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# New York Sustainable Winegrowing

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## CERTIFICATION GUIDELINES

Boldly,  
NY.

[www.newyorkwines.org](http://www.newyorkwines.org)

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 New York Sustainable Winegrowing

The mission of the New York Sustainable Winegrowing Program is to advance the environmental, social, and economic sustainability of New York’s wine and grape industry through regionally defined sustainability standards, third-party certification, grower education, and stakeholder engagement. The vision of the program is to elevate New York State as a world class wine and grape region that protects the environment, conserves natural resources, and improves the lives of our stakeholders.

## 1.2 New York Sustainable Winegrowing Vineyard Certification

New York Sustainable Winegrowing Vineyard Certification is a voluntary third-party certification administered by the New York Wine and Grape Foundation. This certification ensures that vineyards operate under best management practices to conserve natural resources, protect the environment, and maintain a successful and socially equitable business. Beginning in 2021, the first round of on farm audits took place in 2022 for a small pilot program.

In 2022-2023, NYWGF will mark the first official program enrollment for growers statewide and launch the New York Sustainable Winegrowing Trust Mark for successful completion of the program. This Trust Mark is an indication to consumers that at a minimum 85% of grapes used to make a labeled bottle of wine are certified sustainable. Not only will this help consumers shop responsibly but reward growers for their environmentally and socially conscientious practices.

## 1.3 VineBalance workbook

VineBalance is designed to provide grape growers in New York and other regions of the Northeast with guidance in evaluating and adopting best management practices that minimize environmental impacts, reduce economic risks, and protect worker health and safety. These practices include: soil management to reduce erosion, runoff and leaching; use of integrated pest management (IPM) practices for insect, disease, and weed management; nutrient management, with a particular focus on nitrogen use; pesticide management and spray technology; and cultural practices used in viticulture.

The workbook’s format and content evolved from three previous efforts. The first VineBalance workbook in 2007 was developed using The Long Island Sustainable Viticulture Program draft workbook developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County and the New York Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) vineyard worksheets developed by the Cornell Cooperative Extension Finger Lakes Grape Program and the Yates County Soil and Water Conservation District. This workbook represents a synthesis of these three previous efforts, as well as standards drawn from other respected certification programs. Updates are implemented yearly to ensure VineBalance is in line with current scientific understanding of sustainability. The workbook is designed to serve as a reference for all growers across New York – from bulk Concord and hybrid producers to premium *V. vinifera* growers.

## **2. Certification requirements**

### **2.1 Annual self-assessment using Vine Balance**

Every year participants must complete the VineBalance self-assessment workbook for each vineyard they wish to certify. Self-assessed scores will be verified by independent auditors the first year of certification and every third year following. On non-audit years workbooks will be reviewed by NYWGF. To be eligible for certification 75% of the maximum score of VineBalance must be achieved and no categories scored a 1. For the first year of certification scores of 1 are allowable if accompanied by an action plan indicating how the score will be improved before the next in person audit.

## **3. Certification Process**

### **3.1 Decide what to certify**

The first step in the applicant's journey is deciding what they would like to certify. For most this will consist of a singular contiguous plot of land used to cultivate grapes which we will refer to as a vineyard. However, some individuals may own separate parcels of land around their main vineyard and want to certify them as well. If these separate plots do not have their own mixing and loading station and are under the same management as the main vineyard, they may be registered under the same certification. If the participant owns multiple vineyards that have their own mixing and loading stations and/or are under different management, they must obtain certification for each vineyard independently. If there are any questions regarding the number of certifications required by a participant, please reach out to the Sustainability Program Manager.

### **3.2 Submit application**

Applications can be found on the NYWGF's website at [newyorkwines.org/sustainability](https://www.newyorkwines.org/sustainability). An application must be submitted for each individual certification desired. Upon successful completion of the application participants will be sent a link to their Google Sheets version of VineBalance. Applicants are encouraged to apply early in the certification timeline to ensure ample time to prepare for the in-person audit. There are no fees due at enrollment.

### **3.3 Complete VineBalance workbook**

Participants should complete the VineBalance workbook on the provided google sheets link. A printable PDF of VineBalance is available on the NYWGF's [sustainability page](#) for ease of use but final scores must appear in the google sheet. All workbooks must be completed and submitted by December 30<sup>th</sup> to be eligible for certification the following growing season. If any assistance is needed in using google sheets, contact the program manager at [justinjackson@nywgf.org](mailto:justinjackson@nywgf.org).

### **3.4 Determine areas of improvement**

During the participants' first year of certification scores of 1 are allowed in the VineBalance workbook if accompanied by an action plan on how they will be improved to a minimum of 2 before the next in person audit. Action plans can be as simple or complex as a participant wants if they are realistic and

inside the vineyards means. Templates are included in the VineBalance workbook, but action plans can be formatted anyway the participant wishes in the google sheets link provided. Action plans must be completed along with VineBalance by December 30<sup>th</sup>.

### **3.5 Schedule audit**

Following the VineBalance submission deadline of Dec 30<sup>th</sup> participants will be assigned an independent auditor who will reach out to schedule an audit time. To ensure there is enough time for the audit, please leave a three-hour window of availability. It is highly encouraged that the person who completed the VineBalance workbook be available for the duration of the interview with other experts available to answer questions that may arise.

### **3.6 Prepare for in person audit**

Participants should gather material necessary to corroborate self-assessment scores given in the VineBalance workbook. A check list of recommended material is available at [newyorkwines.org/sustainability](http://newyorkwines.org/sustainability) under the *Tools & Resources* section. Ensure that there is a space available with a table and chairs to sit and discuss your Vinebalance workbook with the auditor.

### **3.7 Undergo onsite audit**

The assigned auditor will visit the proposed site of certification to meet with the participant and validate the VineBalance self-assessment score along with action plans. Make sure all documents are prepared and easily accessible for their visit. The auditor will walk through the VineBalance workbook step by step with the participant discussing scores and reviewing records as needed. This Audit should take around one and a half to two hours

### **3.8 Review audit report**

Following the onsite audit, participants will receive a copy of the audit report. This report should be carefully inspected to ensure all vineyard names, addresses, and acreage is correct. If a participant wishes to appeal their score, they have 30 days from receipt of the audit report to contact the Sustainability Program Manager. At that point the Manager has 30 days to respond. All decisions after this appeal process are final. Participants who fail may reapply the following year.

### **3.9 Determine certification Status**

If the auditor determines that a vineyard meets the criteria of New York Sustainable Winegrowing, and any applicable fees have been paid, NYWGF will review the documents and decide on the Vineyards certification status. Once status is granted, vineyards will receive a digital signed certificate to prove the certification status of their vineyard. If grapes from a certified vineyard are sold, a copy of this certificate should be sent to the buyer for chain of custody auditing purposes.

### **3.10 Maintaining certification**

Following the initial in person audit year, desk audits will be conducted for the following two certification years. An updated version of VineBalance must be completed along with updated action plans. These and any applicable fees must be submitted by Dec 30<sup>th</sup> every year to maintain certification.

While in person audits are required every third year following certification NYWGF reserves the right to require audits at any time on certified vineyards. If any of the requisite criteria are not met, certification will be revoked along with the right to use the New York Sustainable Winegrowing logo on any grapes produced that year. If certification lapses the vineyard will need to undergo another in person audit to be recertified.

As the New York Sustainable Winegrowing program is in development, criteria for certification are expected to change. Participants will be notified with ample time to adhere to changes and must abide if they wish to maintain certification.

## **4. Dates and timelines**

### **4.1 Important dates**

October 9<sup>th</sup> Vine Balance released

Dec 30<sup>th</sup> Vine Balance is due

Feb 1<sup>st</sup> audits begin

### **4.1 Certification and recertification timeline example**

This timeline is an example of the three-year cycle of certification and what is required to maintain certification after the initial year.

- 2022
  - October-December: Sign up and complete VineBalance
- 2023
  - February-May: Undergo initial in-person audit
  - October-December: Complete VineBalance and pay fees
- 2024
  - October-December: Complete VineBalance and pay fees
- 2025
  - October-December: Complete VineBalance and pay fees
- 2026
  - February-May: Undergo in-person audit
  - October-December: Complete VineBalance and pay fees