For more than 15 years, winegrowers and vintners across California have been striving to cut down on pesticides, reduce water and energy use, increase ecological diversity on their land, improve working conditions for their employees and support their local communities. As a result of these efforts, nearly a quarter of the state's vineyard acres and well over 125 wineries, from some of the biggest players to boutique producers, have been certified sustainable by independent third parties.

Yet if you looked at a bottle in a shop, you'd often find little indication that a wine was sustainable. Consumers have been able to pick out wines with organic and biodynamic certifications by their logos, but some key sustainability certifications haven't appeared on labels.

That is changing, as California's largest sustainable wine program and one of its most prestigious regions, Sonoma County, have begun rolling out federally approved certification logos on labels, debuting with the 2017 vintage; nearly 275,000 cases started reaching store shelves, restaurants and tasting rooms this spring and summer. Meanwhile, Napa Valley is gaining momentum with its own regional certification labeling, with 130,000 cases of wine bearing a Napa Green logo expected to come out this year.
"I think this is important because a lot of people say, 'I'm green and this and that,'" said Emma Swain, CEO of St. Supéry, an early adopter of sustainable practices that now uses the Napa Green Land and Napa Green Winery labels on all its wines, at least 80,000 cases a year. "This says, 'Yes, you are, you're doing what you say you're doing.'"

Though research indicates that many wine consumers still don't fully understand what all the different organic, biodynamic and sustainable certifications mean, they still appreciate them. "About 50 percent of [consumers] feel that sustainable certifications mean that you're caring for your community and your people, as well as the environment," said Swain, citing an early 2018 Wine Market Council study of 1,159 frequent wine drinkers.

The California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance (CSWA) first developed its set of best practices in 2002, then introduced certification for vineyards and wineries in 2010 to provide third-party verification for trade customers. But they held off on consumer-facing labels. "There was a conscientious decision not to start with certification and marketing," explained CSWA executive director Allison Jordan. "The industry wanted to be sure we were walking the walk before talking the talk."

Finally, the CSWA decided that the program's reach and market demand for bottle labels had both achieved enough critical mass to allow the certifications to appear on 2017 vintage wines, backed by a new chain-of-custody audit to verify the use of certified grapes. In 2017, the certification program saw a 46 percent increase in the number of certified vineyards, to 1,128, and a 20 percent increase in certified wineries, to 128.

Any wine made in a certified winery with at least 85 percent grapes from certified vineyards can carry a California Certified Sustainable logo. The first five participants alone—Jackson Family Wines, Wente Vineyards, Sonoma's Marimar Estate and Saracina, and Ponte in Southern California's Temecula Valley—will release 250,000 cases of logoed wines, with more participants joining with the 2018 vintage.

For the Sonoma County Winegrowers (SCW), a logo seemed like a natural progression as the organization closes in on its goal, set in 2014, to have all of its vineyards certified sustainable by 2019. As of January 2018, 72 percent of the county's vineyard acreage and 75 wineries had been certified through Certified California Sustainable Winegrowing, Lodi Rules, the Central Coast's Sustainability in Practice (SIP) and/or Fish Friendly Farming.

"Putting it on the label is just another step. We've got the vineyards done; now here's a bottle of wine that comes from these certified-sustainable vineyards," said Tracy Dutton of Dutton Estate, one of two wineries that helped test the verication procedures.

Before unveiling a Sonoma County Sustainable wine label, SCW wanted to be sure that both small and large wineries could meet standards consistent with AVA labeling requirements, explained president Karissa Kruse. At least 85 percent of the grapes must come from certified-sustainable vineyards in Sonoma County. SCW conducted consumer research to test the logo design options, eventually settling on a stylized stamp that says "Sonoma County Sustainably Farmed Grapes."

Napa sustainability program Napa Green started allowing logos on wine labels in 2013. Napa Valley Vintners is working toward having 100 percent of its members participate in the certification program by 2020. The group is more than halfway to its target, with 220 landowners enrolled and 23,000 acres of vineyards certified-half of the valley's total. As of May, nearly 70 wineries were certified, with 60 more in the process.
Nine wineries—Artesa, Cakebread, Chateau Boswell, Michael Mondavi Family Estate, Pine Ridge, Signorello, St. Supéry and Staglin Family—are approved to use the Napa Green Certified Land or Napa Green Certified Winery (or both) logos on some or all of their production.

"I think people are interested. Restaurateurs, somms are all asking about it," said Pine Ridge winemaker Michael Beaulac, who had just returned from an East Coast sales trip. Pine Ridge now has Napa Green logos on all its estate wines starting with the 2016 vintage, roughly 30,000 cases. "In the tasting room, it's a talking point for our educators. There's a lot of great wine being made in our neighborhood, and [it's] a differential point for us."

Still, Beaulac added, when he's out in the market, "I'll point it out if it comes up. But I don't use it as a selling point. I like to think the wine does that; it's just an added bonus."