



## Smile | if you think saving the planet's funny

In Biodynamic Vino Veritas

It's a lovely vintage, with nutty undertones and hints of yarrow that's been stored in a stag's bladder

By Joel Stein

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AFTER A FEW LONG MINUTES of silence, my wife, Cassandra, looked away and said, "I saw the quotes you were writing. You're going to make fun of them." I should have known that reporting about biodynamic wine would cause a fight. Yes, we were spending a romantic three days in Napa Valley, but Cassandra takes herbal supplements, sees a chiropractor, and drinks kombucha tea. I, on the other hand, make fun of her for those things. So entering the debate between science and New Age was a bad call on a trip that required drinking all day.



I got curious about biodynamic wines after I noticed the word on the labels of bottles--particularly French ones--that I'd bought. I figured the word just means "superorganic." Which is kind of true. Biodynamic agriculture is really, really natural. Lots of composting and caring for the soil and conservation. And it demands that a farm be nearly self-sufficient: Biodynamic wineries grow vegetables, often run on solar energy, and raise animals so they can graze between rows and provide fertilizer. As winemaker Steven Canter said to me at his Quivira Vineyards, just over a bridge separating his spread from the rest of Healdsburg, California, "You can bomb that bridge tomorrow, and we'd be fine."

Before I continue--to keep things cool with Cassandra--I want to state that Canter is a smart man who makes some of the most distinctive and restrained American wine I've ever had for a reasonable price. But he does have a box on a rafter to attract bats and uses their guano for fertilizer. And, as per biodynamic rules, he considers the astrological calendar before tilling. He's building a fountain to swirl water into vortices to improve its energy before irrigation. And every autumn Canter packs a bull's horn with green manure, buries it underground until spring, and then mixes it with 50 gallons of water that he spreads on his vines. This special mixture has so little manure in it that it's chemically just water. "You can imprint information on water," he explains. Canter, needless to say, does not inoculate his children.

Besides being superorganic, biodynamic farming means following the teachings of Rudolf Steiner, a turn-of-the-last-century Austrian philosopher who also invented Waldorf schools and disciplines known as eurythmy and anthroposophy, which, I'm guessing, Cassandra would like too. Besides the horn burying (not just manure in the autumn, but also silica crystals in the spring), Steiner advised making herbal teas to pour on your plants, like the ones health stores tell you to drink when you're sick: chamomile (stored in a cow's intestine), yarrow (kept in a stag's bladder), and oak bark (kept in the skull of any domestic animal), as well as dandelion (kept in a cow's mesentery), valerian, nettle, and horsetail (which can be stored, conveniently, in plastic bags). If you're too busy to do all the ceremonies and preparations--and most winemakers are--you can order finished versions (at surprisingly reasonable prices) from the

Josephine Porter Institute for Applied Biodynamics in Woolwine, Virginia. You can also buy a T-shirt that says "Compost Happens."

To further undermine my planned mockery of Cassandra, the biodynamic winemakers I met were not people who seemed as if they'd been growing pot (and dreadlocks) before grapes became the trendier crop. Demeter, an international certification organization, has qualified more than 50 biodynamic wines in California, including those from some famous estates: Bonny Doon, Bonterra, Fetzer, Benziger, Porter Creek, and Grgich Hills.

"One of the reasons you've seen an explosion of biodynamic--other than the fact that it sounds sexy with a French accent--is George Bush and the USDA really diluted organic farming," says Phil Coturri. While Coturri looks like a hippie with his torn, stained shirt, beard, and ponytail (and he is one--as a young man he worked on the commune that is now Moon Mountain, an organic vineyard he consults at), he works for lots of big-name wineries including Arrowood. "Richard Arrowood is a good friend of Rush Limbaugh--a total card-carrying GOP member--and he wants organic fruit because the flavors are so much more exact. He's a chemist. To get him to stop spraying Roundup was a big deal," Coturri says. "Give me a few years, and I'll convince him to go biodynamic."

If ever I was persuaded, just for a moment, of the efficacy of Steiner's New Age nonsense, it happened when I was talking to Ivo Jeramaz, the vice president of vineyards and production at Grgich Hills. Grgich is one of the most famous vineyards in Napa--winemaker Mike Grgich's Chateau Montelena chardonnay beat French white burgundies in the famous 1976 Paris wine tasting. And Jeramaz looks far less like a hippie than a guy who might beat one up: Wearing a button-down shirt and a big silver watch, he's a thick-accented Croatian with a master's in mechanical engineering. But he does keep a shed full of cow horns, chamomile, and nettle. "I'm the last person to embrace voodoo," he says. "But intentions are as important as spraying. I believe that strongly." Grgich Hills dry-farms--which means that unlike everyone else, the winery doesn't irrigate its vines after they reach maturity, three years after planting. Grgich uses less than three tons of compost per acre, whereas most organic farms use more than ten. Jeramaz doesn't add yeast to the juice, instead letting whatever wafts into his vineyard take hold. "A vineyard that was dying--50-year-old vines, we could not ripen grapes--now that we went to biodynamic, it makes our best cabernet, \$135 a bottle."

So, look, I'm not a farmer. And I'm not a scientist. But I'm a pretty good husband, and an even better wine drinker. And if following some Austrian New Age philosopher forces farmers to pay a lot of attention to their crops and make wine that tastes more distinctive than the big, fruity California stuff, I'll put aside my skepticism and drink up. After all, people always say the best fertilizer is the footsteps of the farmer. Even if that farmer seems a little nuts.

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