

by Sara Schneider

Great wine, naturally

From cosmic forces to chickens, winegrowers embrace nature to make wines full of character



When the moon is full at Ceàgo Del Lago on the north shore of California's Clear Lake, things begin to happen around the vineyard. Not ghostly things; rather, vines are pruned and wines are blended. When the moon's dark, there's different activity. The wines are racked — siphoned off the sediment in the bottom of the barrels.

The lunar activity isn't lunacy. It's part of the biodynamic farming system that Jim Fetzer, owner of Ceàgo, and a growing number of other winemakers are committing to, including Robert Sinskey and Quintessa in Napa, and Benziger, Quivira, and DeLoach in Sonoma County. They practice biodynamic methods because it's the right thing to do for the land, and also because they believe it infuses their wines with the most

vivid *terroir*, the Holy Grail of winemakers, the essence of the place where the grapes were grown.

A full moon is a great levitating force: The power that lifts tides in the oceans of the world also pulls moisture up in grapevines and flavors out in wine lots, so it's the best time to cut back vigorous vines and make informed blending decisions. And when the moon goes dark and Earth's gravity holds complete sway, the sediment in barrels stays put during racking.

As Jim Fetzer, owner of Ceàgo, puts it, "Would you try to paddle upstream when the tide is going out?"

Biodynamic methods go far beyond what you *can't* do in organicland (that is, use no synthetic fertilizers or chemical pesticides) to what you *can* do to make a vineyard a fully alive, completely self-sustaining ecosystem.

Like making sure that many things are growing there, because biodiversity is key to soil health and pest management. At Ceàgo, the vines share the property with lavender, olive trees, and other edibles. Crop rotation is also important. But since it's a tad impractical to switch out grapevines, cover crops — fava beans, strawberry clover — are rotated.

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The fertilizer on a biodynamic farm is "green" too. In the vineyards, some of it is dropped directly — by sheep and chickens. The Ceàgo hens live in style: They have a mini mobile home that gets pulled here and there, giving them a place to sleep and lay their eggs (which you can buy in the tasting room). Combining animal and plant lives is key to a holistic biodynamic operation.

The real science and lore of biodynamic winegrowing, though, rest in a handful of preparations applied at very specific times and some in seemingly peculiar ways. For example, ground-up quartz crystals are sprayed over the vines in the morning to refract the sun and boost photosynthesis, and manure is packed into the horn of a cow and buried in the garden from the fall to the spring equinox, before being made into a microbe-rich spray.

All of which seemed mystical to Fetzer at first. The sight of someone stirring a crock of manure to pack into a cow's horn conjured up witches in his head. But now it feels like smart farming — working with the forces of nature rather than

wresting crops from the ground.

He still can't explain why burying that manure in a *female* cow's horn, during the equinox in the fall, creates livelier microbial life in the soil. But the result is measurable. And the latest Ceàgo Merlot is more expressive of the land than ever — that part's tasteable. So why not dig under a full moon?



E. Spencer Toy

Quivira "Steelhead Red" 2004 and Robert Sinskey "Abraxas" Vin de Terroir 2005

More picks

Cooper Mountain "Mountain Terroir" Five Elements Series Pinot Noir 2003 (Willamette Valley, OR; \$30). Beautifully understated, with hints of cherry, soy, cola, and minerals.

Presidio Syrah Rosé 2005 (Santa Barbara County; \$17). Fresh, spicy, and off the charts with citrus zing. One of the best out there.

Quivira "Steelhead Red" 2004 (Dry Creek Valley, CA; \$18). Pine aromas, milk chocolate, and coffee mingle with wild raspberry and blueberry flavors in this hedonistic blend.

Robert Sinskey "Abraxas" Vin de Terroir 2005 (Carneros, CA; \$28). Exotic, minerally, citrusy blend of Pinot Blanc, Riesling, Pinot Gris, and Gewürztraminer.

Robert Sinskey Los Carneros Pinot Noir 2004 (Carneros, CA; \$34). Sinskey Pinots — some of the best in Northern California — are delicate and rich at the same time. This one has hints of mocha but explodes with citrus and minerals.
—Karen MacNeil-Fife

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