

THIS JUST IN From Fortune Magazine Aug 23, 2004
Moonshine, Part 1

Why are top winemakers burying cow horns filled with manure on the equinox? Because it seems to help make great wine.

By Jean K. Reilly

Winemakers are often considered an odd lot. A good number of them hug trees, wear Birkenstocks, and so on. But there is a movement sweeping the wine world that makes Greenpeace look moderate. It's "biodynamics," a form of viticulture in which all the work in the vineyard and the cellar is performed in accordance with the cycles of the moon and the alignment of the planets.

Some biodynamic practices, such as spreading nettle tea in the vineyards, are merely unusual. Others, such as "preparation 500," are downright bizarre. This treatment is created by burying manure in cow horns at the fall equinox on lines where astral influences cross in the vineyard. The horns are dug up at the spring equinox and their contents heavily diluted with rainwater. Before being spread on the vines, the preparation is "dynamized," stirred in alternate directions for an hour, preferably by hand. Minute amounts are used, perhaps a handful per acre. Those employing the preparation believe that it transfers the "life giving" forces of the earth to the vines, making them healthier.

It is unlikely that anyone would have taken much notice of biodynamics if so many of the wines it produced were not among the best on the market. Many of the top estates in France, including Domaine Leroy in Burgundy, Chateau de la Roche-aux-Moines in the Loire, Maison Chapoutier in the Rhone Valley, and Domaine Zind Humbrecht in Alsace, are practitioners.

The theory behind biodynamics was developed by Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian philosopher (1861-1925) who founded the Anthroposophical Society and the Waldorf schools. Steiner never specifically addressed grape growing in his writings; his agricultural precepts originally found adherents among home gardeners. And while Steiner couched his theories in scientific jargon, there are no scientific studies behind his conjectures. Rather, Steiner's wisdom is believed to come from his ability to see the "inner life."

The self-appointed leader of the current movement is Nicolas Joly, owner of Chateau de la Roche-aux-Moines and author of *Wine From Sky to Earth*, a bible for aspiring biodynamists. Like Steiner, Joly communicates in poetic metaphors: "Herbicides destroy the microbial life of the soil. Without this, the vine cannot feed itself. If my hands are tied behind my back, I cannot eat." Many practitioners in this country, including Mike Benziger of Benziger Family Winery in Sonoma and viticultural consultant Alan York of Mendocino County, play down the mystical side. Not so Joly. "Vine diseases come from not respecting life forces," he claims. "In biodynamics, we are using the energetical world and reconnecting that to the vine. You have a lot of invisible forces. Disease is just a lack of life forces." Such pronouncements, as well as Joly's compelling personality, attract throngs of ardent followers, which is upsetting to some in the wine world. Alan Meadows, a prominent Burgundy critic, says, "It has cult-like aspects; it reminds me of Jimmy Swaggart."

The biodynamists say their approach enhances the uniqueness of wines, making them express their origins more clearly, a concept the French call *terroir*. And while that concept is one of the most respected in fine-wine circles, it is also a handy marketing argument, one that's particularly valuable at a time when French wines are rapidly losing market share to less expensive offerings from the New

World. If a wine is valued for its expression of a specific place, it can't be supplanted by another wine from the other side of the globe.

Biodynamics is a labor-intensive way to work the land. The biodynamic calendar often calls for working at night and on weekends. The calendar specifies times for tasting too, which can raise eyebrows. Says Meadows: "The biodynamic growers want me to taste their wines only on fruit or flower days, never on leaf or root days. It's a concern for me as a critic when the grower says, 'These tasted much better last week.' You don't know if it's true or if it's code for 'My wines suck this year.' "

THIS JUST IN August 23, 2004

Moonshine, Part 2

A blind sampling of 20 wines shows that biodynamics works. But how? (This, by the way, is why we went into journalism.)

By Jean K. Reilly

In our last issue (see [Moonshine, Part 1](#)) we reported on biodynamics, a radical viticultural method whose proponents claim it produces superior wines by combining elements of astrology and homeopathy with organic grape growing. We decided to road-test these claims, and set up a blind tasting of biodynamic vs. conventionally made wines.

Out of ten pairs of wines, only one of the conventionally made wines was judged superior to its biodynamic counterpart (see [Taste-Test Results](#)). Says Doug Frost, a Master of Wine and Master Sommelier: "The biodynamic movement seems like latent '60s acid-trip-inspired lunacy—until you taste the wines."

While the majority of our panelists were skeptical about the theories behind biodynamics, they were not surprised by the results. Mary Ewing-Mulligan, Master of Wine and co-author of *Wine for Dummies*, says, "I almost always perceive biodynamic wines ... to have more fine-tuned aromas and flavors than 'normal' wines." Several panelists suggested that the biodynamic winemakers are a self-selecting group with a common trait that makes them better craftsmen. As Bernie Sun, head sommelier at New York City's Montrachet restaurant, puts it, "Most biodynamic winemakers are artists—they're very intense and focused."

On the whole, the biodynamic wines were found to have better expressions of terroir, the way in which a wine can represent its specific place of origin in its aroma, flavor, and texture. Indeed, that is one of the principal claims of biodynamic vintners, particularly those making wine in prestigious locales. Ray Isle, managing editor of *Wine & Spirit* magazine, says, "It's kind of a no-brainer as a consumer. **If you buy wines from producers who are biodynamic, you're getting wines made (a) without pesticides and other inimical chemical whatnots, (b) with meticulous attention to detail in the vineyard, and (c) by growers who really believe that a vineyard's character should be expressed in the wine.** So what if they also think burying cow horns full of manure will help them channel new life forces from the cosmos?"

Despite its growing popularity, biodynamics is in no danger of becoming ubiquitous. Its founder, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), is highly controversial, and his works are more than a bit convoluted. In his treatise on agriculture, for example, Steiner wrote, "Those beings who stream from the sun down to the earth, unfolding their spiritual activity, encounter throughout spring and summer the being that belongs to the earth itself. In this exchange the organs are formed through which the earth perceives those beings, for the plants do not perceive." Okay!

What does seem certain is that the practice of biodynamics will continue to evolve through the ceaseless experimentation of its numerous break-the-mold adherents. Alberic Mazoyer, winemaker for

Maison Chapoutier in the Rhone Valley, says, "Now we have proved that biodynamics preserves the taste of the terroir. Using biodynamics, we have the possibility to go much further. We are trying elevate the spiritual level of the wine.... We are on the verge of a revolution." Stay tuned.

THIS JUST IN

Taste-Test Results

By Jean K. Reilly

The wines were presented in pairs, one biodynamic, one nonbiodynamic. The pairs were chosen primarily by proximity of vineyard sites, with consideration given to price range. The wines in each pair were from identical or comparable vintages. Our tasters were asked to determine which wine of each pair was of higher quality. The wines were tasted blind, with the general origin of each pair revealed but not the names of the wineries or any hint of which employed biodynamic practices.

Tasting Panel

Michel Couvreur, sommelier, Le Bernardin

Mary Ewing-Mulligan, Master of Wine; co-author, *Wine for Dummies*

Ray Isle, managing editor, *Wine & Spirits* magazine

Ian Mendelsohn, specialist, Christie's wine department

Fred Price, wine director, Union Pacific Restaurant

Timothy K. Smith, assistant managing editor, *FORTUNE* magazine

Bernie Sun, head sommelier, Montrachet

Wine	Cost	Comment
TIE 1. Pol Roger, Champagne, NV	\$31	
TIE 2. Brigandat, Champagne, NV	\$26	IM: I prefer the roundness and richness of No. 2, though No. 1 has more potential for aging.
3. Schoffit, Riesling Rangen de Than 2001	\$45	
• 4. Zind Humbrecht, Riesling Rangen de Than 2001	\$70	BS: No. 3 is missing something in the mid-palate. No. 4 has a happier feel.
• 5. Alzinger, Gruener Veltliner Smaragd Loibner Muehlpoint 2002	\$35	
6. Nikolaihof, Gruener Veltliner Smaragd Im Weingebirge 2002	\$38	MC: No. 5 has a lot of richness and complexity.
7. Dom. du Closel, Les Caillardieres Savennieres 2002	\$23	
• 8. Ch. de la Roche-aux-Moines, Clos de la Bergerie Savennieres 2002	\$40	BS: The length on No. 8 is very

- impressive. It doesn't quit.
- 9. **Olivier Leflaive, Puligny-Montrachet Les Pucelles 2001** \$70
 - 10. **Dom. Leflaive, Puligny-Montrachet Les Pucelles 2001** \$130 **MEM:** No. 10 is perfect. The first taste I had to keep from swallowing, and the second I couldn't.
 - 11. **Dom. Jean Grivot, Clos Vougeot 2001** \$75
 - 12. **Dom. de la Vougeraie, Clos Vougeot 2001** \$110 **MC:** I get more sophisticated fruit on No. 12.
 - 13. **Ch. Figeac, St. Emilion 1999** \$75
 - 14. **Ch. La Tour Figeac, St. Emilion 2001** \$40 **RI:** There is a nice, earthy spiciness on No. 14.
 - 15. **B.R. Cohn, Olive Hill Estate Cabernet Sauvignon 2000** \$40
 - 16. **Benziger, Sonoma Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon 2000** \$42 **MEM:** This wine [No. 16] has boobs!
 - 17. **Jaboulet, Hermitage La Chapelle 2001** \$140
 - 18. **Chapoutier, Hermitage L'Ermite 2001** \$180 **RI:** I think both of them would last. No. 18 has the longer finish.
 - 19. **Trimbach, Riesling Vendanges Tardives 1998** \$70
 - 20. **Ostertag, Riesling Vendanges Tardives Muenchberg 2000** \$44 **FP:** No. 20 has more depth and complexity and a better acid-to-sweet balance.

Nonbiodynamic / Biodynamic

• *Indicates winner*

From the [Aug. 23, 2004](#) Issue

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