



## Biodynamic Wines

I grew up in a science family. My father was a polymer chemist so I am most at ease with the scientific method. However, I am a person of faith and was a farmer for 20 years, which can do more than any other profession to test one's faith. I do not feel the necessity that every phenomenon, natural or otherwise, come packaged with scientific proof to explain it. I accept with some resignation that we live in a complex world that in many respects defies both logic and explanation.

I became aware of biodynamic agriculture about 20 years ago in Oregon, which may be where it got its toehold in vineyards. In fact, we safely claim that Dr. Bob Groff, a psychologist by day, was the first to use biodynamic methods at Cooper Mountain Vineyards outside of Portland. Now, it is almost mainstream in Oregon with high profile names like Beaux Freres, Brickhouse, Evesham Wood, Cow Horn and others being certified by the Demeter organization, and producing very fine wines.

During this period of introduction into the global wine world I read the work of Rudolph Steiner and Maria Thun, hosted workshops, visited BD vineyards, and even organized a field day to the Pfeiffer Center (<http://www.pfeiffercenter.org/index.aspx>) and spent a day with Gunther Hauk, one of the foremost practitioners in the region. Sustainable, organic and biodynamic workshops are always among the most popular of my educational offerings. There is definitely a visceral appeal to these production systems among our practitioners and consumers.

Just as one religion is not better than another, I think it is unwise to profess that a viticultural production system makes better wine than any other. Despite the lack of hard evidence that BD is actually making better wines, there are some compelling reasons not to dismiss it. I tend to agree with my University of California extension farm advisory, Dr. Glenn McGourty (read his excellent book, *Organic Winegrowing Manual*), who probably works with more BD practitioners than anyone in the US: that BD viticulture is out there, growers are using it, and therefore we cannot ignore it. Of course, Glenn's interest in BD goes much deeper than simple acknowledgement of its existence. He helped Dr. John Reganold from Washington State University to conduct one of the only controlled experiments comparing organic and biodynamic vineyard practices (AJEV56:4, 2005). I have stated often that, at least for me, "in vino veritas" is the bottom line in our business and that whatever practices you choose to use, if you can produce a commercially acceptable bottle of wine, well, it must have some merit no matter how "out there" it may seem to the rest of us. What is compelling to me is that so many great estates, particularly in the old world, such as Domaine Zind-Humbrecht, Domaine Leflaive, Domaine de la Romanee-Conti in France, Nikolaihof in Austria, and Burklin-Wolf in Germany. I would maintain that most of these producers would make great wines no matter how they chose to grow

them, but they believe in and appear to validate BD as a viable viticultural system. I think what they prove is that, in general, only high qualified and experienced wine growers can make the BD system work well, that BD is system of viticulture that you graduate up to, like a doctoral degree, and not something that any novice can implement successfully, especially in a challenging climate like the one in the Eastern U.S.



The sixth American tasting of the *Return to Terroir* was held in New York City recently. Seventy seven biodynamic wineries were present, surprisingly only one from the U.S. (Coturri). This tasting is unique for me because many of the actual winery owners and producers show up to pour their wines for a largely retail and restaurant audience (I did not see or recognize a single U.S. wine producer in attendance during the event). It is particularly gratifying to see so many of the next generation presenting their wines. I met Pierre Morey, the long time winemaker at Domaine Leflaive in Burgundy many years ago and he graciously spent a few hours with me tasting their mind-bending wines and then walking me around their great vineyards. So it was such a pleasure to visit with his daughter Anne (<<), who now works with her “retired” father to make the wines. Virginie Joly was present with

her father Nicolas, who gave his usual fiery speech about the wonders of biodynamie to a crowd of eager trade people. There was also Mathieu Deiss, the son of Jean-Marie Deiss, representing his family’s great Alsatian estate and Nikolaus Saahs from Nikolaihof in the Wachau. The future of BD is assured with such talented young wine growers carrying on the traditions and new practices of their parents. I don’t really worry about the production but I am concerned about BD and how it is perceived and received by the wine trade (non-production). This uneasy feeling was confirmed when listening and watching Monsieur Joly address a rapt audience, it was a bit like feeding kibble to a bunch of kittens. It is somewhat unnerving to hear him talk about how native yeasts are able to ferment more harmoniously with other natural elements, implying that this will make a better wine – I do not see the justification or the necessity to make statements that have not been proven to be factual, or make a statement in such a way that it clearly an opinion. I worry on two levels: first, there is no evidence of these cause and effect relationships. It simply cannot be stated as a fact. Second, the wine media, critics, retailers, restaurateurs, sommeliers, etc. are not able to withstand the intense appeal of this type of “back to nature” brand of wine making. To some extent, Monsieur Joly demonizes conventional viticulture, and firmly plants the flag of “best method” on BD, which immediately activates my suspicion of dogma. Why not profess it to be yet another way of making a great wine, not to the exclusion of other methods, but adding to the diversity of the wine world?

The fact remains that Joly is the public voice, if not the soul, of the BD movement within the global wine community. He, along with other progressive BD producers, have written a “Quality Charter” for natural wine production that can stand on its own, apart from biodynamie, if it would make the user more comfortable. This is an excerpt from its opening statement:

*The taste of wine can only attain its singularity and become inimitable when it has received the mark of its terroir and microclimate. Everywhere on earth the four components – heat, light, water and soil/subsoil – combine differently in a unique way. This is the subtlety of each appellation, which plants*

*grasp in every instance in their own ways. The greatness of the appellations is based on the understanding, which also guarantees consumers a taste connected to the uniqueness of the specific place. For vines to fully embrace their terroir with their roots (mineralogy of the soil and subsoil, the orientation of slope, etc.) they must be alive and free of weed killers that destroy all microorganisms. In order to successfully capture their climate and its endless variations – wind, slope, humidity, etc. – the plant must develop as naturally as possible. In particular, the leaves must be free of synthetic chemical products that perturb photosynthesis and all other levels of the living plant's development.*

Here I would encourage you to go to the *La Renaissance des Appellation* website ([www.biodynamy.com](http://www.biodynamy.com)) and read the three levels of requirements to the Quality Charter. Examples from Level 1 include the exclusion of genetically modified plants, all synthetic chemicals, and chemical fertilizers and the cultivation of soils, use of cover crops and compost or natural fertilizers; Level 2 includes use of selection massale, no irrigation and manual harvesting; and Level 3 manual harvest in multiple passes and organic or biodynamic certification for at least seven years. There are a great many wine making requirements as well. To some extent, they represent the philosophy and practices of most of the best practitioners. Of course, they promote biodynamie as the way to honor the charter, but in a blended approach, wine growers could adopt the practices that serve their own farming methods.

By attending this event I was hoping to gain a better sense through the wines I tasted if there is, in fact, a discernable biodynamic imprint on the wines. This may have been a fool's mission, but I thought having so many BD wines from great estates in one place might elevate my awareness of their virtues. Of the 500 or so wines that were being poured, I tasted about 45, choosing to focus on Alsace, Burgundy and Austria, perhaps the most BD proficient regions in the world. There were clearly great wines, including those from Zind-Humbrecht, but as I processed them through my memory banks of non-BD wines, I couldn't come up with any notes or nuance that would set them apart. If anything, I would say the wines, both red and white, had a particular quality of warmth to them that, even in cooler regions, spoke of the sun. It was not uncommon to see alcohols north of 13 in most of the wines, which mainly came from the 2009 vintage.

It is difficult to talk about biodynamics as strictly a viticultural method. It is not a religion or a philosophy but a set of practices. Mathieu explained that they are not focusing on the grape variety, instead it is their intention for the wine to be fully expressive of the place. In fact, there are no variety names on their labels, just vineyards, which are field blended each harvest to make the wine that represents the essence of whatever a particular vintage has to offer. They are not seeking typicity because this implies an expectation of what the wine will be. They do, however, want the wine to have the identity of the terroir, and they speak of very particular relationships between wines and soils, such as limestone, marl, clay, etc. He emphasized that they never targeted BD as the way they would farm their vineyard, it is something that simply evolved naturally at the estate, as they eschewed chemical pesticides and fertilizers and started using organic practices, it simply made sense to them to try biodynamic practices. I asked a few of the wine producers about how they handle wet vintages in France and Austria but they said where they are growing grapes it doesn't rain much during harvest. 2007 was a recent damp vintage and they spray more silica on the vines which has a drying effect on the berries and vine.

I know of a few BD practitioners in the East, including two on Long Island. They are among the most dedicated wine growers in our regional wine industry. In years like 2011, the system

cannot withstand the pressure that conditions place on it. In biodynamic viticulture the accepted outcome for a bad vintage is lost fruit and what is sorted out represents what the vintage had to offer. This result would be unacceptable to most grape growers. Perhaps that is why most biodynamic vineyards are operated by wine estates that can sustain occasional and significant fruit loss.

Biodynamics agriculture seems to work best on small farms and practiced by fully devoted to the method. The largest scale I have seen is the amazing Bonterra vineyard in Mendocino, which is perhaps 50 acres. BD requires a level of commitment and involvement that most growers are unwilling to devote to their vineyard, but I know conventional and organic growers who have just as an intense interest in their vineyard and produce superb wines. It is an extreme form of empirical wine growing, a discipline that I endorse but not at the exclusion of other options. I am against all forms of dogma, in wine and elsewhere. Whether or not BD allows greater access to the expression of terroir I cannot say for sure. In my experience, biodynamicists eschew science, as if it would interfere with their belief system. Yet, if biodynamic agriculture is ever to have a chance a wider use and acceptance, it must be validated through the accepted scientific method that applies to other systems and materials in common use.

Reference resources about biodynamic agriculture and viticulture that I have found helpful to understand this particular approach to farming and growing grapes :

1. *Authentic Wine* by Jamie Goode
2. La Renaissance des Appellation - [http://www.biodynamy.com/charte-qualite\\_en.php](http://www.biodynamy.com/charte-qualite_en.php)
3. *Wine: from sky to earth* by Nicolas Joly (3<sup>rd</sup> edition)
4. *Gardening for Life: the biodynamic way* by Maria Thun
5. *Biodynamic Agriculture* by Willy Schilhuis
6. The Pffeifer Center - <http://www.pfeiffercenter.org/index.aspx>

Here's a list of my favorite wines from the tasting:

1. 2006 Nikolaihof Kremstal Steiner Hund Riesling
2. 2009 Domaine Ostertag Fronholz Vendage Tardive Gewurztraminer
3. 2009 Domaine Zind-Humbrecht Clos Ste Urbain Rangen de Thun Gewurztraminer
4. 2007 Domaine Marcel Deis Altenburg Bergheim Riesling
5. 2008 Tenuta di Valgiano Colline Lucchesi DOC (Lucca-Tuscany) – Sangiovese, Merlot and Syrah from old vines
6. 2008 Maison M. Chapoutier St Joseph Le Granit (old vine Syrah)
7. 2007 Domaine Pierre Morey Meursault Les Tessons
8. 2009 Domaine Michel Lafarge Volnay

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