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THE POUR

## Trying to Bottle Moonlight and Magic

By ERIC ASIMOV

**L**ET'S get the weird, mystical stuff out of the way first. If most people have heard anything about biodynamic winemaking and grape-growing, chances are they have heard stories about filling cow horns with dung and burying them in vineyards, about aligning cellar work with phases of the moon and of brewing odd potions, to be spread like voodoo charms over grapes and vines.

Yet before you consign practitioners of biodynamics to the distant corner of your mind reserved for Shirley MacLaine and the weird sisters in "Macbeth," consider that among the people who practice biodynamic viticulture are some of the world's great wine producers.

In Burgundy, Domaine Leflaive, Domaine Leroy and Comtes Lafon all use biodynamic techniques. But add to that list Zind-Humbrecht, Marc Tempé, Marcel Deiss and Domaine Ostertag in Alsace, Fleury and Larmandier-Bernier in Champagne, Coulée de Serrant from Savennières, M. Chapoutier in the Rhône Valley and Alvaro Palacios and Pingus in Spain. Esteemed winemakers, all, and I have not even mentioned an American contingent, including Araujo Estate in Napa Valley, Benziger Family Winery in Sonoma County and Brick House Vineyards in Oregon.

While these names may not account for much production, their influence is enormous. Many were among 74 winemakers in New York City on Monday at the first major tasting of biodynamic wines in the United States, an astonishing number considering that biodynamic practices used to be dismissed as the equivalent of U.F.O. sightings.

"Ten years ago they thought we were complete wackos," said Alan York, a biodynamic consultant in California, whose clients include Benziger, Quivira, Sonoma-Cutrer and Dry Creek Valley. "It's been a huge change."

Biodynamics, its advocates assert, maximizes the personality of a given plot of earth. Like a homeopathic doctor, a biodynamic farmer analyzes the land and determines what is out of balance. The aim is to turn the land into a self-sustaining, self-regulating habitat. "It's like removing kinks from a hose, so the highest potential of that property can be realized," said Mike Benziger of Benziger Family Winery, who began converting his Sonoma Mountain Estate to biodynamics in 1996.

No winemaker has been more fervent an advocate of biodynamics than Nicolas Joly of Coulée de Serrant, who for 20 years has proselytized all over the winemaking world. He caught the fascination years ago, when he read a book by Rudolf Steiner, the Austrian philosopher, whose agricultural principles evolved into biodynamics. Mr. Joly's vineyard near the Loire has been biodynamic since 1980, and he wrote a book, "Wine From Sky to Earth: Growing and Appreciating Biodynamic Wines." He boils the issue down to a simple question: "Taste — does it come from the appellation, or does it come from technology?"

To frame it another way, does a wine have a sense of place? Does it taste as if it came from a particular vineyard, from grapes that grew in a specific soil and climate? Or could it have come from anywhere, manipulated to taste exactly as the winemakers, and focus groups, desired? Mr. Joly believes in wines that taste of their appellation and despises those that taste of the laboratory.

"I call those wines Appellation Contrôlée de L'Oréal," he said.

Much of biodynamic agriculture seems like good, old-fashioned common sense. Avoid inorganic fertilizers and chemical pesticides and herbicides. Use natural means where possible, even horses instead of tractors. But there is more to it than that.

"We don't buy ladybugs or bring in owls," Mr. Benziger said. "But we build the habitat that attracts them."

Mr. Benziger's 85-acre estate has just 42 acres planted with grapes. Thirty more acres are devoted to habitats to attract the insects, wildlife and plants he wants for his vineyard. "You're reading the book of nature," Mr. Benziger said. "Because you can't use chemicals, you have to intuit — anticipate problems before they start."

That is still only the beginning. Practitioners talk about "unseen frequencies" and "life forces," which can also be common sense. "A plant is growing by its two ends," Mr. Joly said. "One is sucked down by gravity. The other is sucked up by the sun. In the balance of these two forces you get quality."

Biodynamic winemakers wait until the moon has waned to rack their wines, that is, to clarify the liquid by siphoning it from one container to another, leaving solid matter behind. Why not? Just as the full moon pulls up the tides, they say, it would pull up sediment in the wine. The waning moon allows it to settle.

And then there are those cow horns. Mr. Benziger fills dozens of horns — not from bulls or heifers, but from cows — with cow manure and buries them in his vineyard on the autumn equinox. When he digs them up, the manure has turned into what he called a beautiful humus. "It's like chocolate," he said. He dissolves it in water and sprays it on the ground, "one horn per acre." He also packs horns with ground quartz, or silica, which he leaves buried over the summer. Spraying the vines with the silica solution, he said, "supercharges photosynthesis."

But the crucial question is, what does it mean in the glass?

It is awfully hard to argue with the wines at the tasting. Araujo Estate's Eisele Vineyard cabernet sauvignon is one of Napa Valley's great wines, while few Champagnes reflect their terroir as well as Larmandier-Bernier's minerally Terre de Vertus. Benziger's 2001 cabernet blend is smooth and luscious, while Brick House's 2002 Willamette pinot noir is pure, rich and spicy. And Mr. Joly's wines are perhaps the most distinctive Savennières of all.

Nobody can say exactly how biodynamics contributes to these wines. No full studies have been conducted, said Dr. Andy Walker of the viticulture and oenology department at the University of California, Davis. "I'll say that some of the best vineyards I've ever seen are biodynamic, and the owners tend to be very conscientious," Dr. Walker said.

That may be the bottom line. Biodynamic agriculture is difficult and exacting and requires an enormous commitment on the part of the winemaker, always a good thing. While it may not help, as grandmothers always say, it couldn't hurt.

*This column, devoted to trends in wine, will appear regularly in the Dining section.*