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Virtuous Vino

By Lisa McLaughlin

You've mastered the which-are-the-good-and-bad vintages, learned the difference between a Cabernet and a Merlot and can finally pronounce Gewürztraminer. But now the casual wine drinker has a new label to grapple with: biodynamic.

Think of biodynamic as überorganic. The farming method is based on principles put forth in the 1920s by Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner. Although Steiner is best known in the U.S. as the inspiration behind the Waldorf school movement, his unique blend of spiritual science touches on every aspect of humanity and its relation to the universe, especially agriculture and diet. Biodynamic farming thus combines organic practices--like the banning of pesticides and chemicals--with somewhat mystical ideas such as basing planting and harvesting schedules on the position of the moon, sun and stars. It's full of colorful details like burying a cow horn filled with manure at the autumnal equinox. One Italian biodynamic vintner has even placed loudspeakers around his vineyards. Although he claims that playing Mozart makes his vines grow quicker and healthier, the more perceptible result of blaring Symphony No. 40 in G Minor is that it scares the bejesus out of grape-stealing deer, boars and birds.

Within the past decade, biodynamic farming has gone from a fringe movement to a fairly mainstream one, with products from milk to cosmetics now being produced via Steiner-inspired methods. But winemaking is where the practice has truly blossomed. Several high-end stores like New York City's Appellation Wine & Spirits have started devoting themselves solely to organic and biodynamic offerings, and sommeliers at restaurants across the country are creating wine lists that exclusively feature these ecologically sustainable wines. More important, some of the world's greatest vintners have signed on to the biodynamic craze, including Domaine Marcel Deiss of Alsace and Italy's Emidio Pepe. Alain Dugas, winemaker at France's Château La Nerthe--where wine has been produced almost continuously since 1560--began experimenting with biodynamics on 20 of its Châteauneuf-du-Pape acres 10 years ago. Why the sudden urge to tinker with centuries-old practices? "To maintain pH balances," Dugas explains. "There is less acidity in biodynamic wines."

Meanwhile, Jim Fetzer's Ceago Vinegarden, a biodynamic vineyard in Northern California, raises chickens as part of its viticulture system, with the birds playing a key role in keeping the vines healthy and pest-free. And Fetzer has a nice side business selling certified humane eggs.

But while organic wine might be good for the earth, is it any better for your palate than regular wine? Some biodynamic wines are definitely worth the slight bump up in price, like the citrusy Patianna Sauvignon Blanc or the Domaine de la Renjarde Côtes du Rhône Villages, with its earthy berry notes. "What you are tasting is that specific soil, that sun, those grapes," says acclaimed sommelier Sterling Roig. "These wines have an incredible purity about them." Which means that after swirling your glass, you should feel free to look down your nose while sniffing.

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