founders of Frank Family Vineyards in Calistoga, CA.

What does sustainability even mean anymore? "It's a broad term, isn't it?" acknowledges Leslie Frank, co-founder of Frank Family Vineyards in Calistoga, California. "You're hard pressed to find any landowner, vintner, or anyone in the wine industry who's not 'sustainable.'" But for Leslie and her husband, Richard, owning Napa Valley's third-oldest winery (and a nationally registered historic landmark), stewarding over 380 acres of vineyard property, and crafting notable premium wines "that span from sparkling to Cabernet and everything in between" means they must continuously seek to improve business practices in an effort to better the life forces both below and above ground, within their local community, and throughout the wine industry at large. "For us, being green involves earth-to-bottle stewardship, which is reflected in our green-to-our-roots philosophy," says Leslie.

A CONSIDERED APPROACH

"When we talk about sustainability, we really want to point to the actions and the physical things we're doing and progress we're making," comments Will Drayton, director of technical viticulture, sustainability, and research for Treasury Wine Estates (TWE), the parent company that acquired Frank Family Vineyards in 2021. Drayton says the conversation surrounding sustainability starts with the brand's certifications: California Sustainable Vineyard & Winery, Fish Friendly Farming, and Napa



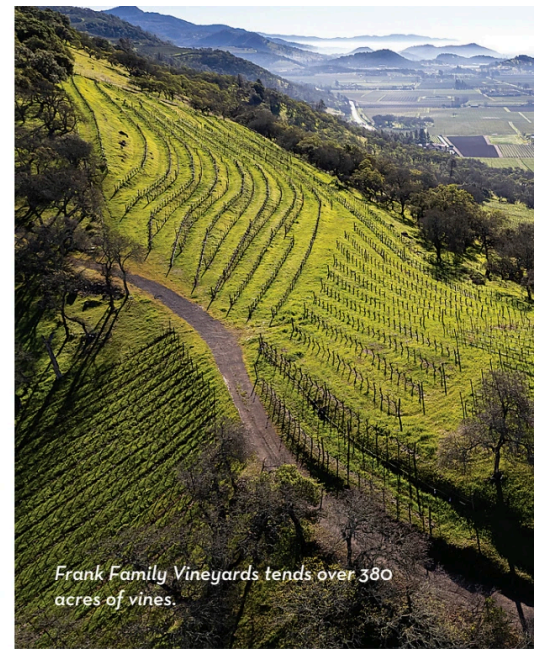
Through July 2025, each bottle purchased of Frank Family Vineyards' 4ocean Chardonnay and Cabernet Collection pulls a pound of trash and plastic from the world's oceans, rivers, and coastlines.



In 2024, the winery installed 800 solar panels atop its facility.



Precision irrigation is practiced in the vineyards.



Frank Family Vineyards tends over 380 acres of vines.

Green. It's this latter accreditation that, according to Drayton, really pushes the envelope when it comes to environmental conscientiousness. In 2021, Napa Green became the first winegrowing program to redevelop its standards to include six core pillars of sustainability: water efficiency and savings; energy efficiency and savings; waste prevention and supply-chain management; soil health and biodiversity; the promotion of social justice and diversity, equity, and inclusion; and climate action and regenerative agriculture. "The Napa Green pillars cover most of our goals," notes Drayton.

Frank Family has implemented a range of practices, including planting a spectrum of cover crops to help develop and sustain a diverse subsoil microbiome, aid in soil-nutrient and water-holding capacity, and create habitats for natural predators of vineyard pests like the dreaded leafhoppers that spread the bacterial Pierce's disease. Practicing a gentle, low-till regime of mowing these crops allows natural fertilization to occur, thus reducing soil compaction and microbiome disturbances.

Deficit irrigation plays an important role for Drayton, who describes the process simply as "watering a little less than the full amount the plant could use if you let it." When stressed, he explains, vines increase grapes' color and flavor development; if watered in excess, their energy is focused on green material, not the fruit. Deficit irrigation is nothing new, but in California, where conditions

run the gamut from serious drought to massive rains, it's used to find a balance that supports vine health and quality fruit growth. That said, he adds, "We need to take it a step further." Globally, TWE is implementing real-time water metering; in the U.S. specifically, it's rolling out the use of precision irrigation technology called Lumo. The device has automatic valves with a flow meter that dial in exactly how much water is needed and when—and it can be monitored remotely via smartphones and other devices. "If you imagine, previously, this was all done by hand, and it's difficult to get the timing and water needs all correct," explains Drayton. "But with these water valves in place, we can deliver water at precise volume and help our effort to actively steward every drop."

Drayton also sees potential for AI in the field. "The Lumo sensors we use can detect whether the pattern of water flow is normal or not and will highlight any abnormalities," he notes, commenting that such abnormalities may be due to leaks or breaks in the irrigation system. "You wouldn't catch that, or catch that in time, if it was all manual. And you probably wouldn't notice it in a list of data points, but AI cleans up the data and filters reports to focus on these anomalies."

ENERGY EFFICIENCIES

In 2022, Frank Family enrolled in Marin Clean Energy's (MCE) Deep Green program, allowing its winemaking facility, tasting room, and other hospitality ven-



Frank Family Vineyards is certified California Sustainable Vineyard & Winery, Fish Friendly Farming, and Napa Green.

ues to utilize 100% renewable electricity from local wind and solar power. And in 2024, 800 solar panels were installed on the property, meaning that an estimated 75% of the winery's electricity will be produced on-site, with the rest coming from local renewable sources. "Roughly 70% of TWE's direct emissions (scope 1 and 2) come from electricity use (scope 2)," says Drayton. "If we can decrease our electricity carbon footprint to zero, that's a huge amount of progress." To put it into perspective: The system is estimated to



Pruning vines in the Winston Hill Vineyard.



Increased biodiversity is a key goal of sustainable viticulture.

generate the equivalent of the average annual electricity usage of 53 houses. "We want to be environmentally and socially conscientious in every part of the business," he says. "We have a responsibility to do the right thing but also to our consumers, who understand the importance of sustainability and the part they play."

EXPANDING OUTWARD

"We are proud to be one of the largest contributors to the Napa River Restora-

tion Project," says Drayton, who adds that the project has had a massive positive impact on the local environment. Widening the river's path ensures water flow is slowed, which helps mitigate soil erosion while making room for increased biodiversity. "We set back our vineyards to allow space for native plantings of trees and understory shrubs while removing invasive, disease-harboring species like periwinkle and Himalayan blackberry," he says. "These efforts have strengthened habitats for birds, fish, insects, and mammals while also reducing disease pressure on adjacent vineyards."

Social and human welfare is an equally important part of sustainability for the Franks. Enter Frank for a Cause—a program the founding couple developed in 2018. "Rich and I feel incredibly fortunate to call Napa Valley home, establish a winery here, and grow a business in partnership with a company like Treasury Wine Estates," says Leslie. "With the winery, we have a platform to raise awareness and give back meaningfully."

Over the years, Frank for a Cause has given to numerous organizations: Breast Cancer Research Foundation, Autism Speaks, the Humane Society of the United States, and K9s for Warriors, among several others. "Giving back is woven into the very fabric of who we are, and through our Frank for a Cause campaigns, we've had the privilege of raising both awareness and vital funds for so many deserving organizations," says Leslie.

As of June 2024, the Franks have partnered with 4ocean in its mission to help end the crisis of plastic pollution in the oceans. Through July 2025, each bottle purchased of their 4ocean Chardonnay and Cabernet Collection pulls a pound of trash and plastic from the world's oceans, rivers, and coastlines. And the Franks aren't just philanthropists, they're activists. At the end of 2024, the couple hosted and participated in a coastal cleanup in Boca Raton, Florida, which recovered 100 pounds of trash. More cleanups are scheduled for 2025 in Chicago, Rhode Island, and the San Francisco Bay Area, and the Franks invite and encourage their club members, followers, and friends to sign up to help. "4ocean is an extraordinary organization making a profound impact," says Leslie. "It's staggering to see the sheer volume of plastic and debris they remove from our oceans and waterways through their global cleanup efforts."

As of this writing, the Franks are also pitching in to support victims of the Los Angeles fires, with 10% of online and tasting room sales going toward Cal Fire. "We have family members who were directly impacted and friends who lost their homes and businesses. The scale of devastation is almost unimaginable," says Leslie. "Los Angeles is a second home to Rich and me, and right now, those impacted by the fires need our support more than ever."

Supporting community—*isn't that* what sustainability is all about? *sj*