

# THE TIPPING POINT

Biodynamic wines making for good conversations, not least because of the way they are made. But how big is the market segment? Roger Morris finds out.

Last September, readers of The New Yorker were greeted by unusual multi-page advertising for Louis Roederer Champagne. The first advert was a photo of an ammonite, which the copy explained helped make up Champagne's signature chalky, seabed soils – a traditional terroir story.

But the second advert was not in the least traditional: an illustration of a white cow in a grassy field with text that began: "The cows must be happy. The quality of their manure depends on it. Kept in horns buried deep in the winter ground, the manure is dug up in spring and spread below the vines to work its fertilising magic." The third and final page was in the same vein – a painting of a winter sky with a quarter moon fronting the Milky Way. "The moon is waxing..."

The ads, produced by Paris-based Saltimbanque agency, marked the first time

that biodynamic practices had been featured as selling points in an American consumer magazine. "Our concept is to talk about Cristal as the very great wine that it is, as opposed to brandishing some wayward beauty gazing out to sea, a glass of Cristal in hand," explains Roederer executive vice-president Michel Janneau. "We want to reveal why Cristal is inherently different, right from its DNA up to its embodiment as a wine."

It's not just Cristal. As dreary winter skies descended on the Burgundy wine capital of Beaune, Aubert de Villaine, co-owner of Domaine Romanée-Conti, which is the most revered wine producer in the world, explained why his domain totally adapted biodynamics farming practices around 2006. "For me," he said, "biodynamics is not a religion, but about getting more concentration and more finesse [in the wine], because we get a better balance

between yield and terroir."

The stature of both men and their domains, as well as Roederer's groundbreaking advertisements, begs the question of whether the biodynamics conversation is moving from fringe to mainstream? The evidence appears to show that it does.

## Rapid evolution

Although biodynamics as a codified agricultural practice dates from a series of 1924 lectures in Poland by the anthroposophist Dr Rudolf Steiner, it only began to be applied in numbers to grape growing and winemaking around the turn of the current century. Parts of biodynamics are sound farming practices that go beyond simple organic agriculture, parts are a continuation of the long-held belief among agrarian societies that whatever goes on in the night sky has a direct relationship to what should be happening on earth in vineyards, and parts are a faith-based methodology involved in fertilising and protecting vines from disease.

In the early 2000s, biodynamics began taking on cult-like status, led by Loire winegrower Nicolas Joly, who seemed to enjoy playing the Pied Piper of Bio through his organisation, La Renaissance des Appellations. Yet, after lighting the fire, Joly's flame quickly tapered outside France. Jean-Louis Carbonnier, a New York-based public relations consultant and now part of the Château Palmer organisation – itself a biodynamic producer – worked with Joly during this period. "Nicolas demanded a lot of these winegrowers, many of whom were not only luminaries in their own regions but internationally," Carbonnier recalls. Eventually, many such followers decided they no longer needed his guidance.

Today, biodynamics is embraced by a long line of superb winegrowers, most of whom first practised organic growing and still do, who see bio as the next step. A partial list



The horse hard at work in the biodynamic vineyards of Château Pontet Canet



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includes such prominent names as Latour, Pontet-Canet, Boisset, Chapoutier, Beaucastel, Drouhin, de Trevallon, Tablas Creek, Leflaive, Zind-Humbrecht and Bonterra. But not all biodynamics producers are high-end. For example, entry-level wines for King Estate in Oregon, which has 1,033 acres, 465 of which are under vine, are priced under \$20.00 a bottle.

“To get certified for organics is easy – it’s just a matter of checking all the boxes,” says Robert Sinskey, whose eponymous winery, located in the Stags Leap District of Napa Valley, has long grown organic grapes. “But biodynamics is more of a journey than just checking boxes. We’re compensating for the damage being done to the earth. Our mission is to heal it.”

There are two primary biodynamics certifying bodies – Germany-based Demeter and Biodyvin, which is especially prominent in France. However, there are many producers worldwide, such as Sinskey, who practise biodynamics but who don’t want to pay the fees involved in staying certified, or who reject certain parts of the biodynamics philosophy or, perhaps, its theology.

“Our membership among grape and wine producers has been growing at 10 percent per year,” says Demeter USA president Elizabeth Candelario, pointing out the fastest-growing group are organic grape growers in Oregon who also want to be biodynamic. There are 85 Demeter-certified winegrowers in the US; Biodyvin in Europe has a similar story. “In 2009, we had 61 biodynamic members,” reports Biodyvin’s Bernadette Blatz, “and today we have 135. Last year, we certified 12 domaines and have 10 now in conversion.”

In an article “An Overview of the Biodynamic Wine Sector” published in the *International Journal of Wine Research (IJWR)* in February 2017, three Italian researchers say there are now 639 certified biodynamic wine-grape farms worldwide, covering about 11,000 hectares (27,182 acres) of vines. Almost half of these are in France, a hotbed of Steiner advocates, with 70 in Italy. In the New World, the US and Chile are the primary



The New Yorker ads for Louis Roederer Champagne mark a turning point for biodynamic wines.

certified producers.

Conversion to biodynamics is a time-consuming, costly process that can take years. It is a form of poly-agriculture involving cover crops and, often, horses for ploughing vineyards and sheep for grazing. Pruning outside and racking inside are done at specific times, not when convenient. Compost must be generated, including the use of specially grown ingredients such as nettles, and from it are made and applied sprays or “teas” to keep vines healthy. In the same *IJWR* article, the authors cite a study that found the rule of thumb that organic growing is typically 10 percent to 15 percent more expensive than standard winegrowing; biodynamic growing adds another 10 percent to 15 percent in costs.

Additionally, weather and disease can overwhelm any protective powers of bio. “We lost about 30,000 bottles due to mildew” in the 2016 vintage, says Daniel Cathiard, co-owner of Château Smith Haut Lafitte, which is selectively biodynamic. Similar crop destruction took place at Château Palmer. Producers who used conventional spraying fared better.

### *Biodynamic and the consumer*

A few pioneers in the US saw bio as not only good farming but also good marketing. The producer Bonterra was one of these, but American writer Steve Heimoff thought it one of the reasons Bonterra lost its independence. In a 2010 blog, he wrote: “I think Bonterra over-played the biodynamic card from a PR point of view. We all admire and respect

biodynamic wineries, but the fact that a winery is biodynamic is way, way down the list of top 10 reasons to buy a wine, except for some of my Berkeley neighbors and there aren’t enough of them to sustain a winery.”

Bob Blue, the founding winemaker at Bonterra, sees that attitude changing, if slowly, much the same way that organic growing was once not part of the sales pitch. “Organic had a bigger, broader group, including outside of grape growing,” he says, “so it had a broader platform. Biodynamics is a conversation we have when calling on a few customers, such as sommeliers and small wine-shop buyers.”

Maddalena Pasqua, proprietor of Musella Winery near Verona, says: “Being able to describe it well is important in order to bring consumers closer to this vision of the world and the practice itself. Simply having the Demeter certification helps the client or consumer understand what standards the wine follows as well as general protocol.”

“We can see right now that the biodynamic story is becoming more and more prominent in two distinct areas,” says Gino Colangelo, whose New York-based Colangelo & Partners represents some bio producers. “One is the new generation of minimal-intervention winemakers in both the Old and New Worlds, and the other is the prestige sector, particularly in categories such as Champagne and Burgundy.” The first group, Colangelo says, has anti-mainstream appeal “written into their DNA”. The second, the luxury market, sees biodynamics offering “a form of differentiation from others – because of the cost and the amount of work required to work on a larger scale – that can be marketed as

'handcrafted' and 'authentic.'

Roederer's Janneau agrees. "The reaction [to the adverts] has been excellent," he says. "It was a risk, mind you, but a worthy challenge." Xavier Barlier, head of the Roederer brand's US marketing and communications, rates the response as being high on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, "appealing to a higher sense of oneself. We want the consumer to feel that Roederer is a good steward in its own vineyards; to think, 'It reinforces my love for the brand.'"

"Knowing about biodynamics is de rigueur in the wine trade and somms are taught it from a young age," says sommelier Jeff Porter, wine director for restaurateur Mario Batali in New York City, noting the subject is taught in WSET and Court of Master Sommeliers classes. A sampling shows many NYC restaurants have biodynamic wines on their lists, although they are not highlighted. "But if a customer is interested, biodynamics has lots of good stories to tell," says Caleb Ganzer, wine director of La Compagnie des Vins Surnaturels.

Joe Campanale, beverage director at Fausto, notes: "In recent years, the producers have got better at what they produce." Neither is sourcing a problem. "We work with many good vendors and importers who have biodynamic wines," says Ortzi beverage manager Kim Milburn.

But while biodynamics is now being embraced by buttoned-down ad executives, corporate grape counters and free-thinking somms, there is little doubt that, for some practitioners of biodynamics, the passion itself is more important than marketing. Greg Moore, raconteur and co-owner of Moore Brothers wine retailers on the East Coast, tells the story from a few years ago of, while visiting Alsace, visiting a remote compost heap with François Barmès of Domaine Barmès-Buecher.

"I asked him why he went to so much trouble – to drive truckloads of tank slurry and vineyard debris up a 3,000ft mountain every spring and mix it there with his friend's biodynamic fumier de vache, only to truck it all back down in the fall to compost one-third of his vines. 'Isn't there plenty of manure in Wettolsheim?' 'Mais c'est l'altitude, mon pauvre Greg,' François replied as if explaining the obvious to a child. 'Up here the cows are a thousand metres closer to the stars!'" ■



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