

Friday, Aug. 14, 2009

The Spiritual Side of Making Wine

Already improved by modern technology, winemaking may now also get a little extra help from reiki, feng shui and biodynamics

By FELICITY HUGHES

Between the cold steel of enormous fermentation tanks and the state-of-the-art equipment in the tasting rooms of today's modern wineries, it's hard to believe that there is any element of the winemaking process that is not governed by the strict dictates of science. So imagine my surprise when, visiting just such a winery in the heart of Spain's Castilla de la Mancha, I found a winemaker using the Japanese technique of reiki to channel positive energy into their wines.

It would be easy to dismiss this as superstitious nonsense, especially considering we were in the heart of Don Quixote country. Up until 1837, when Theodore Schwann discovered that yeasts were necessary to the process of fermentation, winemakers tended to be a superstitious bunch. The yeasts that are necessary to magically transform grape juice into alcoholic wine are naturally present in the air in wine producing regions, but were to all intents and purposes invisible to our forebears.

These yeasts, known as wild or ambient yeasts, come into contact with the sugars in the grapes and convert them to alcohol, heat and carbon dioxide. These days, many wineries add their own yeasts rather than chance the process to wild ambient yeasts, especially in the New World where ambient yeast populations are not yet adequate for the fermentation process.

Modern winemakers fully understand the science behind the alchemy of fermentation and aging, so why would they feel the need to recourse to mysticism to improve their wines?

I asked winemaker Maria Pilar Palomar at Bodegas Palomar Sanchez about her use of reiki. "Reiki is a universal energy, and treatment with reiki may be directed to people, animals, plants, things or



The right energy: Wine from the Bodegas Palomar Sanchez vineyard at Castilla de la Mancha in Spain (above), receives reiki treatment before the fermentation process. FELICITY HUGHES/PALOMAR SANCHEZ



situations. Reiki is the channeling of ki (energy) through a series of techniques using the hands, and that is what we do in the wine cellar. We produce a grape and a wine of high quality and do not use reiki to improve the organic properties of the wine: its aroma, color and flavors. We believe, instead, that reiki harmonizes the wine with the energy of the universe, and when people drink our wine it balances body and mind. We believe that reiki energy flows in nature, and we want our wine to be one of the channels through which people can receive this energy."

Belief that ki, or chi, can enhance the winemaking process can be found elsewhere. Howard Park's Margaret River winery in the southwest of Western Australia was built using feng shui principles. Owner Amy Burch explained why she decided to consult a feng shui expert when building her winery. "I have always subscribed to the premise that if your environment is well thought out in planning, allowing for good spaces for people to enjoy work in, you will find that people are happier. I am of Asian extraction and it seemed a natural way to go to use Asian practical techniques to enhance our building project."

Building principles were used to enhance the flow of chi energy throughout the site. Built 2.5 degrees off magnetic north, the winery is positioned in the most auspicious spot at the highest point of the property. There are a number of smaller details to consider when enhancing the chi of a site: There are no sharp edges and even the number of different colored fish in the pond is an important part of the equation. When asked what positive effect all this had on the wine, Burch's answer was equivocal. "It is hard to judge. If the people in the company are prepared to invest in feng shui principles, then we are open to any aspects that will enhance our production — and that can only be positive."

It's easy to see how winemakers might refuse to be drawn into stating the positive effects spiritual techniques might have on that wine. Spiritual energy is rather hard to quantify and, in my experience, impossible to detect at a tasting. So why use it at all?

Although scientific methods have gone a long way to modernizing and improving today's winemaking, there remains an element of the process that is akin to art. There are a number of decisions that the winemaker has to make on instinct, such as how long a wine ought to be kept in the barrel to age, or what kind of oak to use for the barrels.

Jim Elder, director of marketing at the Sorting Table, a large Californian wine importing and distribution company, is a strong believer in the good instincts of winemakers. "There's science but there's also art to it, no one will ever know the exact truth of whether or not a certain technique is actually doing it.

"Wine is so complex, even if you change just one particular thing, because the weather pattern the next year will be different, you'll never know for sure if it was that one thing that made the wine different. It's a lot like cooking. No one's been able to 'dial it in.' There are a lot of judgment calls that happen."

There is, however, a particular branch of winemaking that claims to have come pretty close to "dialing in" the recipe for success, and that is biodynamics. Despite the technical-sounding name, the biodynamic movement is the nearest thing the wine world has to a religious cult, and feelings run high as to the veracity of its teachings. It's a holistic approach to farming

that has its roots in the spiritual philosophy of anthroposophy and posits that the winemaker should consider the vineyard as a self-nourishing system.

Propounded by theosopher Rudolf Steiner in 1924, anthroposophy was a springboard for the organic movement, stipulating that artificial fertilizers and weed-killers must not be used in the farming process. The dictates of the system are rather strict, for example planting is strictly based on an astronomical calendar. “Things like how many times you should stir your concoction of fertilizer. Sticking ash into the horn of an animal and putting it into an acreage. That’s pretty much superstition, there is no technical proof to any of that. So biodynamics has completely wrapped its arms around the mystical side of winemaking,” says Elder who is a confessed cynic about the biodynamic process.

In contrast, Californian Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon wineries is a proponent of biodynamics and believes that the system has a lot in common with Eastern philosophy. “I’m drawn to the spiritual aspect of it. To try to make a person more present with his grapes, his vines and land, more observant and more intuitive. There is something very Eastern in the whole notion of attempting to make a wine that expresses terroir (sense of place).

“The French make a distinction between a wine of effort and a wine of terroir, the former is where the winemaker is really manipulating the wine to suit his own ends, whereas with a vin de terroir the winemaker is taking a more passive attitude, his presence is more discrete allowing the land or the site to express itself — and that seems very Asian. We are making wines with more life force or chi.”

Grahm believes that the more science intervenes in the winemaking process, the less the natural magic of the vineyard is able to express itself, down to using indigenous and not cultured yeast in the fermentation process. “If you grow the wrong grape in the right place or the right grape in wrong place you are always out of balance and trying to correct yourself, whether having to add acid to the wine or picking too late or adding other things to fix the wine. You’re never quite there.”

Grahm tries to attune himself as much as possible with the rhythms of nature and has used experts in feng shui and geomancy (earth divination) to locate the site for his new winery in San Juan Bautista. “A wine of terroir has this resonance, you can think of it as a vibration or a signal; it has a frequency or pulse. It’s a coherent vibration. What you want to do if you make the most expressive wine is to amplify that signal and how you do this is to create sympathetic vibrations, undertones or overtones.”

In addition to knowing their way around a laboratory, modern winemakers need to possess a certain creativity that enables them to step beyond science and into the individual art of winemaking. But trying to nail this ability down with spirituality and a set of rules may bring the winemaker’s mysterious art back down into the realm of the mundane.