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RESTAURANTS

The Moon Makes the Earth Breathe

"If you're filling the vines with chemicals... they become lazy. They don't explore the soil."

Philippe Coderey was having liver trouble. His doctor thought it might be an effect of alcoholism, but Coderey wasn't an alcoholic. "Finally, we started to talk about what I was doing. Part of my job was to be around chemicals all the time: I was working in France and Switzerland, selling pesticides and other chemicals to vine growers. I poisoned myself; it was some kind of ingestion through the skin." In 1987, he quit his job and moved to Kimberton, Pennsylvania, a hotspot for biodynamic agriculture. Conventional ag had failed him in spectacular fashion; he was curious about the alternatives. Once there, Coderey found plenty of things that aroused his skepticism. But, he says, "I tried to push my scientific mind away from it, and I started seeing things that were really amazing."

A small, but still dramatic, example: composting according to the actions of both lunar and solar forces. "If you want to do compost at the right time, you have to look at the earth" and the things that exert an influence upon it. "The earth is connected to the sun — you can see that by looking at the seasons. In the springtime, it's getting warm, the plants are shooting up, grow-

ing. The earth is 'breathing out' — exhaling, pushing. Things grow."

Then, "In the summer, there's a big change — the plants stop growing and put all their energy into the fruit. Once the fruit is picked and gone, the vines lose their leaf and go into dormancy." At that point, "You've got all this energy which is actually moving toward the center of the earth. The vegetation above the soil dies, but the soil is reawakening. The earth is 'breathing in.' That's the best time to put compost on top of the soil."

A similar sort of breathing out/breathing in effect is brought about by the moon. "The moon has seven cycles. We're using the most important one — ascending (away from the earth) toward the perigee and descending (moving closer to the earth) to the perigee. As the moon ascends, the earth breathes out; as it descends, the earth breathes in. If you put down your compost in the fall, while the moon is descending, the combined influence of the sun and moon will produce dramatic results. After two weeks, your compost is gone. It's not there anymore. You don't need to plow it in; it's been sucked in by the earth, by the soil. It gets into the soil on its own, because you're

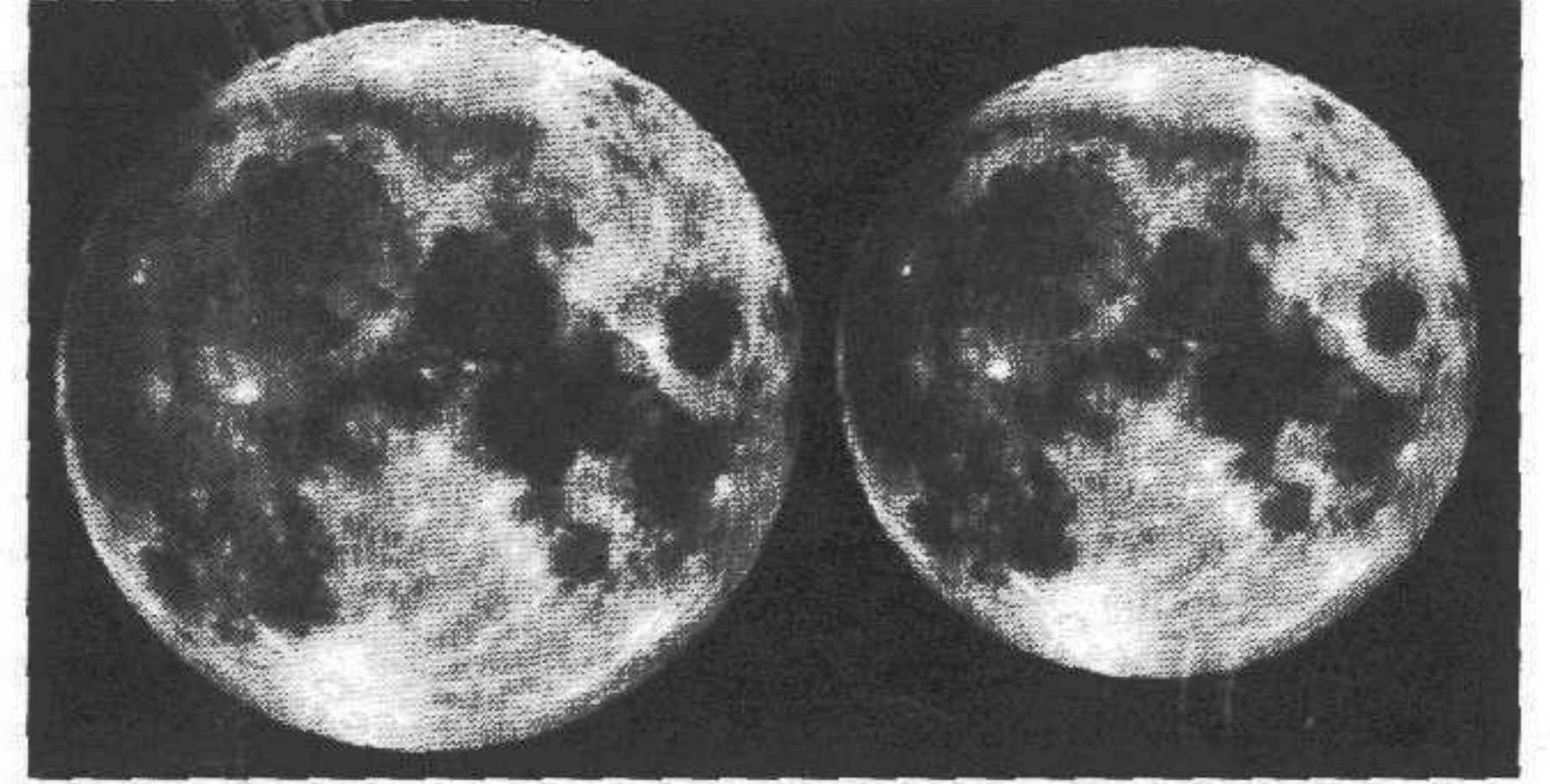
Crush
MATTHEW LICKONA

using a natural cycle."

The visit to Kimberton was supposed to be just that, "But I stayed for eight or nine years. I went through a serious training, and I took over the vineyard and the orchard." At the end of his sojourn, he returned to France, there to work for the (biodynamic) Chapoutier winery in the Rhone. That job lasted until three years ago, when Randall Grahm & Co. at Bonny Doon lured him back across the Atlantic to serve as the winery's director of viticulture.

Grahm has made a Holy Grail out of making wines that exhibit true terroir — a sense of place, one that starts with the soil. It's a quest that has taken its toll; Grahm once told wine writer Natalie MacLean that "French wines rock — they have soul. New World wines are all a façade." "Even yours?" asked MacLean. "Ours," replied Grahm, "are... genuine plywood veneer. ... New World wines, including mine, are trivial, they're banal. True terroir wines are leaner and more subtle, and they allow mineral flavors to seep through. I suspect we might have terroir in California, but I don't know where."

Coderey tends to agree. "Most of the conventional wines are fruity. You can feel the fruit, and then, after that, whatever the consumer likes — usually oak and tannins." (Read: stuff added in the winemaking process.) "There is nothing behind the fruit. Why? Because there is nothing in the wine to balance that. If there is no absorption of minerals from the soil, there is no complexity." And why is there no absorption of minerals from the soil? "If you're filling the vines



The moon at perigee and apogee

with chemicals and watering them, they become lazy. They don't explore the soil; they don't grow roots. You get gigantic vines which are very susceptible to disease." The biodynamic winemaker, who eschews chemical fertilizers and tries to avoid irrigating, "is training his vines to go deep into the soil."

And when vines have to go digging in the dirt, he says, "They transform the soil according to their needs. The plant does not pump or suck minerals from the soil. It's the conventional approach that tells you, 'The plants need nitrogen, so we'll put some nitrogen in the soil.' That's a very poor approach to nature. Around the roots, you've got a thin area that is made of bacteria and a bunch of other little creatures, which are actually transforming the soil, making the nutrients the plant needs available to the plant. And the longer a plant lives, the more it will transform the soil." And once that happens, "You will find inside the bottle of wine the minerality that gives the wine complexity. You're tasting not only the fruits, but also the soil." Terroir.

Hearing this, it's no wonder Grahm brought Coderey in to "train the vine growers" that fur-

finished Bonny Doon with grapes in biodynamic practices — after he convinced them it was worth doing in the first place. “That’s the most difficult thing — to make sense of it for them. When you’ve got a pest in your vineyard, you buy some poison, you spray the poison, and the pest dies. That makes a lot of sense. But the biodynamic approach is totally different; you’re trying to reestablish a natural balance in the vineyard.” Trying, for example, to establish systemic models that promote plant health, as opposed to chemical interventions; the idea being that if the soil is healthy, and if the plant is allowed to function according to its own internal rhythms, it will be less susceptible to both pests and disease — and will produce better fruit to boot.

By the time Coderey finished his pitch, the vineyard manager was willing. The vines were a little more hesitant. “The first year, the vineyards are going to be very stressed. It’s like if you have somebody who drinks 30 beers a day, and one day you tell him, ‘No more.’ He’s going to be shaky for a while.”

That was the case with the Gimelli Vineyard in San Benito County, the primary source for Bonny Doon’s 2005 Ca’ del Solo Sangiovese — which, as it happens, was the wine that first got me curious about biodynamics in the vineyard. It displayed something of the minerality Coderey mentioned, and a more layered character than most domestic Sangioveses I’d tasted. But the word that kept running through my

head was “clean.” The wine had a clarity on the palate that caught my attention. I won’t discount the power of suggestion — I’d read about the Bonny Doon biodynamic project before tasting the wine — but subsequent bottles have seemed to substantiate my initial experience.

And while we’re on the subject of clarity, it’s worth mentioning Bonny Doon’s “commitment...to the great virtue of transparency” (here I’m quoting the label), as manifested by the label’s graphic: a “sensitive crystallization” of the wine that manifests “a wine’s organizing forces.” It’s another target for the skeptic, but Coderey doesn’t shy away from the topic. “What you’re looking at is a petri dish, 90mm wide. You mix some wine, some purified water, and some copper chloride solution. You put the petri dish in a dehydration chamber — it’s on shock absorbers, because you don’t want any vibration. You raise the temperature to about 95 degrees, the water evaporates, and the crystals form. It takes about ten hours.”

And what does it mean? “You get three zones. The center is connected to the fruit itself — the bigger the center, the more fruity the wine. And the more centered the center, the more balanced the wine is. Then you’ve got the peripheral zone, which indicates the minerality of the wine. It should be very well defined. If it’s not, it’s because the wine doesn’t have any minerals.” Between the two, there’s the median zone, which “indicates vegetal and floral character. You want a bal-

ance between these three zones.” On top of that, there are two layers of crystallization, one spreading from the central point, and one feathering out above that. “The first, we call the life forces; that’s your indication of how powerful the wine is. The second we call the organizing forces. The more organized the wine, the more mineral it is. The crystallization is going to give you lots of indications about the wines and, therefore, about the vines and, therefore, about the soil. Everything is connected.” ■