

*Five Decades
on the*

LECO-

Frontier

J. Lohr manages water resources very carefully, requiring less than a quarter of the water used by the average producer in the winemaking process.

PHOTO: JEREMY BALL

WHY SUSTAINABILITY IS A CORE VALUE OF CALIFORNIA'S J. LOHR VINEYARDS & WINES

by Courtney Schiesal



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eloved by enophiles of all stripes for its wide range of approachable wines, J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines encompasses various properties within the now-bustling growing region that is California's Central Coast. But nearly 50 years ago, when founder and proprietor Jerry Lohr found just the right spot in Monterey County in which to plant his first grapes, few had realized the potential for winemaking there.

This pioneering producer now has facilities in Greenfield, Paso Robles, and San Jose, with 1,400 acres of estate vineyard land in cool, windy Monterey County and 2,700 more in warm Paso Robles. Yet the secret to its decades-long success goes far beyond being in the right place at the right time. "Sustainability, farming, and respect for people have always been core to our whole philosophy," Jerry says. As one of the first wineries to earn the Certified California Sustainable Winegrowing designation, J. Lohr has shown a dedication to environmental, social, and economic principles that's setting the winery up for its next 50 years of success.

CONSCIENTIOUS TO THE CORE

Sustainability isn't a new concept for J. Lohr: It's been a core tenet of the winery since Jerry, who grew up on a farm in South Dakota, first bought land in Monterey County in 1971 and launched the winery in 1974. CEO Steve Lohr helped his father plant these vineyards when he was 10 years old. "We didn't necessarily use the word 'sustainability' back then," he says, "but we were always looking to improve the way we prepare and take care of our soils as well as all [other] processes in the vineyards and winery."

Jerry's farming background paved the way for his sustainability efforts. In South Dakota, farmers didn't have herbicides or pesticides and instead used organic practices largely by default. Following their lead rather than that of the corporate agricultural industry, with its increasing reliance on chemicals, he preferred to prioritize healthy soil practices.



J. Lohr co-owner Lawrence Lohr, founder Jerry Lohr, CEO Steve Lohr, and President and COO Jeff Meier.

PHOTO COURTESY OF J. LOHR VINEYARDS & WINES



Measuring the potential water content in vine stems allows J. Lohr to irrigate less.



A portrait of ecological health: A bee rests on a compost heap at the winery.

Sustainability advocates “take a holistic look at vineyard and winery practices,” says Steve. “For example, when you have a lot of tractor passes in the vineyard, you’re increasing greenhouse gas emissions. So we’re looking at ways we can take care of our soil while also taking care of the air around us.”

While J. Lohr’s environmental sustainability efforts are numerous, water conservation has been particularly important to the company over the past 16 years. In 2003, the standard industry practice was to use 6–7 gallons of water to make just 1 gallon of wine. J. Lohr began tracking its water usage and found that it was already using water more efficiently than the average winery, measuring around 3.5 gallons of water for per gallon of wine. But the team thought they could do better. By using low-flow, high-pressure nozzles on hoses and timing how long it takes to properly clean barrels, they were able to cut their water use even further; today, J. Lohr averages about 1.5 gallons of

water for every gallon of wine.

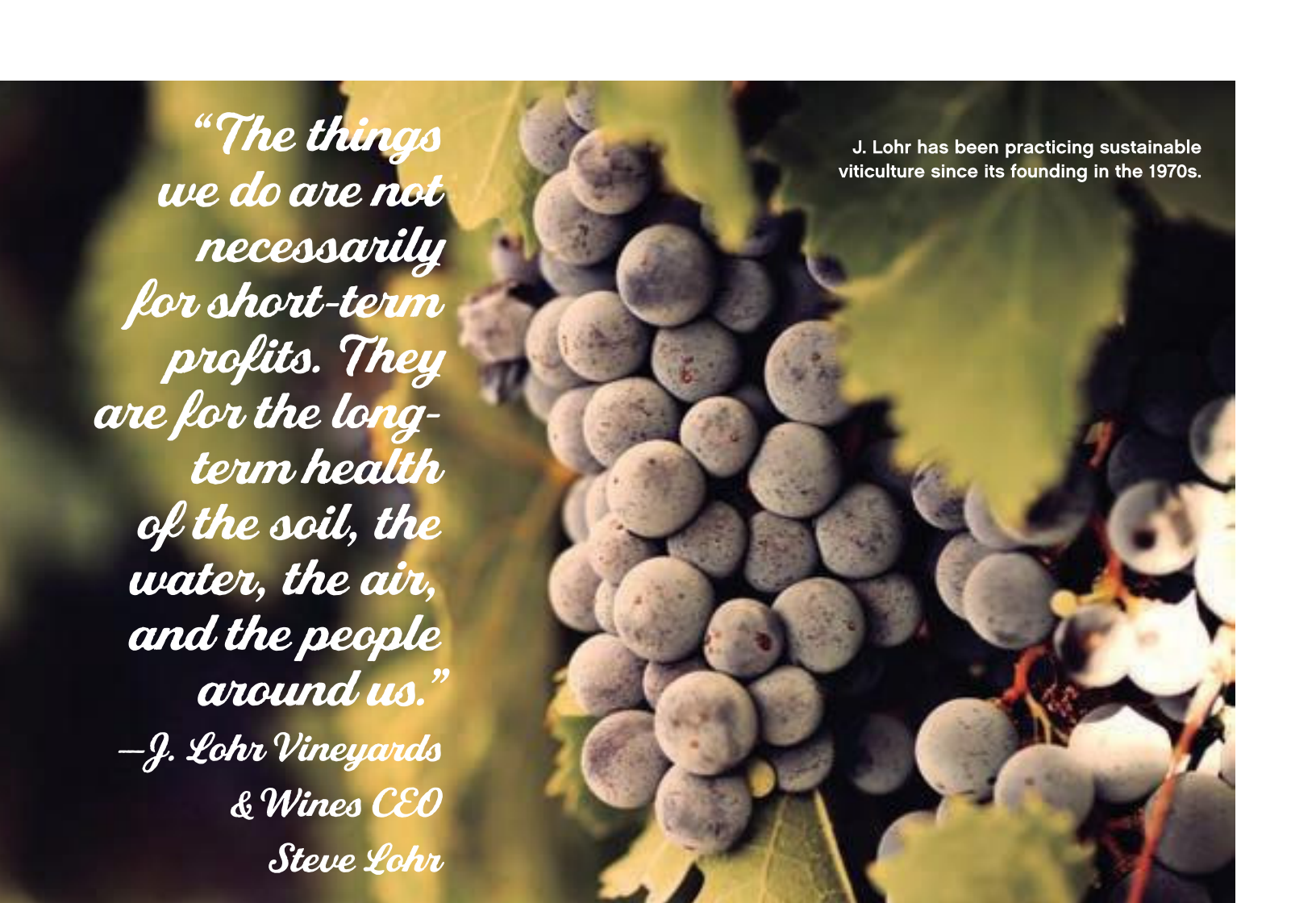
Now, it’s going one step further by tackling efficient water use in the vineyard. Working with a vineyard water-use specialist from the University of Bordeaux over the past decade, the company found that the vine itself—via the utilization of stem-water potential measurement—is the best soil moisture meter throughout the growing season, even in warmer regions like Paso Robles. “Depending on soil type and season, we can go up to three months in the summer without irrigating, with no detriment to yield or vine health,” says Jeff Meier, President and COO of J. Lohr. “In fact, we’ve seen an improvement in wine quality.” In July, the winery began working with some of its growers to decrease irrigation and promote efficient water use throughout the region.

TAKING THE LEAD

The J. Lohr team believes that sustainability must also extend beyond their wineries, estate vineyards, and growers,

and Jerry’s decades of experience put him in the position to lead. “Sometimes the research gets done and gets published without getting used,” he says. “We’re going to try to engage more people at a practical level.” Whether that’s through financing universities that lack the funds to travel and share research with the wine community or holding leadership positions at industry organizations across the state, J. Lohr doesn’t just want to enact change—it wants to drive change.

“Part of the ethos of our company is that anything worth doing is worth doing well,” says Lawrence Lohr, co-owner of J. Lohr, “and industry leadership and collaboration are paramount to what we all hold so dear here.” Jerry is now pushing for legislative change when it comes to water-management practices; current California laws require that farmers continue to irrigate land even when it is fallow in order to preserve their water rights, which can be unnecessarily wasteful.



“The things we do are not necessarily for short-term profits. They are for the long-term health of the soil, the water, the air, and the people around us.”

*—J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines CEO
Steve Lohr*

J. Lohr has been practicing sustainable viticulture since its founding in the 1970s.

Not only was J. Lohr one of the first 17 vineyards and wineries to earn the aforementioned Certified California Sustainable Winegrowing (CCSW) distinction, it aided in pioneering the certification itself. Jerry helped form the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance (CSWA) in 2001 as an outgrowth of the Wine Institute and the California Association of Winegrape Growers. In 2008, Steve formed the J. Lohr Sustainability Team, which meets quarterly to analyze ways to improve practices in the company's vineyards and wineries; the same year, J. Lohr was part of the CSWA group that decided a sustainability certification could bring clarity and guidance to the industry.

“At the time, there was some greenwashing in the industry—people saying they were sustainable, but there was no way to prove it,” says Steve, who has been on the board of CSWA for nine years and served as chairman in 2017 and 2018. “So the CSWA decided to create a certification

program verified by a third-party auditor, using the code of sustainable winegrowing practices that is part of the organization.” In January 2010, the first CCSW certifications were awarded.

SOCIAL EQUITY

“Sustainability, in addition to looking at the environment, also focuses on social equity and economics,” says Steve. It’s important for employees to know that they are valued, the team agrees, so J. Lohr looks to properly compensate associates and has implemented an incentive-based profit-sharing plan. “We think of it as taking care of our employees,” he adds, “and by taking care of our employees, we create an environment where people enjoy coming to work and have a major stake in our success.”

Social equity is also about giving back to the community. After Jerry’s wife, Carol, died of breast cancer in 2008, the winery began partnering with the National Breast Cancer Foundation.

Today, J. Lohr makes a donation from every bottle sold of Carol’s Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon to help women around the country get mammograms who would not otherwise be able to afford them. J. Lohr also hires people with developmental disabilities to work on projects like bottle labeling. “It’s a chance for them to feel good about doing work and getting paid for it,” says Steve. “We’re really happy to have them with us.”

Whether their projects pertain to the environment, social equity, or economics, the J. Lohr team is thinking ahead not just months or years but decades. “Sustainability has a short-term effect as well as a long-term focus to it,” says Steve. “The average life of a grapevine is 25 to 30 years—the same time frame as many of our sustainability practices. The things we do are not necessarily for short-term profits. They are for the long-term health of the soil, the water, the air, and the people around us.” ■■