

HARPERS

Biodynamics Article de Monty Waldin

Biodynamic brothers

Biodynamic brothers With the profits from the Fetzer family sale of its brand in 1992 to Brown-Forman, both Bobby Fetzer and his brother Jimmy bought separate Mendocino County ranches (Masut and Ceago Vinegarden respectively) and turned them biodynamic. Both sell grapes to Bonterra. In January the 60ha Ceago Vinegarden was purchased by Brown-Forman, and renamed McNab. The ranch will form the heart of a premium, single-vineyard biodynamic wine range (US\$25-45 bottle) and allow Bonterra the space for its own winery and biodynamic visitor centre, separate from Fetzer Vineyards, which produces non-organic wines. Olive oil and lavender are other cash crops at MacNab.

Koball, who left Kohn in 2000 to plant Brown-Forman's biodynamic 45 ha Butler Ranch, acquired vineless in 1999, will also manage McNab. McNab and Butler lie adjacent, separated by a range of hills. The only other biodynamic vineyard in Mendocino County is Frey Vineyards, which is owned by another wine dynasty, the Freys, led by Marguerite Frey and her 12 children (the boys have Bible names, and the girls heathen ones). The Freys refuse to store their No 500 and No 501 biodynamic preparations in cow's horns on animal welfare grounds, but use walnut shells instead. The family produces "biodynamic wine" which is wine made from biodynamic grapes but without sulphur dioxide preservative. Brown-Forman's wines from McNab and Butler will be labelled "wines from biodynamic grapes" because they will contain added sulphur dioxide.

Worldwide, the growth in interest in biodynamics has never been so strong, and word of mouth and grape quality are bringing the sceptics round. Eric de Suremain, co-owner of Château de Monthélie in Burgundy, is also a shareholder at Domaine Leflaive in Puligny-Montrachet. For ten years now Anne-Claude Leflaive has run comparative trials in vine plots under conventional, organic and biodynamic management. These were monitored by Bourguignon and the results hastened his departure from INRA. Suremain's domaine is now in conversion to biodynamics.

Roy Richards of Richards Walford, who works with several significant French biodynamic producers, observed: "Wine growers are inherently conservative, so only if they can see the benefits, both to their vines and to the wine, of a new way of farming are they prepared to adopt it and take what they see is a risk, either economically or of ridicule by their peers." The vineyard manager of a well-known Pomerol pooh-pooled the widely held view locally that biodynamic trials took place there in 1996. "If we had trialled biodynamics, and it looked like we were going to lose the crop due to problems during the conversion period, we'd have had no hesitation taking corrective action with chemical sprays. If there's a fire you have to save the family furniture, you know."

The Demeter organisation, which regulates biodynamic production worldwide and the "biodynamic" trademark, has also shown a willingness to save the family furniture, but in a different context from the Pomerol, by launching a successful lawsuit against Agri-Synthesis, Inc, a Napa-based vineyard management company which was using the copyrighted "biodynamic" name for some of its vine treatments. Greg Willis of Agri-Synthesis claims he

can cure Pierce's Disease within a matter of days with a spray called Mojo, which he markets. As yet, no California wineries are using Mojo and its contents remain "proprietary".

Willis is critical of Demeter, because its record of convincing farmers to become biodynamic is "pitiful, with maybe 80 members in the entire US". Demeter says that worldwide it supervises more than 1,000,000 ha of biodynamic farmland (90% of this in Australia), of which about 0.5% is vineyards. Brown-Forman's purchase of McNab and Butler Ranches may give Demeter its first globally marketable, premium brand. However, several French producers, such as Alsace's Marc Kreydenweiss and the Rhône's Domaine St Apollinaire, farm biodynamically but independent of Demeter, which several growers refer to as "too much like a church".

However in France, the level of conversion to biodynamics is increasing dramatically, as in the Rhône with Chapoutier converting 250 ha, easily enough to overtake Brown-Forman and its grape suppliers combined. Alsace has half a dozen growers in conversion, including such leading lights as Ostertag, Deiss and Domaine Zind-Humbrecht. The latter is arguably the most significant, because proprietor Olivier Humbrecht is both a Master of Wine and from a science - rather than a hippy-and-sandals - background. Also, it's not just producers with established reputations working biodynamically, but also humble "coopérateurs" such as the two growers selling grapes to the Confrérie des Vignerons de Oisly et Thésée in Touraine for the Domaine de Pontcher and Domaine des Maisons Brûlées wines (stocked by Majestic).

Forty years ago this cooperative became the first in France to install that emblem of modernism, stainless-steel fermentation vats, and now it has become the first to release wine from biodynamic grapes. Cigar, anyone?

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