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Is It Voodoo, or Old-Fashioned Passion?

By BEN GILIBERTI

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In the world of wine, as elsewhere, some ideas are good, some are bad and some are just plain wacky. Biodynamic winemaking seems to occupy a fourth category: so wacky it just might work.

What is biodynamic winemaking? I'd call it an unorthodox combination of organic winemaking and sustainable agriculture, plus an elusive something extra.

The organic and sustainable components encompass such familiar concepts as the use of organic fertilizers, elimination of chemical pesticides and herbicides, protection of the ecosystem and other practices considered healthy for people and the planet.

Then it gets tricky. Biodynamic winemakers also might consult the zodiac to determine harvest times; make compost by burying grape skins and other plant materials in skulls, horns or bladders taken from dead animals during certain phases of the lunar cycle; brew special teas to spray on their vines; and raise cattle to ensure a supply of homegrown manure, which they say makes for happier vines.

Such techniques have been part of biodynamics since its development shortly after World War I by Rudolf Steiner, a prominent Austrian philosopher and spiritualist. Approached by dispirited farmers who thought the land was no longer producing nourishing crops, Steiner prescribed a return to agricultural methods rooted in the peasant folklore of the past, which apparently included a good deal of what modern critics of biodynamics refer to as "doo-doo voodoo."

Although some of it may be hard to fathom, biodynamic winemaking clearly is a growth industry. Wineries are permitted to label their wines "biodynamic," "biodynamically produced" or some such variation as long as they have a certificate from a biodynamics organization such as the Demeter Association, which is headquartered in Brussels with offices in the United States and other countries. Dozens of wineries in the United States and around the world claim to be fully committed to biodynamics, and many more say they are employing at least some of its practices.

In the United States, one ardent disciple of biodynamics is Mike Benziger, who is making some terrific Demeter-certified wines at Benziger Family Winery in Sonoma, Calif. Benziger displays the enthusiasm of the converted and has given his commitment a lot of thought. "People can scoff at what we do if they want to, but just because we don't yet understand how something works, that doesn't mean it doesn't work," he says. "Biodynamics isn't just some theory. It's the collected wisdom of the most effective farming techniques developed during the last 10,000 years. It comes down to us from folks who had an incredibly intense connection with the environment, because historically, if you did the wrong things and your crops failed, you didn't survive."

In keeping with his beliefs, Benziger follows strict biodynamics practices on the winery's 85-acre Sonoma Mountain ranch. Chemical pesticides have been eliminated through the establishment of three wildlife

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sanctuaries devoted to plants that attract beneficial insects such as mites, wasps and butterflies, as well as birds and other small animals that prey on pests harmful to grapevines. Cover crops such as mustard, crimson clover and bell beans, rather than chemical herbicides, are used to control weeds, and great attention is given to returning to the land -- through the use of biodynamic composts and manure from cattle raised on the ranch -- whatever winemaking extracts.

But do the wines taste better? Benziger insists they do. "When the soil is healthy, the vine roots fan out and grow a lot deeper, which provides better balance between the root system below and the plant growth above," he says. "I'm amazed by the flavors we get. They're not only more intense, they're also site-specific, which gives us more flavor components to work with when we make the wines."

I'm not so sure. Benziger's biodynamic wines are terrific, but so are many of his wines that are not biodynamic -- and that sell for a lot less. Indeed, my overall impression of biodynamic wines is that they are very good but relatively expensive, probably because of the extra costs involved in production.

Maybe the real point is not the price but the overall high quality. A winemaker like Benziger, who has the passion to invest his time, energy and money in biodynamics, almost certainly will do whatever it takes to make the best possible wine, biodynamic or otherwise. I don't know if you can taste biodynamics, but I do know you can taste passion, the single most important ingredient of all great wines.

Here is a sampling of recommended biodynamically produced wines. Online resources for finding wines include <http://www.winesearcher.com> and <http://www.wineaccess.com>. Call stores to verify availability. Prices are approximate.

RED WINES

Benziger Family Winery 2003 Tribute (\$85; California): This Bordeaux blend is powerful, impressive and delicious but needs two or three years in the cellar to come into its own.

Ceago Vinegarden 2002 Merlot "Camp Masut" (\$25; California): From organic farming pioneer Jim Fetzer, this deliciously supple and deeply flavored merlot from unheralded Mendocino County has a level of class and complexity usually associated with prestigious Napa and Sonoma bottlings.

Montirius 2005 Le Cadet De Montirius "Vin de Pays de Vaucluse" (\$13; France); *Montirius 2003 Vacqueyras* (\$21): The Cadet, a blend of grenache, syrah, cinsault and merlot from vineyards near Provence, is a classic French country wine, making it great for pairing with steak and pommes frites, pâté, cassoulet and other bistro fare. The potent Vacqueyras offers brawny flavors of figs and damp earth.

Marc Kreydenweiss 2004/2005 Perrieres "Costieres de Nimes" (\$13; France): This stylish blend of carignane, syrah and grenache offers red plum, blackberry and subtle licorice flavors at the finish.

Querciabella 2004 Chianti Classico (\$31; Italy): It is expensive for a regular Chianti Classico but has the complexity and aging ability of a riserva.

WHITE WINES

Grgich Hills 2004/2005 Fume Blanc Napa Valley (\$33; California): Grgich's fume blanc (another name for sauvignon blanc) is always among the best of Napa, but the 2004 is simply phenomenal, and the 2005 is not far behind.

Domaine de l'Ecu (Guy Bossard) 2004 Muscadet Sevre et Maine "Sur Lie" (\$19; France): It delivers a bracing mix of peach, sea salt and citrus flavors.

Domaine Ostertag 2005 "Les Vieilles Vignes de Sylvaner" (\$18; France): Delicate peach and floral notes merge into a soft, round, citrusy finish.

Do you have a question for Ben Giliberti? E-mail him at food@washpost.com. Please include your name and address.

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