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**[Trincherro Family Estates shows the wine industry how to save money by conserving resources](#)**

- [Carol Emert](#)  
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For years, Sutter Home Winery's labels featured small wings sticking out from the label proper, wasting the slim strips of paper that were trimmed away to make the tabs.

The excess was only a couple of square inches, but multiply that by hundreds of millions of bottles and it adds up. A recent label redesign is saving Trincherro Family Estates, which makes Sutter Home, nearly half a million dollars per year.

By installing fluorescent lights, energy-efficient motors and additional insulation, St. Helena-based Trincherro has reduced its electricity usage 10 to 15 percent in each of the last four years. Decisions to remove glass-wasting indentations, or punts, from the bottoms of bottles and aluminum "skirts" on the necks of screw-capped mini-bottles will each save the winery \$1 million annually.

"I once watched a cellar worker track one grape skin 40 feet across the floor, with a hose going full blast," rather than picking up the skin and throwing it away, says Bob Torres, a Trincherro family member who oversees the winery's sustainability efforts as senior vice president of operations. "Now we use low-flow hoses" and employees are trained to keep a sharp eye on water use.

Sustainability doesn't get much airtime compared to sexy wine topics like gold medals and direct shipping stings. High-level recognition comes from the California Integrated Waste Management Board instead of Robert Parker.

But resource efficiency is a major behind-the-scenes movement in wine. Producers of 50 percent of the wine made in California and growers who account for 30 percent of the wine grape acreage participate in a formal sustainability program that started less than two years ago.

That response far exceeded the expectations of the program's organizers, the Wine Institute and the California Association of Wine Growers, which started the project in November 2002 with a goal of 10 percent participation.

In sustainability, "You have your leaders, you have the pack and some are just following along," says Nancy Light, the Wine Institute's director of communications and its point

person on sustainability.

Trinchero is a leader and has taken a key role in educating other wineries about the environmentally friendly practices it has honed over the decades, Light says.

Torres traces Trinchero's green corporate culture to the company's modest beginnings, when resource conservation was a financial imperative.

Founded in 1948, "we were very small, barely scratching out a living until the mid- to late-'70s," says Torres, 44. "We didn't leave the lights on, we didn't let the water run. We even picked up empty bottles from the tasting rooms of other wineries because we had no money" to buy glassware.

The family's fortunes changed when a fermentation accident and a stroke of marketing genius created a sweet, pink wine the Trincheros dubbed White Zinfandel.

Now Trinchero is one of the biggest producers in California and its owners are high-profile philanthropists. It makes and markets wines across the spectrum, from the premium Folie a Deux and Trinchero lines to \$4 Sutter Home White Zinfandel to the Australian Reynolds Vineyards and Little Boomey brands.

But penny-pinching remains a Trinchero value -- especially now, with heightened import competition and deflationary pressures hitting its bottom line.

In a recent visit to company headquarters on Highway 29, Torres showed me reams of color-coded computer spread sheets he uses to track electricity usage. Until four years ago, power bills were sent to accounting; now Torres reviews them each month to make sure usage is headed in the right direction.

Change for the better

Trinchero's efforts illustrate how energy efficiency can be accomplished by many mindful tweaks rather than seismic shifts:

-- As an experiment, Trinchero recently changed the cleaning agent used on one bottling line and found it reduced water usage by two-thirds because it eliminated the need to rinse. The cleaner, peracetic acid, also leaves no unhealthy salts in the environment. Plans are being laid to make the change at additional facilities.

-- Even before that innovation, Trinchero used less than 1.5 gallons of water per gallon of wine produced, compared to an industry average of 5 to 7 gallons of water per gallon of wine.

-- Trinchero recycles 50 million gallons of wastewater per year through irrigation ponds and composts 2 million pounds of diatomaceous earth, a natural fining agent, and 24,000 tons of pomace (grape skins).

-- Energy-efficient motors are used for all refrigeration tanks. "They're more expensive, but you make it back," says Torres.

-- Torres is trying to persuade his label maker to remove silicon from the decal-style labels so the backing is recyclable.

-- Delivery trucks use less fuel to deliver Trincherro's lighter bottles, cases and case separators. "There's a ripple effect in efficiency," says Torres.

-- Every work space at Trincherro has a box where employees can discard used batteries from home and work.

-- Trincherro recycles about 20 tons of office paper, 41 tons of scrap metal, 850 tons of cardboard and 100 tons of plastic each year. Proceeds go into a fund for employees in need and staff parties.

Trincherro's efforts have been recognized for four years in a row by the California Integrated Waste Management Board, which honors companies that demonstrate significant improvements in waste reduction each year.

A need for awareness

Environmental awareness hasn't always been at the top of Trincherro's priority list.

During White Zinfandel's growth spurt, the company barely noticed that it was overtaxing its systems. Plumbing leaks and clogs appeared with increasing frequency and no one stopped to address the problem systematically.

Torres joined the family business in 1984 after graduating from UC Berkeley with a degree in architecture. His mother, Vera, is the sister of Bob Trincherro, the company chairman and Roger Trincherro, the chief executive. Torres' first job was to convert a chicken ranch on Zinfandel Lane in St. Helena into a massive production facility that is still in use.

Torres quickly figured out that "We didn't just need a bigger system, we needed to manage our resources better," he says. "We didn't know how much water or electricity we were using or how much waste we were generating."

He conducted a comprehensive energy audit with Pacific Gas & Electric and has been building on the reforms each year.

One idea he has rejected was solar power, which more and more wineries are embracing. "We just use too much energy -- (solar) doesn't pencil out for us," he says.

Most of the packaging changes have been instituted in the last four years, driven in part by hard times in the wine industry. "You can't raise your prices now, so you have to look at your costs," says Torres. "When things are good, you don't pay as much attention."

Torres has parlayed his experience into guidance for other wineries. He was a key author of the telephone book-sized sustainability workbook introduced in 2002.

Vintners and growers use the book to record baseline data on 221 items, track their improvement and compare their performance to others in their region.

While many people helped write the workbook, Torres was inspiring because he has been practicing sustainability for so long, says Karen Ross, president of the California Association of Winegrape Growers.

"There's nothing like an innovator standing up and sharing their expertise that helps others realize, 'Oh, there really are bottom-line savings to doing it this way,' " she says.

As much progress as the wine industry has made, it still has a long way to go. While half of California wineries, by production, are using the workbook, half are not. And 70 percent of growers by acreage are not.

Ultimately, moving toward sustainability will help fend off government regulation and restore the trust of environmentalists who sometimes regard the industry as an adversary, says Light.

"It's the model I see our industry embracing."

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