

WINES & VINES

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Uncovering Biodynamic Wines

More top estates doing it, but few talk about it

by Rudi Graeter



Fairfax, Calif. -- French domaines Leroy, Leflaive and Comtes Lafon in Burgundy, Maison Chapoutier in the Rhône Valley and Domaine Zind-Humbrecht in Alsace are producing wines considered benchmarks by the international wine world and commanding commensurate prices. What may surprise some people is that all of these blue chip estates have thrown in their lot with Biodynamics.

Biodynamics, brainchild of Rudolf Steiner, could be described as "*über-organics*." It treats the vineyard as an organic whole, including the soil, its flora and fauna. Its practitioners link agricultural work to cosmic forces like moon phases and planetary positions. The vineyard is nourished with a specific compost, and sprayed with infusions brewed from plant materials.

In my small stash of Zind-Humbrecht wines, the labels make no mention that Olivier Humbrecht farms his vineyards Biodynamically. Of the three Burgundy domaines listed above, only Domaine Leroy lets you know that the estate is fully Biodynamic.

Hoping to discover why such celebrated producers are turning to Biodynamics--and, even more mysteriously, why they prefer to keep their Biodynamic practices to themselves--I embarked on a tour of French Biodynamic estates, starting in the Roussillon.

Crusty French individualism prevails everywhere, and the growers are not marching in lock step into bio-land. Some are certified, some are not. They adapt Biodynamics to their environment, and pick and choose what works for them.

Disciples of Steiner

Aime Guibert, Languedoc quality pioneer, owner of Mas de Daumas Gassac, the man who was instrumental in showing Robert Mondavi the door when the latter was about to establish a mega-winery in Languedoc, wrote me the following before my visit: "Yes, we are disciples of Steiner, but without being too religious about it."

La Maison Chapoutier, with substantial holdings in the best appellation of the Rhône Valley,

had seen its fortunes plummet, adopted Biodynamics, and reversed its decline. In Burgundy the prominent Biodynamic Domaine Trapet Pere & Fils is also experiencing a renaissance.

Domaine Gauby, in a remote corner of Roussillon, could be called the "ultimate" Biodynamic estate. and its owner, Gerard Gauby, refers to his land, where small vineyards are interspersed with scrub, as a biotope. He never had his vines certified as Biodynamic, because he doesn't want to be boxed in by rules and regulations. When Jancis Robinson refers to Gauby as a "celebrated winemaker," marketing is no longer an issue.

Domaine Montirius, owned and operated by Christine and Eric Sorrel, is the only estate I visited that sported large road signs promoting its wines from Gigondas and Vacqueyras in the Southern Rhône Valley as Biodynamic. During my visit, a German tourist stopped by and filled his car trunk with wine. He had been a Montirius fan since the Swiss organic/Biodynamic wine club Delinat had included Montirius bottles in his shipment.

Racing north to keep my appointment with Lalou Bize-Leroy, I reached Vosne-Romanée early. With time on my hands, I decided to visit Burgundy's holy grail, home to La Romanée, La Tache, and Le Richbourg. The only human in sight was a friendly local, Sebastien Denis, who had just harnessed his workhorse, hitched it to a plow and was ready to turn the soil between vines belonging to Domaine Romanée Conti. Workhorses are becoming a common sight in French vineyards.

Barrel-tasting the 2005 Burgundies with the ever-gracious Madame Bize-Leroy turned me into an instant believer of Biodynamics. The wines ran the gamut from a Pommard village wine to a who's who of *grand cru* of the Cote d'Or, and all exhibited individuality, freshness, bright fruit, structure, balance and thrilling length. With results like these, it's easy to understand why top-notch French producers are turning to Biodynamics.

British wine writer Monty Waldon lists two reasons why Olivier Humbrecht's embrace of Biodynamics makes him France's most significant Biodynamic wine producer. Humbrecht was the first Frenchman to pass the Master of Wine examination, and as a trained scientist, was not turned off by the "spiritual" aspects of Biodynamics. Humbrecht told me that he started thinking about Biodynamics after a visit from California wine people who mentioned the topic.

Why did he switch to Biodynamics. and why has Alsace become such a hotbed of Biodynamics? "It's usually family-owned estates that make the switch. There is no point converting for economic reasons. We see ourselves as 'peasants' in the best sense of the word," he said.

Cautious marketing

From Roussillon in the southeastern corner of France to Alsace in the northeast, biodynamiques has become a buzzword in the French wine world. Domaine Gauby of Roussillon has risen above the crowd by applying Biodynamics; others, like Mas de Daumas Gassac in Languedoc, Leroy, Levlaive, and Comtes Lafon in Burgundy or Zind-Humbrecht of Alsace, have staked previous fame and fortune on Biodynamics.

In France, Biodynamics derives its momentum from such flagship estates with international cachet. The buzz is on, but the jury is not in. At the very least, the impetus that Biodynamics creates forces people to rethink what they do in the vineyard.

Why this shyness of many producers about using Biodynamics as a marketing tool? Jancis Robinson notes that they "... are deeply embarrassed by some of the wilder claims associated with the theory."

Besides, the growers that I spoke with declared that they simply see themselves as stewards of the

land that their families have farmed for generations. They adopted Biodynamics as a medium to rejuvenate vineyards that had been abused by decades of chemical intervention. In the process, they also hope to make more authentic wines.

In France, most consumers view these trends with skepticism. Emmanuel Cazes of Roussillon, whose family runs the largest contiguous Biodynamic vineyard (135 hectares) in the world, said as much during my visit.

"We play down the fact that we use Biodynamics. It's seen as elitist in France, and avoided by the average consumer. We end up exporting around 50% of our production."

British-born Robert Eden is the head of Languedoc's "Conte Cathar," a negociant group that also purchased a number of domains that are run Biodynamically. Eden gave me to understand that the bulk of production is sold in the UK; the rest goes to Singapore, Malaysia, and Denmark.

In contrast to France, Germany has a substantial green movement. According to Peter Riegel of Riegel Weinimport, the market for low- to medium-priced organic and Biodynamic wines is growing. "As this specialty market is expanding, we and others like us are taking business away from conventional marketers who napped while we grew," he said.

The U.S. attitude

Organic foods in the U.S. have gone mainstream, but this appears less true for wine, although I do notice occasional "organic" or "Biodynamic" signs in wine shops. A closer look reveals that the "organic" bottles are often imports, and their labels state that they are, "wines made from organically-grown grapes."

When I asked Michael Sullivan of Beaune Imports in Berkeley, Calif., whether he encounters reliable organic European Union wines that might comply with U.S. standards on organic wines, he remarked, "We have several excellent wines that could pass the USDA requirements; however, the paperwork is far too onerous."

Whole Foods is a U.S. leader in the natural foods retail business. Its Bay Area stores carry extensive wine selections. Surprisingly, its inventory contains only about 5% "organic" wines, although an employee of the San Rafael, Calif., store assured me that these wines are a "destination product for customers."

Justin Rutherford of the San Francisco Wine Club likes to recommend organic and Biodynamic wines to his customers, but feels "that they don't fully understand what Biodynamics is, because it isn't practiced as much here as in France."

Domaine Montirius is among a number of French estates whose bottles are identified as Biodynamic on the shelves of K & L Wines in San Francisco. These wines are selected by Mulan Chan, K & L's regional specialist. She said she doesn't get many customer requests for organic or Biodynamic wines. Nevertheless, she sees an upward trend in consumer interest. Chan feels that various "salons" on Biodynamic wines have raised consciousness among wine trade people and the public. "I like to promote such wines," she said. "Once people find out what Biodynamics means, their response has been very good."

Among the wine trade there is unanimity that quality must come first. Martine's Wines in Novato, Calif., imports Biodynamic wines from Domaine Leroy, as well as lesser-known lights. Nina Scherotter of the marketing division said that Martine's sales catalog uses symbols to indicate organic and Biodynamic wines in its portfolio.

"When you have the reputation of Domaine Leroy, it legitimizes Biodynamics. Unknown producers are a different story. They have to prove themselves first with consistent quality. The

way their wines are produced is of secondary importance," Scherotter explained.

California gaining steam

While California's sustainability movement is gaining steam, organic or Biodynamic California wines are still rare. I know only a handful of estates or brands in California (e.g., Bonterra, Frey Vineyards, and Benziger), that market wines as organic or Biodynamic.

Frog's Leap Wine Cellars ("responsibly farmed vineyards") and the Robert Sinskey winery ("organic grapes") are both quality producers that are certified organic but use these quotes only on their back labels. Araujo Estate and Joseph Phelps Vineyards are California wineries with impeccable reputations. Araujo is now fully certified as Biodynamic, and Phelps is farming increasingly greater portions of its holdings Biodynamically.

Craig Williams, senior vice president and director of winemaking at Joseph Phelps, made the following points: "The response from our customers has been positive; from the press somewhat interested, but to be fair we don't promote the approach in specific wines, although the Backus Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon is now 100% Biodynamic since '03."

According to Daphne Araujo, "the quality of the French estates that follow Biodynamics was one of the main reasons that we became interested ourselves." Araujo's customers are "very enthusiastic about anything we can do in the vineyard to make our wines more 'green' and of course, more complex and vibrant, which Biodynamics has surely contributed to."

However, Araujo has not yet labeled its bottles as Biodynamic.

Is it realistic to assume that people will remain oblivious to the chemicals that may end up in the wine they drink, while they scour farmers' markets for organic produce, search out eggs from free-range chickens and pour organic milk on their cereal? While an organic, let alone Biodynamic revolution in the wine world is hardly around the corner, consumer interest is on the rise, and as the German market demonstrates, the sales potential of such wines is real.

When does a "call in the wilderness" achieve critical mass? The acreage of organic or Biodynamic vineyards would have to increase dramatically. These vineyards must provide commercial yields from the vines. Notable wines will have to be produced, selling at high price-points. Most importantly, the wines need to be distinctive.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the future of wine is passionately debated. Concerned growers, some with deep pockets, are resisting the industrialization of wine. Their experiments, often based on ancient farming methods, are fanning the debate.

Are they tilting at windmills or are they riding the wave of the future?"In the end, it is the market that decides, and the message that it gives today is unambiguous: the days of the nondescript are numbered." --Hugh Johnson.