

## Eco-friendly, high quality and tasty, too

### Benziger releases Tribute, a wine made from biodynamic grapes

by PEG MELNIK

June 30, 2004



PEG MELNIK

With vineyards and people co-habiting in such close quarters in Wine Country, I take note of each and every milestone in the organic movement.

The latest is the Benziger Family Winery's June release of Tribute, a Bordeaux-style blend grown exclusively from biodynamic grapes, and the recent New York tasting of upscale biodynamic wines like it.

A biodynamic wine is one made from grapes grown on a property where the entire environment is involved in the process, not just the vines. Other crops and even animals are used in the mix to make the land more fertile.

In contrast, organic grapes are ones that never encounter any "cides" -- pesticides, herbicides, etc.

"We spend just as much money per acre on other crops as we do on grapes," winemaker Mike Benziger explained. "We think of the grapes as the lead character and other crops as the supportive character that give depth to the lead character."

Benziger said his Sonoma Mountain property is the first in Napa and Sonoma to be certified biodynamic by Demeter Association, an independent certifier of biodynamic farming practices.

While biodynamic wines are a small sector of the industry, the New York tasting attests that many of the world's great wines are produced with biodynamic grapes. The 75 producers of biodynamic wines include some impressive names in the wine world: Burgundy's Domaine

Leflaive, Comtes Lafon and Domaine Leroy; Alsace's Domaine Ostertag; Champagne's Larmandier-Bernier; and California's Araujo Estate, aside from Benziger.

"It was really exciting to get judged on the world stage," Benziger said. "The tasting was a major step for awareness of these types of wines ... in the past, biodynamic farming has been more of a philosophy rather than a method for producing quality wine."

Benziger said he thinks the next year's international tasting of biodynamic wines will be in California.

To see these wineries come out and boast about their eco-friendly wine in such a public way is gratifying. Just a couple of years ago high profile wineries bottling organic grapes were keeping a low profile because they didn't want their bottles to show up in organic wine sections in retail stores. They simply didn't want their wineries associated with the "low-quality" image of organic wines.

Back in the spring of 2002 Benziger said, "It's the birth of the organic movement at the high quality end. More and more high-profile producers are bottling organic grapes ... unfortunately we'll never know which wines because people are very quiet about this. They don't want to be branded an organic product."

Even Benziger wasn't coming out as strongly as he could have as an organic proponent in 2002. Benziger's 1999 Estate Zinfandel, Sonoma Mountain, didn't indicate the wine was made from organic grapes on the front label.

Making a wine from biodynamic grapes is even more of a commitment than making wine from organic grapes, but it looks like wineries are willing to band together and speak out today. And they're laying the ground work for a philosophical shift toward environmental friendly practices.

Of course progress won't happen over night. Benziger concedes "About three to six people come each month to look at my property and see what (biodynamic farming) entails and almost none can step away making the commitment to do it."

Even so, it's refreshing to see some wineries show the world they're proud stewards of vineyards and they have great wine to show for it.

**Reprinted from *The Press-Democrat*. For more information, visit [www.benziger.com/tribute](http://www.benziger.com/tribute)**