

## **Biodynamics gives nature a bigger role**

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**By John Griffin**  
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Farming a vineyard so that the environment is incorporated into the grapes is what the French concept of terroir is all about. And, as many winemakers would have us believe, the greater the terroir, the greater the wine.

A growing number of wineries are taking that philosophy further with the concept of biodynamics, a type of organic farming that calls for more than eliminating the use of chemical sprays or fertilizers.

“Biodynamics is working with nature,” says Mike Benziger, who manages Benziger Family Winery in Sonoma Valley and has become one of the farming technique's most vocal supporters. “It's farming in a way that enhances the land.”

The idea was introduced in the 1920s by Austrian Rudolf Steiner. He said farming should be done in self-sustaining systems without external additions.

That means when you find mites on your grapes, you don't just go out and spray them, Benziger says. “You go back and look for the reason why we had the mites in the first place.”

Or, as Grady Wann, winemaker and general manager of Quivira Vineyards in Sonoma's Dry Creek Valley, says, “It's the philosophy of treating the farm basically as a living organism.”

Steiner's notions weren't put into practice until recent years, as interest in organic farming began to take off. Now such prominent vineyards as Quintessa, Grgich Hills Cellars, Mendocino Wine Co., Robert Sinskey Vineyards and Araujo Estate Wines are either producing biodynamic wines or working toward that designation.

The process takes several years, during which the vineyard is remade. A number of plants are added to the estate. They include chamomile to stabilize nitrogen, dandelion to regulate healthy growth, and stinging nettles to stimulate soil health, as well as valerian and yarrow.

Meanwhile, all unused organic material, including stems and peels as well as landscape waste, are composted and returned to the soil.

Few would argue with these aspects of biodynamics. But then there's the notion of stuffing bulls' horns with cow manure or ground quartz crystals and then burying them in the ground over winter.

The horns are dug up in the spring, and the contents are used to create natural fertilizers that are said to stimulate root growth and photosynthesis. Then there's the mystical side, in which a balance of fire (sun), air, water, earth and spirit is sought as part of the life force.

If the word “bull” comes to your mind in a way that does not refer to buried horns, you are not alone.

Wann felt that way at first, too. With a doctorate in organic chemistry, he wasn't sure how to handle the spiritual aspects of biodynamics. But he has been astounded with the results.

"I don't fully understand the why of it," he concedes. "I have more questions than when I started. ... But it has had nothing but positive effects on the vineyards."

The wines have "deeper, more intense flavors," Wann says, and the grapes have "better balance, even from more problematic sites."

An area of sauvignon blanc vines that was infected with phylloxera is now producing excellent grapes. "I can't say it's definitely from biodynamics," Wann says, "but the vines seem to be doing fine."

Sales of organic produce have skyrocketed, but the market for organic wine hasn't grown at the same rate. That's because organic winemakers cannot add sulfites to their products, so they don't age as well.

Biodynamic winemakers, however, can use small amounts of the preservative, which occurs naturally. Both Benziger and Wann do, and that makes the difference, they say.

The bottom line to the consumer is whether biodynamic farming results in better wines. Two of Benziger's suggest that may be the case.

Tribute (\$45), a blend of cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, merlot and petit verdot, has received accolades from Robert Parker, Wine Spectator and Wine Enthusiast for its deep berry and chocolate flavors with hints of black pepper and tobacco. The 2003 vintage is a big wine, but, at 14.5 percent alcohol content, it's not hot like too many California reds these days.

At the other end of the spectrum is the 2004 Sauvignon Blanc, which has a light, grassy touch and a clean citrus quality. For \$13 a bottle, it's perfect for summer, a wine you can chill down as cold as beer and enjoy.

Because of the commitment required on the part of the farmer, the spread of biodynamics will likely be confined to smaller wineries, Wann says. But he does see it growing on that level, as it has in Europe.

"The proof is in the vineyard," he says. "We believe our property is healthier."

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