

Certifications

USDA Organic

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program (NOP) provides the official "organic" certification for agricultural products and is the most widely known certification program by consumers. The focus of the National Organic Program is stewardship of soil and water through cover cropping, crop rotation, composting, the prohibition of synthetic chemical use, and the practice of Integrated Pest Management.



All producers of goods labeled or advertised as “organic” must adhere to the National Organic Program regulations. Producers who sell over \$5,000 per year (gross income) of organically-labeled goods must complete annual third-party certification through an Accredited Certifying Agency. The National Organic Program is regulated by Part 205 of Title 7 (Agriculture) of the [Code of Federal Regulations](#).

Steps to pursuing Organic Certification

1. Locate an accredited certifying agent. The USDA provides a [national list](#) of certifying agents. Many certifiers operate in multiple states.
2. Submit some basic information to your certifying agent about your operation and what substances have been applied to the land over the past three years.
3. Familiarize yourself with the NOP regulations and create an Organic System Plan (OSP). The OSP describes specifically how you will meet the organic standards in your vineyard. The National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service has put together a group of [forms](#) to aid grape growers in documenting their OSP. To find out what materials and products are permitted for organic farming, see the Organic Materials Review Institute, known as [OMRI](#), which annually updates and published the list of approved supplies online and in print. Also see NC Extension Agent Debbie Roos’ website for a practical [introduction](#) to the regulations.
4. Your certifying agent will visit the farm and award your vineyard with organic certification if the inspection is successful.
5. You will be required to keep post-certification records for each year and maintain records of the past five years.

Registration typically costs \$1,000 annually but can be 75% subsidized through the NOP Organic Cost Share Program, administrated at the state level. Visit the [NC Department of Agriculture](#) website for information on applying for the cost share. There are also costs associated with the certifying agency, so be sure to outline expenses with your potential certifier.

Wine Labeling

Note that wines containing added sulfites, nitrates, or nitrites may NOT be labeled “organic,” but may be labeled “made with organic grapes.” Additionally, the sulfite concentration must not exceed 100 parts per million to meet this qualification.

The USDA has published an [online training session](#) for wine labeling with use of organic and non-organic grapes.

§ 205.301 Product composition.
 (f) All products labeled as “100 percent organic” or “organic” and all ingredients identified as “organic” in the ingredient statement of any product MUST NOT:
 (5) Contain sulfites, nitrates, or nitrites added during the production or handling process, Except, that, wine containing added sulfites may be labeled “made with organic grapes”

[Code of Federal Regulations Title 7](#)

VineBALANCE

The [VineBALANCE program](#), developed by the Cornell Cooperative Extension, provides a comprehensive viticulture sustainability workbook that aids growers in discerning their current level of sustainability and making improvements in their practices.

Since most wine-specific sustainability certifications in the U.S. are based on the West Coast, VineBALANCE provides valuable information on the reality of sustainable grape growing in the East.



First published in 2007, VineBALANCE addresses sustainability by encouraging growers to make improvements in their operations. Topics covered include site preparation and soil management, canopy, nutrition, irrigation, pest, weed management, as well as continuing education. The program is not designed to mandate or disallow certain practices or substances, but to support growers in moving towards best practices in the vineyard.

This self-assessment workbook presents growers with a series of options for over 100 agricultural parameters. The grower completes the book by selecting the options that represent current vineyard practices, and is then tasked with creating an action plan to improve the sustainability of the vineyard. Methods are outlined in the workbook along a range from risky to environmentally sustainable (each ranked 1 - 4), allowing each grower a clear picture of steps to improve vineyard practices.

Although VineBalance is not a “certification,” growers who have completed the workbook and created an action plan based on the self-assessment can advertise their participation. Study of this workbook also provides a thorough introduction to vineyard sustainability methods.

Certified Naturally Grown



The [Certified Naturally Grown](#) (CNG) program considers itself to be a “Grassroots Alternative to the USDA’s National Organic Program meant primarily for small farmers distributing through local channels.” Although not as widely known by consumers as the National Organic Program, CNG does provide certification to agriculture producers including vineyards in North Carolina, and may be a good fit for some growers.

Like “organic” certification, Certified Naturally Grown is not specific to vineyards and awards third-party sustainability certification to growers. The requirements are also similar to the National Organic Program, but inspections are conducted by participating CNG farmers instead of a private company. Both the inspecting farmer and applicant farmer sign documents stating that the applicant meets all required standards.

Small and medium-size wineries who primarily sell direct to consumers may relate particularly with this program’s mission to promote sustainable local food.

See full [program requirements](#) and more information at <http://www.naturallygrown.org/>

Biodynamics and [Demeter Certification](#)

The biodynamic system is particularly popular among sustainable grape growers compared to farmers of most other crops. Many growers who practice this type of vineyard management report that the transition to biodynamics came as a natural progression of their long-term practice of organic or sustainable agriculture.

Like organic farming, biodynamic principles forbid the use of synthetic pesticides or fertilizers, viewing the whole farm as an interwoven, interdependent system including the plants, animals, and humans that interact there. The primary difference between biodynamic and “organic” or “sustainable” practices is the system’s very specific methods of preparing and using compost and compost teas. Biodynamic growers feel that the improvement to soil and overall farm health that these techniques provide makes their vines less susceptible to pests and disease, and improves the overall quality of their end product.

Very little research is available that tests the claims of the biodynamic system. One multi-year study comparing organic to biodynamic viticulture in a California Merlot vineyard found higher Brix, phenols, and total anthocyanins in biodynamically grown fruit, with what researchers considered an “ideal” vine balance compared to the organically grown fruit, which was considered “slightly overcropped,” ([Reeve, et al 2005](#)).

[Demeter](#) is the official Biodynamic certification program. Just as products labeled “organic” must be certified by the USDA, those labeled “biodynamic” must carry the Demeter certification, which is a registered ® designation.



The Demeter group was founded in 1928 to promote the ideas of Rudolph Steiner, who saw the farm as a “living organism.” In 1985 Demeter became the official non-profit group in the US that now awards certification.

See [Demeter USA](#) for a brief [history](#) of the program. For more information on the process of Demeter Biodynamic® [certification](#), contact the Demeter office, which will send guidelines and arrange to visit the vineyard. Certification is renewed annually.

Biodynamic producers also have their own [trade organization](#).

West Coast Certification Programs

The following certification programs are based on the West Coast, but present in-depth information on sustainable business and viticulture methods.

Oregon LIVE



[Low Input Viticulture and Enology](#), Inc., or Oregon LIVE, provides third-party certification for vineyards, wineries, and wines in the states of Oregon and Washington.

LIVE was incorporated in 1999 as a Non-profit 501(c)3, grower-led organization. The program’s standards are based on the protocols of the international organization IOBC, which also endorses the program annually. Certification begins with a checklist of multiple items from 12 fields including: Farm Records, Self-Inspection, Training and Traceability, Biodiversity, Ecological Infrastructures, Site Selection, Harvesting, and Worker Health and Safety.

See LIVE’s [forms and standards](#) page for more information.

Lodi Rules Sustainable Winegrowing



Based in California, the [Lodi Rules Program](#) is one of the oldest vineyard sustainability certifications in the U.S., initiated in 1992 by the Lodi-Woodbridge Winegrape Commission. In 2008, Lodi Rules certified 10,000 acres of California vineyards.

The focal point of the Lodi Rules program is the Lodi Grower’s Workbook. The motivation of this program is on not only to protect the soil by “doing no harm,” but also to improve the quality of the entire farm operation on a continual basis. Certification, awarded annually by

the Lodi Winegrape Commission, is achieved through a points system that weighs a grower's [sustainable practices](#) against the use of pesticides in the vineyard.

Although East Coast vineyards typically do not participate in the program, its comprehensive Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing do provide a useful template for improving vineyard sustainability.

Vinewise, the Washington Guide to Sustainable Viticulture



[Washington State's Vinewise](#) sustainable grape growing certification program developed out of a risk management tool created by the Washington Wine Industry Foundation in 2003, funded by a federal USDA grant. Vinewise is now an online program with supporting information for each of its checklist items. Items are organized into 16 comprehensive topics that range from business plans to water management.

The online guide is a practical tool that consists of checklists, evaluation forms, and action plans for each element considered under their definition of sustainable viticulture. Working through this program, even without certification, provides much insight into ideas and practices integral to sustainable viticulture. This program addresses all three branches of the sustainability philosophy, covering environmental stewardship, business planning, and social equity.

Visit <http://www.vinewise.org/> for more information, or explore the [guideline checklists](#).