Ep 175: Regenerative Viticulture with Justin Howard-Sneyd MW (Part 1)

Janina Doyle 00:00:07 Welcome to Eat Sleep Wine Repeat, a podcast for all you wine lovers, who, if you're like me, just cannot get enough of the good stuff. I'm Janina Doyle, your host, Brand Ambassador, Wine Educator, and Sommelier. So, stick with me as we dive deeper into this ever evolving, wonderful world of wine. And wherever you are listening to this, cheers to you!

Hello, wine lovers and welcome back to what is going to be a very interesting topic, one that really matters, but yet still many people are at odds as to what exactly is it. And I am talking about regenerative viticulture.

So, in this episode, I am talking with Justin Howard-Sneyd, who is a Master of Wine, a wine consultant, the owner of a Roussillon winery called Domaine of the Bee, but in this instance, most importantly, a trustee of the Regenerative Viticulture Foundation, where he runs Two day regenerative viticulture courses in the UK and has been doing this for the last two years.

And so, he's gonna run us through the fundamentals. We're going to explore the distinctions between regenerative farming and organic practices and biodynamics. We will delve into the process of obtaining certification in this domain and tackling the very controversial debate to till or not to till.

Now a lot of these decisions are based on how do we make our soils as healthy as possible. And to give you some really interesting facts about soils and why we love them, why we need them to be healthy. Did you know in the UK alone, everyone in the world, the UK is a tiny country, it can hold 10 billion tonnes of carbon, which is one year's worth of global human emissions.

For me, that is astounding. And so, those methods such as tilling or ploughing and the heavy reliance of pesticides and synthetic fertilisers, if they're weakening the soil's capacity to store carbon, that's where I can understand it's a really good idea if viticulturists can find ways to change that.

And another fun fact, what with most of the vineyards dealing with droughts now, but then others dealing with floods. A healthy soil can act like a sponge. Just one hectare of land can store one and a half Olympic swimming pools worth of water and the UK soils alone can store 130 trillion litres of water. Anyway, mind blown!

So, I hope this episode expands your understanding of agriculture just that little bit more and its profound implications for the future of our planet. And so, if you're looking for a bottle of wine to drink along whilst listening to this episode, I can happily and safely recommend my incredible sponsor of this season, Wickhams Wine. I will leave the link in my show notes. They have many wineries that are engaged in the sustainable winemaking practices where they're promoting biodiversity and reducing those CO2 emissions.

So, look for Domain Maby in the RhôneValley or in Beaujolais, there is Mont Joly and Famille Descombe. Don't forget to use my code “EATSLEEP10” for 10% off your first order and enjoy the episode.

Janina Doyle 00:03:40 Okay, so I need to ask you, how did you get actually into teaching from the beginning of regenerative farming? What grabbed you?

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:03:50 Interesting question. I mean, I had spent a reasonable amount of time when I passed the Master of Wine, subsequently as MWs, you do a bit of time teaching students and I hadn't taught for a long time and I've forgotten how much I enjoyed it.

I actually started working for the Dartington Trust in Devon, helping them build a program of wine events. They have a wide range of courses of arts and other things. And we decided to add wine to the list of courses.

As I was going down there and realising quite how into regenerative culture they are, farming and also regenerating communities, I started to learn a little bit more about the regenerative philosophy and thinking about how it might apply to wine.

So, we can see fairly early on that actually there's a real need for people to learn about what regenerative farming means in wine because it's quite well practised in agriculture, but not so well in wine at all.

So, we conceived a small course that we started running about three years ago and that went down really well. Obviously UK based, mostly UK producers coming along to that. But I was learning fast about regenerative and learning a lot from Dartington and also reading certain podcasts.

And so, probably three years ago, I really started really boning up and it's been an incredibly interesting journey and a really interesting one, as someone who used to study a lot and hasn't studied for a long time to go back to study it. Really fascinating. It's such a lot to learn and it's such an inspiring world of interest. So, I've really enjoyed the learning I've been doing.

Janina Doyle 00:05:07 Well, I've just been captivated by it myself. So, I'd said to you when we were talking before recording that only a few weeks ago, I watched Kiss the Soil (Ground) on Netflix. And I just was absolutely shocked by how incredible our soils are at extracting the carbon and how this could be an absolute way forward to deal with our issues. Yet it's not really something that you hear being spoken about. Okay, before we get into healthy soils, what would be regenerative viticulture for anybody listening now? How would you define it?

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:05:45 Well, it's a very good question and it's one that we are busy trying to make simple and straightforward.

Janina Doyle 00:05:51 Please!

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:05:53 I know you spoke to Jamie Goode recently and he's got a definition which is that regenerative viticulture is intelligent viticulture and it evolves and adapts according to what the science currently says.

It is based on scientific understanding but it's also based on, I suppose, an understanding of the complexity of what is happening in a complicated network. The soil food web under the ground is so complex it's very, very hard to test and learn in a purely scientific way. You basically have to achieve a healthy balance of microbes and organisms living in the soil, doing what they do, feeding the plant, feeding the soil, feeding each other in order to cease to have to add a lot of fertilisers, lot of nitrogen, a lot of phosphorus, because the soil biology should be releasing it for you.

And even micronutrients, I mean, sometimes you're very short of a micronutrient and you have to add something to bring that back into balance. It's incredible how small amounts of micronutrients locked up in the soil can be released by the soil biology.

So, essentially, regenerative viticulture is focusing on allowing nature to do the hard work for you and actually doing less work yourself and just trying to set things up so that the system starts to balance and work by itself.

It's very closely related and overlapping with organic and biodynamic viticulture, but it has quite a few differences. One of the main ones is that in organics and biodynamics, well, certainly in organics, one of the main ways in which you control weeds is by ploughing. The big precept of regeneration, and just rewinding a bit talking about regenerative in agriculture, the insight was that soils are lost and degraded and depleted when you plough and leave your soil bare.

What happens then is that when it dries out and the wind blows, the fine sand and the organic matter just blows away. And when it rains, it just washes away. There's nothing in the ground to hold it. And you're also gradually killing the organisms that are living in the soil because they've got nothing to feed on.

So, the big insight is that what everything feeds on is the roots of plants pushing out carbon into the soil, having photosynthesized and having decided that they've got most of the nutrients they need, but some stuff they can't have access to unless they feed the soil biology.

So, algae then takes the carbon and then supplies the plant with what it needs. And over millions of years, billions of years, this evolution process has fine tuned certain organisms, providing certain nutrients for plants. And it's an incredible symbiosis that we've only begun to understand of what happens under the soil.

So, essentially, as soon as you plough the soil, you disrupt all of that nice little ecosystem of setting itself up under the ground. You invert the soil. You take what was a foot below the soil and put it on the top. You take what was on top and put it beneath. It all dies and decomposes and eventually then the soil carbon just depletes and every time you plough it, you get less carbon and less soil life.

So, ploughing is the sort of enemy number one of regenerative farming. So, you probably may have heard of No-till farming that's very much using the same philosophy.

Janina Doyle 00:08:44 Yes well this is a huge, huge conversation right now. And yeah, I'm going to leave this for you to explain why tilling might be really, really bad.

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:08:54 Well, exactly as I said, so when you insert a ploughshare, if you invert the soil, you're moving the habitats around – so, there's all sorts of organisms that live in the soil. Some live way deep down. Most of them live in the top few inches. And if you bury those and put them underground, they don't have what you need to survive, so they die.

And obviously, ploughing, tilling in the first place was originally done in order to make soil, to break it up and make it light so you could put seeds in. So, the early farmers would make a furrow in the soil and drop in seeds and that would allow them to grow a crop. But it's become a way of clearing everything out from what grew before, starting with bare soil and planting the 100% crop you want to grow in a monoculture.

That has been the way of intensive farming over the last several hundred years and certainly intensifying since fertilisers and mechanisation came along. Because of that, we haven't been realising that our soils have been depleting and getting worse and worse and lower and lower quality. And we've been relying more and more on the bags of chemicals, either to fertilise because there's no fertility left in the soil, or then to fix the problems that too much fertility causes.

Rapid growth of plant cells means that they're very vulnerable to pathogens. So, as soon as you give something loads of nitrogen, it grows really quickly and then falls over with the first disease that comes along. We haven't been farming very, very wisely.

And in many ways, viticulture has sort of not been the big culprit in this because we do have a permanent crop in the crop. The vines don't get ploughed out every year. They grow and they grow every year. But it is fairly clear that even in some very premium wine regions in the world, the quality of the viticulture and the quality of the soil is pretty poor.

I think it was Claude Bourguignon who, I think it was back in the 90s, early 90s, he analysed lots of soil in Burgundy. And he said that actually, in his opinion, there was less soil life in the soils of Burgundy than there was in the sands of the Sahara.

Janina Doyle 00:10:45 Yes, that is a famous quote that I've heard of. I mean, it's shocking how, as well, I was reading up, there's this massive, amazing quote in the film, Kiss the Soil (Ground) where if you take a whole handful of healthy soil, it has more organisms in it than human beings who have ever lived on this planet.

But I also read recently, which is another way to look at it, that literally one gram of healthy soil has 10 billion organisms in it. I find that really mind-blowing to understand that there is so much going on under our soils.

Apparently, about half of all of the species that live on Earth are actually under our soils, yet we don't really know anything about it and we haven't put any focus onto it. It's at least amazing that people are starting to focus.

Now, you said with vineyards, we're not ploughing so much because the vines are in the ground but we are tilling. So, am I right and the reason that people are tilling is generally as well for weed control. So, for instance, it's one of these things, what's the right way? They don't want to spray

weed killer, so instead they go along and they till so that they don't have to spray. Is that generally the main reason why someone would till?

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:12:05 Yes, I think there are a few reasons to till and that's probably the main one in many countries. And yes, you do need to control competitive plants and you need to control plants that will grow into your canopy and crowd the grapes and cause disease issues and all of the challenges of regenerative viticulture is how do you do that. There are mechanical means that you can do by hand. That's obviously very expensive. Are regenerative processes very easy to scale?

But I think one of the problems is that really good organic growers know that ploughing isn't a great thing to do and they do it as little as possible and they do it very lightly. But it is a precept of organics that that is an important thing to do.

One of the things that there's a very great French consultant called Frédéric Thomas who's a regenerative agriculture consultant. He helped me understand quite how working the soil is sort of embedded in French culture as something you must do, something that's positive because when you work the soil you get a fertility boost and the plants grow better after you've worked it.

So, there is a mantra: "Oh it's the time of the year, I must work the soil and then my plants will start to grow vigorously." He showed two pots, one of which had the soil heat treated to kill everything in it. And they had exactly the same plant growing at the same time, but one was really bushy and green, and the other one was a regular plant, not looking quite so green.

And the one that actually had been heat treated was the one with the bushy and green plant. And that's because everything in the soil had died, released all its nitrogen, and given the plant lots of energy to grow. And the plant had grown, but you know, you plant in that pot again the next year, there'll be less in there to fertilise.

So, as you kill everything, you get this enormous spike in microbial activity as the microbes break down what it is that's been killed. And then, the microbial activity drops to half or a quarter of what it was before because most of the microbes now don't have a home or anything to eat because it's all gone.

So, I think that is a perception that I've got to plough in order to boost my fertility and to control my weeds. And that therefore ploughing must be good. And actually, more and more organic farmers are beginning to realise that actually ploughing is quite negative.

But with the industrialization of organics in France, the growth has been extremely fast. And there's more and more growers on large scales applying organic protocols, but they're very much doing it by mass ploughing and not sensitively nurturing their soil health. Whereas the very good organic growers are already very far down the regenerative road. What they're doing is very close to regenerative agriculture. And certainly the ones who are diminishing or stopping ploughing and being organic are pretty much ideal regenerative vineyards.

So, in no way do we see that being as an oppositional philosophy, but just because consumers around the world have learnt that the word organic on a label is something to look for, it doesn't necessarily mean that on a mass scale, you can be organic and have really healthy soil. You're

ploughing a lot and you're probably using a lot of – I mean, let's face it, some of the products that are used in organics against fungal diseases are effective because they are fungicides. They happen to be copper and sulphur but those are still fungicides and they're authorised by organics because they're mined from the earth rather than made by a human, but they still are killing fungus. And this is a big challenge for viticulture because vines are very susceptible to fungal disease.

Janina Doyle 00:15:15 And I suppose this is the thing that I always mention to people. Of course, if you can stop using conventional sprays, great. If you're throwing a whole load of copper onto your vines for, for instance, I guess, downy mildew, which is something in the UK we have lots of in these humid conditions.

The issue with the copper, and tell me if I'm wrong, the issue with the copper is that actually you need to often spray more because it's not as effective as, for instance, a conventional spray. But then that means that the tractor is going through, the tractor is pushing down and compacting the soil, which is damaging the soil health and the organisms within the soil.

And equally, you are spraying more and the copper is still remaining in the soil and the copper is affecting the microorganisms and it's not very nice for our earthworms and we love our earthworms for soil structure, for going throughout and increasing the nutrients within the soil. Is that your kind of understanding or is there actually even more to it or I've misinterpreted slightly?

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:16:19 No, what you said very well typifies someone who's perhaps farming less well, but organically believing that to be better, but actually creating compaction problems and soil life problems because copper is also toxic to quite a lot of creatures that live in the soil.

And there's a wonderful cubic metre that someone has arranged with little cotton threads illustrating where the wormholes go through the typical piece of soil. And it's astonishing quite how many wormholes there are in a healthy soil where the worms are travelling. And they're also going up and down and they're going up to the surface and they're pulling things down below and they bring nutrients down deep and they bring nutrients up from the bottom. And they're incredibly good signals of a healthy soil.

If you have compacted soil, it's very hard for the worms to move around. So yes, absolutely. One of the great advantages of regenerative farming is that by working with – So, one of the principles is keeping the soil covered all the time. If it's a season where nothing is actually growing, you can use mulches. So, you can cover it with straw, with wood chips, and with various different types of mulch. And pros and cons are using each type. And I've seen people using sheep fleece around the base.

Janina Doyle 00:17:22 Sheep fleece?

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:17:23 Yeah, because they break down, the sheep fleece breaks down and provides nutrients and it keeps weeds just under the vine strip. There's plenty of interesting work being done, but keeping the soil covered is important. And obviously, you can do that in a season where things are growing using a crop of some sort, often known as a cover crop.

That sort of implies that you've planted a specific crop, but often now people are planting complex mixes of seeds which have 20 species growing in them. If you have deep rooted species like daikon radish, they will help aerate and decompact the soil. So, if you have decompacted soil, you don't have to decompact it with a subsoiler. You can plant deep rooted tap root plants that will help decompact.

And as they attract earthworms and the earthworms find the soil better to live in, the soil will decompact itself. But every time you drive your tractor on it, it will compact it a bit. And if you're driving a tractor five or six times a year, you can probably get away with it. If you're doing it 18 or 20 times a year, it's gonna be quite compacted. And that is one of the drawbacks of organics, is that you have to treat it more frequently because the things you're using are not systemic and they wash off and therefore if it rains after you've just treated you have to go out and treat again. And that does lead you to treating quite often and having compaction problems.

Janina Doyle 00:18:29 So, in terms of actually, you mentioned cover crops, this for me is one of the options to stop people from tilling who are trying to take out, for instance, the weeds by planting the cover crops. One, you mentioned the radishes, really deep roots, but all there's – I know that legumes are really good for fixing the nitrogen. Not sure of anymore. You can certainly, I'm sure, mention a few. But is that one of the ways to not till, to stop doing that, plant more cover crops? Is that a feasible option?

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:19:02 If your tilling is to control weeds, then the more you can plant that you want to have there rather than ones you don't want to have there, the more chance that they will grow and do what you want them to do and you won't have weed plants growing instead.

And there's lots of cases in which weeds are the first coloniser plants. So if you have bare soil, the first plant that arrives there and starts growing is what we tend to classify as a weed. You have a rubbish dump or a building site and the stuff growing there is thistles and weed plants that colonise first.

And actually, as soil matures and the balance of the soil changes, then the weeds stop growing there and other plants come in and there is a whole science of what's called indicator plants. Very experienced people can cast their eye over a field and look at what's growing naturally in it and go, oh, you've got a little bit of a potassium problem there and waterlogging going on here because they can see the plants that are growing and they know why the plants are there.

So, plants will often fix what the problem is. There's some great stories around contaminated soil, soil with heavy metals and things in it, and the plants that grow there actually diminish the contamination problem. They're the only ones able to grow there, but they do grow there because they can take whatever it is that's surplus in the soil and diminish it.

There are plants that can remove copper from soil. I know I was with the Torres guys in Catalonia a couple of years ago, and they're experimenting with trying to plant plants that actually pull out copper, what you then have to do is you have to cut the plants and remove them from the soil because if they break down into the soil again after you've...

Janina Doyle 00:20:24 You're re-putting the copper back in. Yeah.

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:20:27 The work principles of regenerative is you don't take things out of the vineyard. You keep them in as much as possible because every time you remove anything, grapes, stalks, skins, prunings, or your cover crop, you're removing nutrients from the vineyard and you've got to put it back again.

So, the precept of regen is very much to try and keep cycling your nutrients as much as you possibly can. Don't remove it. Obviously, you've got to remove the juice of the grapes because that's the wine.

Janina Doyle 00:20:49 We definitely need to do that.

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:20:52 Yeah. But everything else, provided there's no pathogens in it or you've composted it properly, you can put it back in again. So, a lot of regenerative work is involved in using compost and trying to make sure you're composting everything properly and even growing plants in your inter rows or around the margins that actually will benefit the compost.

There's a whole lot of related things that when you start thinking, my goal is not just a healthy crop that tastes good, but it is that over the long term with healthy vines that grow in a healthy environment, that means I can use less inputs and manage more on my own farm and actually drive my tractor less and use less diesel.

So, you actually get into a kind of virtuous cycle and because it's early days in regenerative viticulture, there are not very many people who've been doing this for a long, long time. But it's amazing how many people are really excited about it now and who are having quite quick results as they start.

You don't immediately necessarily have a result in year one because it takes a little while to build up the soil community that you need. And every year is different. So, every year throws you a new challenge. But it is quite fascinating how quickly you can see progress and actually have what we're really all aiming for is a sustainable living. You've got to be able to make great wine that people want to buy, that tastes great, that produces enough of it for you to live and that's really important.

So, I really like the concept of regen. It allows you to use what you might choose not to use if you could get away with it, but in this particular circumstance you feel you have to use it to solve a problem. So, we'll talk a little bit, I think in a minute, about certifications, but there are certifications that say you've got to also be organic and regenerative, but you can certainly start down the path of regenerative farming without thinking, well, I'm going to have to be organic. Your environment in the UK is a good example, it is particularly tricky to be organic in.

So, I think if you're being intelligent about how you farm, in occasional years you may need to use certain products that will protect your crop from destruction. If that's a pragmatic, best fit decision, then that's allowable. And it should be up to you, the farmer, to make that decision in your long term interests.

Janina Doyle 00:22:58 So, in theory, for anybody listening, no, you don't have to be organic to be a regenerative viticulturist. However, if you’re not organic, you almost need to be a sensitive

viticulturist, as in being very, very aware of the balance at all times. I think is that probably a fair way? A sensitive viticulturist.

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:23:22 I think the purity and the good thing about organics is it is absolutely clear. It's a list of things you can't do. And as soon as you do something you can't do, you can't be an organic club anymore and you have to recertify.

There are plenty of people who've taken that decision because they found in their area just too often they have a problem with mildew, for instance, it's a good example. And if actually using one very carefully targeted modern systemic fungicide actually solves that problem entirely, whereas spraying again and again and again copper on your vines doesn't solve the problem, ultimately you're going to crack and go, no, I'm going to use the synthetic.

And that might sound like the wrong thing to do, but on balance it's probably better for your vines, your soil, your environment. And if the world could be brought to that conclusion that it was better, they would completely back your decision. But it's a big thing to say, I'm going to go away from organics, if that's important to you and your customers.

We're trying to say there are other ways to do things. If you like, organics and biodynamics are a little bit like someone's written down the 10 commandments on a tablet of stone, and then you have to just do that. Even though in modern times, we found out that commandment seven and commandment eight are kind of a bit past it now, I like the idea that re-gen is continually revising what it thinks is the right thing to do according to what science tells us and what experience tells us.

Janina Doyle 00:24:39 Okay. Now you touched on certification. So how many places can you go and get certified as regenerative now?

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:24:50 Well, good question and very topical. I was at Groundswell last year, which is the farming conference for regenerative agriculture. It's in June and it's in a nice field up north of London and you can stay for a couple of nights there, so you can camp and it's become known as the Glastonbury of farming and it's a nice place to hang out actually.

There's some really interesting people there and lots of government ministers and lots of Radio 4 food program people and podcasters. It's more than just farmers. It certainly started as a farmer inviting his neighbours because he wanted to just chat about how they could farm better and they brought a couple of experts in who are doing regen farming in America and that was what? 15 years ago or something. And it's just grown and grown and grown.

So, 7,000 or 8,000 people I think go now. And it's a thoroughly good event. There's lots of tents and lots of talks. So, you're looking at physical demonstrations. You're looking at tractors. Very interesting. You're looking at cover crop trials where the seed companies have come in and they've like three or four months before they've taken their square metre and they've planted it with what they want to plant and they've protected it. So that when Groundswell comes along, they can go, ta-da, look at my amazing seed mix, which is all coming up now.

Demonstrations of how to move your stock around your field without fences. You can have collars on your cows that give them a little tickle when they go close to the boundary of where you want

them to stay. So, they stay in a block and they eat that block. And then you can say, right, five o'clock, I'm going to move them onto the next block. And these collars encourage them to move along one direction and then not get not go back. And so, you can basically move your flock around the field from your armchair with your cocktail in your hand.

Janina Doyle 00:26:22 No, no, no. Sorry. Your glass of wine in your hand.

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:26:26 Your glass of wine in your hand, yes, rather than driving around on your quad bike and your sheep dogs. Lots of amazing things to see. And robot trials. Robots that will zap particular plants and not others. So, no chemicals required, just electricity to kill a particular plant. Yeah, very sophisticated, interesting stuff.

There was a debate in one of the tents about certification for regen. Helen Browning was talking on the panel and she runs the Soil Association in the UK. And she was sort of rewinding to the beginnings of organics and saying at the beginning, there was this group of people in the UK who were particularly convinced that farming with chemicals was going to be problematic and using fertilisers was a bad idea and they should have a purity of farming. But it took them a while to work out what the codification was.

And actually, if they started in the 20s or 30s, the certification really came around in the 60s or 70s. She said it took 40 years to work out what they thought organic should be and to certify it. What she said about regen is it's so new and so exciting and people are discovering so many different things that if you were to certify now, you would produce that tablet of stone with the 10 commandments on it and you would stop the innovation and the exploration that's happening.

So, her message was certification has a place and it probably there will be time for it. But in her view, let's work out what actually we should be doing before we then codify it into a certification. That notwithstanding, there are, I think two years ago, there were zero certifications in regen, certainly three years ago. And now there are five that we know of that are specifically describing themselves as regenerative certifications and lots of other certifications of sustainability programs that have regenerative practices included.

So, I think the first one was the Regenerative Organic Alliance based in the US, but international, and they have a certification ROC, Regenerative Organic Certified, and Tablas Creek was the first certified winery, I think, and that was maybe a couple of years ago in the States that they got certified.

And Tablas are amazing folk, and Jason's an amazing guy who's really leading lots of good work in the sustainability arena and great people to follow and just find out what they're doing and how they're doing it. So, big sort of flag bearers for the Regen movement.

And then several more have recently popped up. So, there's one that was founded originally by the Torres guys in Spain, but it's so far historically been a kind of Spanish speaking focused certification, but I think it is available internationally and that's Regenerativa Viticultura and they have a certification scheme where you can enter the certification without being organic. But I think to become fully certified, you need to move to full organics to get the high level certification.

And then Gabe Brown has a certification. He's one of the leading farmers in the US who's been pioneering regenerative farming. And then there is one called a Greener World. And they have a certified regenerative certification, one called Verified Land to Market. And Regenified is the Gabe Brown certification, which he's just launched.

There are plenty of ways to get certified and we've actually just done on the Regenerative Viticulture Foundation website and recent newsletter a kind of breakdown of the different certifications and what they mean and what they require of you.

So, there are plenty of ways to get certified if you want to go down that road and we'd say, if you're early in your Regenerative journey, maybe just don't think about that for now, just start doing some practices and learn what works for you and then eventually you probably get to a point where you're thinking, okay, well I want to get the credit for doing all this work, I feel I know what I'm doing now. Choose a certification that works best for you and then move towards that if you feel that that enshrines what you want to be doing in your vineyard.

Janina Doyle 00:29:56 I suppose, like you said, to kind of just to summarise, the healthier your soils, typically, the more disease resistant your vines are going to be. And if your vines are going to not need to be sprayed with fungicides and herbicides around because the soil is healthier, then you're not spraying stuff onto the soils to damage the soil and it's going to go around and around in that wonderful cycle where we let nature do what it does best, right?

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:30:26 That's all very well in theory and I think that is the expressed goal and I think the experience of quite a few practitioners who've been doing it for a while. And I think the same is true from talking to people who've applied biodynamic because I think in the biodynamic practices, there are quite a lot of things that are extremely beneficial for soil health and some of the overwintering of compost starters, yes, albeit in a cow's horn, maybe buried at a certain stage of the moon, maybe those things have no effect, maybe they have some effect, but you've definitely got a really good compost starter and then a very good practice to then work that up into a really fertile compost that you're then applying to your vineyard.

There's definitely a lot in it and I know of people who have started in biodynamics and took them a while to get to a balance where their vines felt healthy, but from then on, they seem not to get the same diseases their neighbours easily get because their vines are somehow more resilient.

Now, one thing that's certainly true in any form of agriculture is people won't tell you about their disasters as easily as they will about their successes. They're going on Radio 4 complaining about wanting subsidies.

Generally speaking, if you've been wiped out, it's not something you want to admit to. So there quite possibly are serious problems that are happening, that are being caused when, albeit using your best practice, something comes in one year that causes you a problem. That's true of all agriculture.

I don't think we can promise that every particular farming method is so resilient that nothing can then touch you. But yes, I think you can get your system working in a way a little bit like human health. I mean, if you do yoga and you keep yourself exercised and you're a healthy, well-balanced

person – Amanda and I spent last weekend doing Wim Hof breathing, which apparently is extremely good for your immune system.

Janina Doyle 00:32:07 Well done. I'm a massive believer in that. Were you in five degrees water breathing? Yeah, well done.

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:32:15 There's lots of science backing up the fact that if you're exercising your immune system, you're testing your circulation by making it hot and cold. Alternately, you're really building up your resilience and health. And the more healthy and resilient you are, the less likely you are to get diseases.

So, I suppose what we're trying to advocate is a way of growing vines that keeps the vines as healthy as possible. And therefore, they will have less or fewer diseases. But in certain climates, certain years, you will have disease pressure and your choice is if you're going to lose your crop because of a disease, and you choose to use a particular fungicide in order to combat that, then that's probably a sensible decision in the long run. And you may have to be able to recover from that shock. But if you saved your crop and saved your business, then I think that's an important decision to be allowed to take.

Janina Doyle 00:33:04 Lovely. Well, let me finish off our fantastic chat with asking you about your two day introduction into regenerative viticulture because you run these, in the UK, sadly, sorry for all of my US listeners, but is this for people who are farming and actually planting vines or could somebody who's just kind of interested in the whole setup and understanding healthy soils come?

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:33:32 Definitely. And that's a very interesting question. And we started doing this three years ago and this has been for the first three years down in the Dartington Trust. Actually, it's moving this year and I haven't completely finalised the new venue, but there should be a new venue being announced in the next month or so. And of course, we hope to run in September.

And when we launched it, we weren't sure who was going to come. We thought there were viticulturists in the UK who would like to know this information, but we also thought there were hobbyists and interested people who would come in from other disciplines.

And the first course was a wonderful mixture of people. We had a couple of trade folk who were trying to understand what regenerative means for their producers and trying to see whether that was something they must steer their producers towards. There was a market gardener who was just interested in regenerative growing and wanted to know how it worked in vines.

We had a couple of people who had planted a hundred vines and just wanted to know a little bit about how to grow them. In fact, on my second course, Mike from BinTwo in Padstow, who's got 75… vineyard, came along and we had a sommelier. We had a really interesting mix of people plus two or three quite heavy hitting viticulturalists. A couple of the UK's bigger producers were coming along to find out what this is about.

So, it was very much an introduction, very much to say you can start without knowing very much. We didn't really want someone who had no interest in or no care for growing anything and didn't know which way around to put a plant in the pot because it sort of implied that you want to know a

bit about growing. We don't start from absolute basics when it comes to photosynthesis and trying to explain how that works.

But it is absolutely a course that you can do if you have a moderate knowledge of some of those things. If you've studied to a diploma level and I covered the viticulture required, you'd absolutely have enough to come along and join in on this.

And yes, hopefully we're announcing some dates in September and we'd love to have people coming along. And probably the way to find out about it would be to go into the Regenerative Viticulture Foundation's website and join the mailing list there. And we'll make sure that anyone on the mailing list gets told when we've announced any of the courses and events that we do.

And we do do events in the UK and around the world. So, we will publicise anyone's events, but because a couple of us are physically based here, I've been leading a small group of UK regenerative growers and having informal gatherings on each other's farms to just see what each other are doing. We had one of those with Henry and Kay from Harrow and Hope last year. And I think the first one is just going to be Everflyht with Luke Spalding, who's great. I think it's 20 quid just to cover up a bit of lunch and some teas and coffees to come along and bring a couple of bottles of wine.

Janina Doyle 00:36:03 Okay, that's a good requirement.

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:36:05 One to give to Luke, our host, as a thank you and want to taste it at the end of afternoon tasting. So, it should be a lovely day. And again, that should be available to you if you join the mailing list. We can tell you how and when to book that.

Janina Doyle 00:36:17 Lovely. That's fantastic. For now, everyone, just make sure you have soil where you can have soil. Put good stuff in it. Try not to spray stuff. Compost where you can. No tilling. We move forward and extract some of that carbon back into the soil.

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:36:33 And actually, if you have a garden or a flower pot, you can start to apply some of these practices. 15 years ago, we got a wormery at our house. We had a tiny garden and we had no real way to compost. And we thought we need to do something with our food waste.

We read about wormeries. Amanda got some worms sent to her office and with caution, live worms written on it. She was not very popular with us as a reception team who were a little bit scared. But we had, I don't know, 10,000 little wriggly worms in a kilo packet. And we brought them home, brought this lovely black plastic layer thing with little slats between the layers, put in lots of potato peelings and things, and off the worms went.

And the, I don't know, great, great, great, great grandchildren of those worms are still working for us in our wormery, the same wormery. And we just feed them food scraps and they produce brown ooze, which is lovely for the plants.

So, you can do an awful lot in your own garden. You can plant a little vine. You can just get into it in one way or another, mulches, there's lots to learn and I would encourage everyone to read about it. And as you said, Watch Kiss the Ground or The Biggest Little Farm, which are two fantastic films that give you a little insight into what regen is, and I think that's a great way to start.

Janina Doyle 00:37:43 Thank you so much, Justin. Honestly, I hope people are feeling inspired because actually we can all do a little something. And it's also nice for those listening who are drinking wine to start asking those questions, maybe putting the pressure on wineries that they like or that are nearby to them that they notice aren't doing things because it's all if we at the very, very least, if we're talking about it, things will start to change.

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:38:05 Absolutely. And asking the question is great. Putting pressure is difficult because farmers have tough lives and they've been told to do this and go to do that by lots of different people, they get quite annoyed about that. And they sometimes see them rolling their eyes again, what is this new thing we've got to learn about?

But it is a very positive and exciting message. And if your farm is asking questions of the way they farm and changing what they do, they will find their way towards some of these practices because they're just good sense. And whether they become fully certified regenerative or just incorporate some cover crops and some animals in the winter, you know, all things that they could do are good. So, we'd love you to ask the questions of them and for them to realise that people care, people are interested and want to hear the stories.

Janina Doyle 00:38:41 Beautiful. Thank you. I'm going to put loads of information, the links where people need to go in the show notes and I appreciate your time, Justin.

Justin Howard-Sneyd 00:38:48 It's been a real pleasure. Thank you so much for asking and asking such sensitive and intelligent questions.

Janina Doyle 00:38:52 Why thank you!

Janina Doyle 00:38:58 I don't know about you guys, but this topic genuinely resonates deeply with me. So, next week we're going to continue our exploration of regenerative viticulture, but this time delving into a more personal perspective.

I'll be in conversation with the co-founder of the boutique winery, Ambriel. Now they're nestled amidst the picturesque South Down Hills in West Sussex. She will be uncovering the intricacies of managing vineyards for a greater biodiversity.

So, make sure you're subscribed to this podcast and you've pressed the bell on your podcast apps so you don't miss next week's episode. And of course, please leave a review and some nice little stars if you have a few moments because it does make the podcast more discoverable.

But as always, to finish off, I have a famous quote from New Zealand winegrower James Milton and he sums up this episode so well when he said:

"We're not standing on dirt but the rooftop of another kingdom."

I've said it before and I'll say it again, if you can pick-up a handful of soil and it has more organisms than people who have ever lived on this earth, this is something that we must fight to keep, the health of our soil.

So, thank you, as always, for listening. I hope you've enjoyed this episode and are eager to listen and learn more for the following episode. Wishing you all a very serene week ahead, one where you reconnect with nature, perhaps walk in the forest without your shoes on, inhale that crisp air, allow nature to ignite your spirit, and then, when you reach for that glass of wine, may it be from a winery that not only crafts exceptional flavours, of course, but is prioritising the protection of our precious lands for all the generations to come. And so, wine friends, until next week, cheers to you and to sustainability and the beauty of our planet.