

More on biodynamics

Visiting a wine producer near Perpignan in the far south of France last August, I was surprised to bump into one of my fellow wine writers Monty Waldin reaching deep into a sack of dried nettle flakes, clearly working there. I shouldn't have been. Monty is a specialist in biodynamic wines and he was doing a stint chez the celebrated Roussillon vigneron Gérard Gauby because, as he put it, "I already know how to do the composts but I wanted to come and learn how to do the teas and slurries".

It sounds better in French - *tisanes et purins* - but the principle is the same: administering homeopathic doses of natural products according to the phases of the moon and sun and working the soil by old-fashioned methods such as ploughing and tilling to restore health, life and natural rhythms to the soil and what is grown in it after decades of using agrochemicals and heavy tractors that compact the soil.

On paper it sounds completely crazy, or at least a wholemeal sandwich short of a picnic, but when you see the health of the grapes that result and, perhaps even more importantly, the vibrancy of the wines typically produced, it is increasingly convincing.

It's worth considering a few of the French producers who have gone over entirely to biodynamic viticulture: Lalou Bize-Leroy most famously in her great vineyard holdings that make up the Domaine Leroy in Burgundy; neighbours Jean-Louis Trapet of Gevrey-Chambertin, Anne-Claude Leflaive of Domaine Leflaive in Puligny-Montrachet and Dominique Lafon of Domaine Comtes Lafon of Meursault; Olivier Humbrecht of Zind-Humbrecht in Alsace and many others in Alsace such as Faller of Domaine Weinbach, Kreydenweiss and Josmeyer; Jacques Selosse of Champagne; Chapoutier of the Rhône valley; and Gaston Huet of Vouvray and, the great proselytizer, Nicolas Joly of Savennières in the Loire. These are not flower power sandal wearers. They are thoughtful, practical vine growers who are worried about the future of what we call 'conventional' farming on the planet and have seen that biodynamism works - even if they have no clue how.

I was first alerted to the extremely obvious effects of biodynamism more than 10 years ago when Lalou took me into her newly converted Richebourg vines which were so vigorous and healthy that the perfect, small, glistening bunches almost seemed to be growing upwards. And no-one could reproach her for the quality of her fruit. Its quantity is another matter. One particularly ravaged year she produced a meagre fraction of a normal crop, and it is true that once you become a biodynamic vigneron, you have to basically give up any idea of travelling during the growing season. Not being allowed to use chemicals to treat disease once it's established means constantly administering preventative doses of, say, camomile, bark, fennel, dandelions or valerian, anticipating problems by intimate knowledge of each vine. It is the use, and particularly the timing of the use, of these preparations that particularly distinguishes biodynamic viticulture from organic. Some biodynamic growers are downright rude about pussyfooting about with 'just' organic farming, while some of the many organic farmers mutter darkly about the deeply suspect social beliefs of Rudolf Steiner who first advocated biodynamism in general (not for viticulture in particular) in the 1920s.

The biodynamic producers I most respect have adapted biodynamic methods to their own particular environment and are deeply embarrassed by some of the wilder claims associated with the theory. And many - perhaps most - of them don't even use biodynamics to sell their wines. The movement still attracts so much aggression, suspicion and ridicule (and it costs a fair bit to be certified) that many producers keep relatively quiet about the methods they have found result in healthier vines and more vibrant wines.

As you may have noticed however, biodynamic wines tend to cost more than non-biodynamic ones. The money saved by buying small quantities of ground cow horn (really - a major

ingredient in one of the approved composts) instead of large quantities of man-made chemicals tends to be spent on increased labour. Gauby says that his production costs are eight times what they were before he saw the biodynamic light in the late 1990s – and his prices have certainly gone up even if he has given up tractors in favour of horses.

His epiphany came when he added a chemical soil disinfectant to one of his vineyards in the early 1990s and found 200 dead birds there the next day. It was then that he knew his grandfather was right to distrust 'modern' farming methods, he says, and he has been totally biodynamic since 2001. As he drove me past his vineyards in the Agly valley he pointed proudly at the weeds, particularly wild fennel, sprawling between the vines, warding off predatory insects and encouraging the vine roots to dig deep into the soil that he believes he has now returned to life, complete with its own flora and fauna. To the outsider, his vineyards look a mess, and his vines with their yellow-green leaves look much less regular than the dark green ones of his neighbours with their bare, herbicided soil underneath. He snorted at these over-fertilised plants, the added nitrogen darkening their leaves.

"Look, my vines aren't stressed at all, and we don't have ladybirds, or grapevine yellows. We keep the trees by the vineyards," he pointed out a scrubby little oak hardly as tall as him, "because there are probably more than 500 insects in there that help me keep pests at bay. Basically my vines – all mass selection, no clones – are now in such perfect balance that it doesn't matter to me whether it's a heatwave or wet year. Even [the extreme heatwave of] 2003 hardly affected me because of the depth of the vine roots, whereas my neighbours' vines stopped working in the extreme heat. The only thing I fear is hail."

I visited him weeks before most of his neighbours picked their 2005 crop but he was already fermenting many of his whites and had picked his first Syrah grapes, bursting with health and hardly in need of the 10 people who hovered over the sorting belt picking out the slightest imperfection. And the great advantage of his intensity in the vineyard is that he is achieving extremely intense flavours and high levels of dry extract without high sugars – often well under 12 per cent – when earlier vintages of his celebrated Muntada, many of them celebrated, were closer to 15 per cent. An old-vine 2004 Syrah grown on limestone marls around his new winery outside the little village of Calce had almost burgundian grace and certainly no shortage of flavour but only 11.5 per cent alcohol and a pH of just 3.18.

For the moment there is no set of rules for biodynamic winemaking (as opposed to vine growing). And although the health of the fruit means that wines can be made with very much lower sulphur levels than conventional wines, biodynamic viticulture may still need, and permits, vineyard applications of copper sulphate, the famous Bordeaux mixture in use since the 19th century to ward off the fungal diseases to which vines are particularly prone. Copper sulfate certainly doesn't sound particularly healthy...although sulfur has been used in winemaking and general fruit processing since Roman times.

The big unanswered question in all this is how on earth it works. Olivier Humbrecht for example – someone who is much more like a stolid German than a fanciful Latin – admits that he doesn't know. He just knows that his wines are better, more intense and a truer expression of terroir, and that he feels comfortable that he is doing his bit for the long-term benefit of the planet's ecosystem.

Growers have to have been completely biodynamic for three years before they can be certified. Demeter is the international organisation certifying biodynamic agriculture in general, while Biodyvin (www.biodyvin.com) is an organisation specifically for French wine producers. But it is clear that even within Biodyvin some adherents see themselves as purer than others.

I asked Gérard Gauby whether he, someone whose wine style has completely changed since he embraced biodynamism, was certified. "No," he said, "because I resent paying the fees. I think it's the people who aren't biodynamic who should pay."

The movement is certainly taking hold in France. Biodyvin even has members in the most sceptical French region of all, Bordeaux, and Les Baux de Provence is planning to become the world's first all-biodynamic appellation (helped by the drying mistral [wind] that whistles through the vineyards).

But I sense it will be a while before hundreds of California wine producers follow the likes of Araujo, Ceago, Frey, Phelps, Grgich, Quintessa and Sinskey along this increasingly well-lit path.