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Biodynamics: The Next Trend

BY RAY ISLE

If there's a single trend in how to grow wine grapes, it's biodynamics—admittedly an odd development for an approach based on a series of lectures given in the 1920s by Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner.

What is biodynamics?

At its most basic, the biodynamic approach to grape-growing sees the vineyard as an ecological whole: not just rows of grapevines, but the soil beneath them—an organism in its own right—and the other flora and fauna in the area, growing together interdependently.

Where biodynamics differs from other forms of organic or sustainable agriculture is in its idea that farming can be attuned to the spiritual forces of the cosmos. This might mean linking sowing and harvesting to the phases of the moon or the positions of the planets; it also might mean burying cow manure in a cow's horn over the winter, unearthing it in the spring, diluting a minute amount of the substance in 34 liters of water, "dynamizing" it by stirring it by hand in alternating directions for an hour or so and then spraying the mixture over one's vineyard.

Does it work?

Well, adherents of biodynamics think so, though the success of the practice is impossible to quantify: Scientific measurement of the spiritual is a contradiction in terms. The most effective argument for biodynamics is that wines produced employing it are more evocative of the place they're grown—and, consequently, better. Consider that converts to biodynamics include some of the most significant high-end wine producers today, such as Lalou Bize-Leroy of Domaine Leroy in Burgundy, Peter Sisseck of Dominio de Pingus in Spain, and Olivier Humbrecht of Alsace's Zind-Humbrecht. Also, a growing number of large-scale producers—Maison Joseph Drouhin in Burgundy, DeLoach Vineyards in Sonoma County—are experimenting with biodynamics. Finally, regardless of the more outré aspects of the biodynamic approach, the intense attention it forces growers to pay in the vineyard can't be anything but good. The wines on the following page are proof.

12 Great Biodynamic Wines

2005 Chateau de Roquefort Corail Rosé Côtes de Provence (\$14) Proprietor Raimond de Villeneuve returned to his family's small estate in southern France in 1995 and began to convert it over to biodynamics. He now makes remarkable wines like this pale coral-colored rosé. Its palate-whetting acidity is enhanced by juicy wild strawberry flavors.

2004 Patianna Sauvignon Blanc (\$18) This textbook Sauvignon Blanc, with a zippy, citrusy tang and peppery grapefruit flavor, comes from a 126-acre biodynamic vineyard in California's cool Mendocino County, where, among other sustainable innovations, flocks of resident chickens peck up vineyard pests.

2003 COS Cerasuolo di Vittoria (\$25) In 1980, architects Giusto Occhipinti and Giambattista Cilia founded COS near the Sicilian town of Ragusa. They renovated an old farmhouse to serve as their offices and concentrated on making wines without any industrial techniques (though they're not officially certified biodynamic). The earthy '03 Cerasuolo blends two local red varieties, Nero d'Avola and Frappato.

2003 Pierre Morey Bourgogne Blanc (\$26) Pierre Morey, when not in his role as winemaker of Burgundy's famous Domaine Leflaive, bottles gorgeously focused wines—like this rich, aromatic Bourgogne Blanc—from his own small estate outside the town of Meursault.

2003 M. Chapoutier La Bernardine Châteauneuf-du-Pape Rouge (\$36) One of the Rhône's foremost winemakers, and a longtime proponent of biodynamic farming, Michel Chapoutier makes this velvety Châteauneuf from a blend of old-vine Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre. It's seductive and intense, with flavors recalling coffee and raspberry confit.

2003 Marcel Deiss Gewürztraminer Bergheim (\$39) This lightly sweet and extraordinarily fragrant Gewürztraminer—with a scent that's evocative of rose petals, lychee nuts and cardamom—comes from the Deiss family's 52 acres of biodynamic vineyards in Alsace.

2003 Tandem Porter-Bass Vineyards Chardonnay (\$48) Tandem owners Greg La Follette and Greg Bjornstad source grapes from a host of great vineyards for their wines. Among them is the tiny Porter-Bass property in California's Russian

River Valley, where biodynamic farming and miniscule yields help intensify the flavors of the grapes, as this vibrant, quince-flavored Chardonnay shows.

2003 Benziger Sonoma Mountain Red (\$49) Most of Benziger's wide range of wines come from various vineyards that are spread throughout Sonoma County. However, those from its 85-acre Sonoma Mountain estate—like this formidable, currant-driven blend of primarily Cabernet and Merlot—are made exclusively from biodynamically farmed vines.

2001 Domaine Leflaive Puligny-Montrachet Clavoillon 1er Cru (\$93) Her family's fame and her wines—like this elegant Chardonnay—make Burgundy's Anne-Claude Leflaive a standout.

Star Selections

2001 Ceàgo Vinegarden Camp Masut Merlot (\$25) After selling Fetzer Vineyards in 1992, Jim Fetzer founded Ceàgo and became one of the first U.S. winemakers to concentrate on biodynamics, producing wines like this black cherry-rich Merlot.

2003 Nicolas Joly Clos de la Coulée de Serrant (\$80) Biodynamics leader Nicolas Joly produces wildly complex Chenin Blancs from his famed Loire valley vineyard, Coulée de Serrant. The 2003 is full of red apple, tangerine and honey flavors.

2003 Movia Ribolla (\$25) Ales Kristancic of Slovenia's Movia uses biodynamic methods in his vineyards; he also gives his white wines, like this smoky, apple-inflected Ribolla Gialla, a minimum of two years aging in Slovenian oak casks before release.

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