

Webinar sheds light on holistic management of grapevines

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A webinar led by Saxenburg Estate's fourth-ever head winemaker, Dirk van Zyl, and the internationally acclaimed Dick Richardson of Grazing Naturally, left viewers with plenty of things to consider. Saxenburg is a family winery based in the Polkadraai Hills of Stellenbosch, and is passionately dedicated to producing premium wines, expressive of terroir and variety, and consistency in quality.



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Richardson has spent much time with people all over the world, such as Allan Savoury. Having gained much experience over the years, he noticed things he had been oblivious to before, such as certain ecological principles and guidelines.

Today he is of the notion that the mistakes made by way of unnatural methods, will always take longer to fix than making mistakes the natural way. Grazing Naturally, based in Australia, resulted from his passion for nature and his insights into the symbiotic relationships within nature that create the impulse to drive change. The Grazing Naturally Programme combines listening to the environment and responding appropriately with comprehensive planning, risk mitigation, and [grazing](#) animals.

The footsteps of the farmer

The webinar homed in on the footsteps of vine growers globally, where a growing number of farmers are turning to holistic farming methods. Although the turnaround strategy from conventional farming to sustainable farming methods can take some years, those who have been biting the proverbial bullet reap the benefits by doubling proceeds and returns on their farms.

Van Zyl and Richardson touched on growers using several different methods to build healthy soil to increase biodiversity, enrich soils, restore watersheds, and enhance ecosystem services. However, they emphasised the importance of ultimately producing the closest expression of terroir and quality – not only with wine, but essentially all farming activities.

Van Zyl, who has learned to live by using all his senses on the farm, asked Richardson if it was a penny drop moment for him when he realised that the things which he had learned years before, no longer applied to sustainable farming. To this Richardson replied that he has been questioning specific outcomes on conventional studies for a long time. “I saw matters from a different angle for a long time and today, I worry about our young people who seem to be out of touch, with few of them spending time to know what is really going on around them and in nature.”

The fertiliser aspect

Van Zyl commented on the fact that soil should be seen as a living thing but that too many people still view agriculture as a medium where they can just put down fertiliser as and when necessary. “Unfortunately, farming repetitively in the same way as before, and by taking shortcuts, is doing more damage,” he said. “How do we go about changing this?”

Richardson replied that repetitiveness of methods is often followed as a simplified outcome. “The basic practices of agriculture to produce food is in its own way fundamentally destructive by repetitiveness, such as ploughing every year or using the same chemical year after year. Holistic management, on the other hand, refers to nature working in patterns and the more we can change a pattern, the more we can work synergistically with nature.”

Being regenerative in generating life in soil

“All we really need to do is create soil structures and opportunities for other organisms to come in and do their work,” said Richardson. “If you want phosphorus, it does not have to necessarily come from a bag. We need to learn to be minimalists. For example, having parasites in sheep and under-drenching them with dosing.”

He continued, “What we want to think about is which patterns we can change – or disrupt in the whole – to bring about a different outcome. Planting cover crops or a variety of vegetables in a vineyard block can change, for example, the carbon content, nitrogen, and the pH-levels in the soil. Here is another example: If one uses cattle or sheep to graze cane that has been cut, instead of burning it, there will be an improved outcome due to the grazing factor being added to it. Also, by using the enzymes of animals from their dung and urine, one can get the maximum benefits out of the soil by adding a new mineral cycle to it, which will change the so-called pattern of that particular vineyard.”

Richardson said one should ask oneself if something is really needed, and if there are alternative ways of achieving a goal. First speak to an agronomist and be thoughtful about what you want to do. Also, if you use things such as antibiotics, use them sparingly, only when really needed, timeously, and only in conjunction with nature.”

Cover crops and livestock in the vines

How much growth do you allow on cover crops before placing animals there? Richardson’s reply to this question rang as follows: “As soon as one starts seeing the sandpaper on a cricket ball – that is how long you keep the animals in there. By the time you can have a beer can standing up in a vine block, it is too late, and the animals have been in there too long. The biggest mistake one can make is letting the plants grow out and produce seed.”

He suggested that it is usually a good idea to plant oats first and let it establish itself, followed by anything else suited to the area, such as weeds or chicory, and once these are established, to bring in certain types of grass. “Try to grow stuff. Yes, even weeds that already grow in your vineyards.

“Can I replace it with plants doing a similar job? Yes. No legumes though, because the grasses among them can get lazy from getting free nitrogen from the legumes. Another thing is to select cover crop species that will be most active in cooler seasons and less active in warm seasons. Pick things that will not bother your vines as such.”

Van Zyl and Richardson further touched on tillage and how appropriate its use is these days. Richardson believes that one can put in a disc once to open the soil to get oxygen into it, but there is no need to till the soil 180 degrees.

In conclusion, the keynote message could not be any more straightforward: Take into consideration the essence of Mother Nature and the rewards will pay off exceedingly in the long run.

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