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À votre santé!
to CT's Only Certified Vegan-Friendly Vineyard
By Susan Cornell



When you choose a particular wine to pair with steak, chicken or fish, do you ever wonder what went into the winemaking process? How does gelatin from boiled pig body parts, isinglass from fish bladders or crustacean shells grab you?

For most of us, that is a bit too close to “yuck” – who wants hints of fish, shells, or animal body parts in their libation? These agents, and others such as bone marrow and egg albumen, are used by many winemakers when filtering their wine before bottling, which can influence the wine’s flavor and aroma.

But make no bones about it, this does not happen at Priam Vineyards in Colchester, which was just certified for its pure, vegan-friendly approach to winemaking, putting the Nutmeg State on the map of U.S. wineries receiving global certification. After an extensive review of its production practices from soil to bottle, Priam is the first vineyard in Connecticut to bear the certified seal of approval from BevVeg International.



Priam is in excellent company. Around the world, environmentally-conscious beverage companies are embracing these higher standards of production, including Moët &

Chandon (France) and Irish brewery Guinness, who in 2016 made its beer vegan-friendly by removing the fish bladder from its 250-year-old filtration process.

Ruaan Viljoen, Priam Vineyard’s winemaker and viticulturist, sums up his winemaking philosophy: “Less is more, the simpler the better, minimal manipulation. I want to express the grapes from the area to their full potential, and strive to make the best possible product from what Mother Nature has given us. Being vegan-friendly improves the quality of the wine.”

Priam Vineyards has long embraced sustainable agricultural practices, putting the vineyard in harmony with the surrounding, pristine Salmon River Valley. In lieu of pesticides and fertilizers, the vineyard put up bluebird boxes to control insects, planted wildflowers, was declared a nature conservation area by the World Wildlife Federation, and in 2010 became what is believed to be the first solar-powered winery in New England.



James Melillo, Gloria Priam, Ruaan Viljoen

Owner and managing partner Gloria Priam says that while making adjustments to be sustainable and go solar can be expensive, in the end it’s not. “You have a huge price to pay if you don’t take those precautions,” Priam says.

From the beginning, her plan was to live on the property, so it was important that anything going into the environment was healthy. “It was my well, my water table and my air. I’m here every day and I’m affected by everything that goes on here.”

Priam points out, “It was a very healthy environment to start with – this was 300 years of grazing pastureland on top of a glacial gravel pit.”

The property, one of the oldest of Connecticut’s 43 wineries and vineyards, is





incredibly fertile and, as a U.S. Geological Survey Team discovered, the land has a beautiful mineral deposit, thanks to the glacial shift. Priam's bedrock is Brimfield Schist spotted with small red garnets. "We have minerals from the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean deposited here," she says. "What we're sitting on is just golden and we want to keep it that way."

With Priam's history of sustainable, environmental practices, foregoing animal byproducts and other additives in its wine production was a logical step to embrace. When Viljoen came to Connecticut from Cape Town, South Africa



in 2016, he began using the higher quality winemaking processes that had gained traction in Europe and other countries overseas. But joining the club was neither easy nor inexpensive. Certification entailed a three to five-month audit, submitting all products, their lot and batch numbers, obtaining a Certificate of Analysis, non-GMO certificates and organic certifications, presenting total production plans from vine to bottle and varietals used, presenting blending proportions for each wine and blends under each of Priam's 14 wines, and random site visits from the certification company performing both visual and internal audits.

So why jump through hoops for the vegan seal of approval, particularly considering neither the winemaker nor either owner is vegan (although Priam's fantasy is to have a personal



chef who can prepare vegan meals)? Viljoen said he had received numerous emails, Facebook messages, and in-person questions asking if the winery was vegan-friendly, gluten-free, etc. His personal mission became "to grow Priam Vineyards

into untapped markets and find comfort with new generation millennials and Generation Xers as these developing 'cultures' want to know where their food comes from and am I buying sustainable."

The reason that all wines are not vegan or even vegetarian-friendly has to do with a process called "fining" and how the wine is clarified. It's the filtering before bottling where many winemakers use funky additives, such as animal byproducts.

The term "fining," the winemaker explains, "is the process of adding a reaction agent to clarify or stabilize your product." He adds, "People don't want to consume cloudy wine." Instead, Priam uses enzymes and natural purifying absorption minerals for fining and clarification, or just leaves the wine to clarify on its own (although this can take as long as a year).

A consumer can't simply look at the packaging or turn to the Internet to determine the ingredients used in production. But, if the product is legally certified and carries the proof of vegan-friendly certification on the label, "the consumer can rest assured







there were no animal-derived or animal byproducts used during production."

"This is the main reason I took the time and financial investment to get certified -- as means of assuring not just vegan-friendly, but that the wines I am producing assure quality, transparency, and legality and fit into Priam Vineyards' dedication and practices," Viljoen explains.

The vineyard's practices were initially framed by Priam herself, as well as co-owner and director James Melillo, who joined Priam four years ago to increase the size, quality and reputation of the vineyards. "Priam Vineyards hadn't yet discovered its true potential," Melillo shares. "Now it's really one of the out-

standing wineries on the East Coast, and our wines compete with top vineyards in international wine competitions."

Proof of this can be found in the results of the 8th Annual International Wine Competition, one of the most respected in the world, where two of Priam's hand-crafted wines won gold and silver medals, earning it the distinction of Connecticut Winery of the Year for 2018.

The vineyard's growing reputation for quality wines bolsters Melillo's wheelhouse, which is

"agritourism." He says, "Whether it's a winery or a dairy farm or an apple orchard, agritourism has become critical for success because of costs and the shifting desires from product to experience among Americans."

"Agritourism allows agriculture to maintain its ability to create quality entertainment, tourism, and quality life experiences in Connecticut so people don't need to leave the state in order be engaged." This focus on agritourism coupled with the beauty of the vineyards and excellence of its wines has



made Priam a popular site for weddings and corporate events, as well as a year-round getaway for wine tastings, concerts, family outings and picnics.

Melillo views Priam's success in becoming certified with the "vegan-friendly" quality standard regarding great wines, as another jewel in Priam's crown. Not only do vegans "tend to be more aware and more knowledgeable and conscious, they are one of the fastest growing segments of the food and wine industry," he says. "They're looking at farm-to-table, they're looking for less processed products in both wine and food. It's a way of eating and thinking about food and wine. There's kosher, organic and other terms that are more focused on methodology than quality."



Licensing organizations such as BevVeg have wines they have qualified, but there's no central repository for the consumer. Under U.S. labeling criteria, consumers cannot find out what's in a wine when picking up a bottle. So, what's in that \$10 or \$12 bottle?

through the vineyard, it effectively has a series of mechanical processes that picks up everything that it can – it pulls it up, puts it into the hopper, and then crushes. That includes not just the grapes but may include the snake, may include the bird's nest, and may include the opossum that's made a home in the vine. All of that is scooped up and becomes part of that wine."



Is Melillo vegan? "No, I'm an Italian," he laughs, then goes on to explain why he still represents the target market for Priam wines.

"Our first target market is people who like great

wines, and that's what we make. The second group that drinks our wine is people in Connecticut who are looking to support local or regional small businesses, and that's what we are. The third leg is the vegan. I go out of my way not to eat nitrates and highly processed foods. I choose that as a lifestyle. We want people who not only choose that, but also make it all the way to vegan."

"It's a quality road and we want it to be seen as that quality road that people embark on for their own purposes."



This is one of the reasons why Priam Vineyards handpicks its grapes. With a picking machine, "you don't know what organic matter is in there – animal or vegetable. Picking grapes by hand ensures the quality of our harvest."

