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Biodynamic Wines

They're real, they're here, and they're not a fad. Here's why you should be drinking them.

Until recently, the word *biodynamics* was probably not on the tip of our tongues. Nor were many of us eager to have this vaguely sci-fi-sounding farming practice applied to our favorite Cabernet. These days, thanks to a proliferation of farmers' markets, we consumers are pretty well-versed in organic and sustainable produce, but biodynamics?

When you hear about the more outrageous practices of biodynamics — buried cow horns filled with dung and ground crystals, harvesting by lunar and planetary cycles — you might think this farming method is (how do we put this?) a bit of bull. "What has held people back or confused them about biodynamics is that only the most sensational things have been talked about," says Mike Benziger of Benziger Family Winery. "They're fun to talk about, but when you see these things in the context of a larger system, you understand why we use them."

Benziger is one of an increasing number of modern champions of biodynamic winemaking, based on a farming practice developed by Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner in 1924. Today, there are some 30 certified biodynamic wineries in the U.S., about 200 more worldwide, and countless others employing various aspects of biodynamic principles.

Think of it as organic farming taken one step further. In addition to banning the use of pesticides and artificial additives, biodynamics works to create a self-contained, sustainable farming system in which everything on the property, including water and organic materials, is recycled and reused to regenerate the land. Chemicals are verboten because they deplete the soil, which is considered a living organism. And these practices aren't limited to wine. These days, everything from milk and cheese to produce, spices, cosmetics, and olive oil is produced using biodynamics.

Intuitively we sense these wines must be better — if not better for us, better for the land — but are they? And why? "Each year that you practice biodynamic farming, you increase the biodiversity of the land and the health of the plants. You can grow better vegetables, olives, and grapes — if your definition of better is based on authenticity," Benziger says. The goal, he says, of a biodynamic winemaker is not to make a perfect wine, but to express the authenticity of the vineyard, or what the French call *terroir*. He adds, "Sometimes that means a bit of a chipped tooth, but if done the right way, those are things that hold people's interest, like the Mona

Lisa. Her imperfections, her individuality, hold your attention."

Of course, few would argue that only a mother could love the wines from famed Burgundy producer Domaine Leflaive. A pioneer in French biodynamics, Anne-Claude Leflaive converted her family's estate to 100 percent biodynamic in 1997, and the results have been nothing short of spectacular. The wines are complex, elegant, and balanced, and are consistently some of the most respected in Burgundy.

Similarly, the cult Cabernet Sauvignons from ultra-premium producer Araujo Estate in the Napa Valley are farmed using biodynamic practices (though they are not officially certified by the international biodynamic agency Demeter). Other notable producers include Robert Sinskey and Grgich Hills in Napa, Brick House Vineyards and Cooper Mountain in Oregon, Cullen in the Margaret River region of Australia, Pierre Morey and Domaine de la Romanée-Conti in Burgundy, as well as Zind Humbrecht and Marcel Deiss in Alsace, and Dominio de Atauta in Spain.

But just because a wine is vinified biodynamically doesn't necessarily mean that it's a good wine.

According to Jim Fullmer, executive director of Demeter USA, "You have to start with a good site. Consumers are coming to expect that biodynamic wines have not been manipulated. These wines are authentic. They express the vineyard sites they came from."

One of the ways biodynamic farmers hope to deliver this authenticity is by creating a closed ecosystem. That is to say, they'll take a close look at the property and identify the various ecologies of the site's plants, bacteria, insects, and animals. This is what Benziger calls "farm individuality." His vineyards include wetlands and an insectary, both of which help to restore the balance between predator and prey. The insectary attracts "good bugs" that in turn feed on harmful pests that prey on the vines. Cows that graze on the pure fields contribute manure for the compost that's used to fertilize the vineyards and soils.

Which brings us to some of the more eyebrow-raising practices, such as several of the natural preparations that are added to the soil, based on the movement of the moon and planets. The most talked-about preparation involves a cow's horn that is filled with manure, then buried during the fall equinox and dug up in the spring. Before you cry bull, consider that the majority of a grapevine's root growth occurs right after harvest and just before dormancy, which happens to be around the time of the fall equinox. The burying of the manure at this time is said to encourage deep and wide root growth. According to Anne-Claude Leflaive, this practice "reinforces subterranean life. Numerous tests have proved its effectiveness; roots are much longer, thicker, and better distributed." At the

spring equinox, the buried horns are dug up and the contents are mixed with water to make a sort of tea, which is then sprayed on the vines and earth as a natural fertilizer.

Then there's the practice of mixing ground quartz or silica with rain water, which are buried in a horn at the spring equinox and retrieved in the fall. The contents are then stored in glass jars in the sunlight. Several times during the growing season, the mixture is sprayed as a mist onto the vines' leaves. This is said to increase the effects of photosynthesis by refracting sunlight. "One could say it's an evolution to a holistic process where we give back to the land some of what we have taken, and thereby create an even better product," says Vanya Cullen, chief winemaker at Cullen vineyards in Western Australia.

Ultimately it all comes back to the land. Crystals and horns aside, there's no question that biodynamic farming is better for the environment, if not for our spirits. "We've become so disconnected from the environment," Benziger says. "When we taste a biodynamic wine, we're able to make that connection back to nature, if only for an instant. And that's powerful."

BIODYNAMIC WINES: TASTE THE TREND

Chono 2005 Carménère, Chile (\$11). An earthy wine with plum flavors and bright tannins.

Benziger Family Winery 2005 "Paradiso de Maria" Estate Sauvignon Blanc, Sonoma Mountain (\$29). Grassy floral aromas with clean grapefruit flavors.

Lucien Albrecht 2004 Pinot Gris Pfingstberg Grand Cru, Alsace (\$23). A rich white with honey and apricot flavors and a smoky finish.

Dominio de Atauta 2004 Ribera del Duero, Spain (\$45). Blackberry and spice define this big but balanced Tempranillo.

Domaine Pierre Morey 2004 Meursault, Burgundy (\$68). Lovely minerality balanced by citrus notes.

Cullen 2004 "Diana Madeline," Margaret River, Australia (\$75). This elegant blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Petit Verdot has floral aromas and dark cherry flavors with subtle oak.

— Heather John, *Bon Appétit*, March 2007

Photograph By Sarah Wilkins

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