

Central Coast Vineyard Team Grows

Viticulturist Westover to coordinate technical programs

By Jane Firstenfeld

Atascadero, Calif.—The Central Coast Vineyard Team, a leader in sustainability for almost 20 years, will bolster its technical research and outreach with the appointment of Fritz Westover. Currently viticulture extension program specialist in Houston, Texas, Westover will for the first time provide members with in-house technical advice from the Vineyard Team staff.

Perhaps best known for its SIP (Sustainability in Practice) program, which has certified 30,000 vineyard acres throughout California, Vineyard Team members conducted their first self-assessment through its “Positive Points” program in 1996. More than half a million cases of wine now bear the distinctive SIP seal.

According to Kris Beal, who has been with CCVT as its first and only executive director since 1998, “This is a very important time for us. Making an investment in this type of individual demonstrates the value we place on science and information. It shows our commitment to science and will give us a lot of choices.”

Westover will, she said, “Help us develop and shape content and education programs. He’ll weigh on SIP and do research with our willing base. Our clientele is anxious to study and to learn. We are the network with the infrastructure for that.”

Now in his seventh growing season in the Gulf Coast region of Texas, Westover’s viticultural perspective is national in scope. A Pennsylvania native, he previously spent two years as an associate with Tony Wolf at Virginia Tech. “I wanted to work with regions in their developmental stages,” he said. But he’s eager now to work in an area with larger vineyard acreage. He’s already gained a national platform as a contributor to *Wines & Vines*.

The vast and varied Central Coast of California is hardly an undeveloped viticulture region, he acknowledged. Is he worried that growers there might be more knowledgeable about the challenges they face?

“I’d be more concerned if they didn’t know more than me about their area. I’ll be on hand to apply my critical thinking and research to answering their concerns,” he said.

‘Very big on visuals’

When contacted by *Wines & Vines* this week, Westover was standing in a vineyard that had been battered by hail the previous night. With an earlier growing season than California, Texas vineyards already had shoots more than a foot long. “All they can do is let the secondaries come out and hope they have fruit,” Westover said of the pummeled vines.

In their search, the Vineyard Team was looking for more than just viticultural expertise. “I’ll be putting together practical research and demonstrations, and serving as a spokesperson to show how things are effective,” Westover said. “I’m very big on visuals.”



In his new position with the Central Coast Vineyard Team, Fritz Westover will provide members with technical grapegrowing advice.

Like the Vineyard Team, he held tailgate meetings for farmers and staff in Virginia and Texas. “I like to observe something at its peak, with growers implementing practices and speaking about their advantages and disadvantages.”

Although grapegrowers in hot, humid Virginia and Texas face radically different problems than most in the temperate Central Coast, Westover expects his experience and research there will be transferable. In Texas, “we had every single fungal, bacterial and insect problem in the U.S. Growers there are always fighting to grow grapes. The climates are very harsh for grapegrowing, and we have tackled a lot of issues,” he said. He hopes to educate California growers about products to combat pests, reducing use and improving timing of applications.

Like California, Texas faces perennial water-management issues. Vineyard mechanization, on the other hand, is a rarity in Texas but widely practiced on the Central Coast. “I’m most looking forward to what I’m most challenged by: the dynamic climates; growing practices from hand-grown to fully mechanized,” Westover said.

“The challenge for me is the same as in any new region. I’ll need time to study the region and its many different climates. It’s not a stumbling block, but given how diverse the region is, I’ll need time to catch up.” He’ll also be re-establishing his many contacts within the extension world and California’s university system.

Jumping in feet first

“He’ll hit the ground running: meeting stakeholders, members and farmers; identifying their needs,” Beal said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he gets involved in the water issues. Having worked in different parts of the country, he’s up to speed in terms of winemaking and viticulture all over.”

Beal termed the hire a milestone for the Vineyard Team. In its long history, she emphasized, “Our mission, from the very beginning, has never changed: to educate growers in sustainability.” When the team was founded in 1994, “This was very progressive.”

The Central Coast spans the largest geographical area of any California AVA; virtually all its sub-appellations, from Santa Cruz to Santa Barbara, support their own regional organizations. With its intense focus on sustainable grapegrowing, The Vineyard Team works well with all these organizations, sharing many mutual members.

In addition to the SIP program and the popular annual Sustainable Agriculture Festival, “We still have our core programs, including our tailgate workshops, some bilingual. That’s been an interesting evolution: “At first, we’d have

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Fritz Westover

the owners and high-level staff. After a couple of years, the top-level vineyard managers were next in line. Then it made sense to bring in the foremen and the Spanish-speaking workers,” Beal recalled.

“In terms of a grower organization, we have established ourselves, we’re stable, and we’re here for the long haul. In our wildest dreams, we could not have imagined this group would resonate this way, and build these programs. We’re proud of that record.”

Meanwhile, as soon as word spread that he is leaving his Texas post, Westover was inundated by messages from his clientele there. “In two days, I had more than 100 emails,” he said. “It makes me feel great.” Westover is expected to arrive in California in the next few weeks.

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