

**Biodynamics: Viticulture “Voodoo”
That May Affect Your Next Glass of Wine?**
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During the Fall 2008 semester, I had the opportunity to take my Wines of California class to Lake County and tour four wineries. The Lake County Winegrape Commission (<http://www.lakecountywinegrape.org>) was very generous in arranging the tour for 25 students and even provided a complimentary lunch for our group. The highlight of the trip was our stop at Ceago (<http://www.ceago.com/>), owned and operated by Jim Fetzer, one of ten sons and daughters of the Fetzer family. Jim provided a personal tour throughout his lavish Tuscan-style complex and villa. We saw lavender and herb gardens, sheep, chickens, a dock on the lake where seaplanes could land, a dramatic wine tasting room complete with meeting space and an attached gourmet-style deli..

A unique part of the two-hour tour included Jim Fetzer’s explanation of their “biodynamic”, philosophy, a buzzword in the wine industry these days. We were escorted into a large tower on the property where the compost material that is used in the vineyard and gardens is produced. He explained the process of Biodynamics as is stated on their website as “a proactive approach to farming that looks at the individuality of each property and adds back with natural plant and animal life to emulate nature and create a self-sustainable environment.” Specifically, there are many influences on the vineyard and everything else that determines the growth of grapes. These include crop rotations, compost production, sprays and soil and animal practices. He pointed out that this goes beyond what we normally perceive to be “organic” farming. I think of organic food as food items that have not been subjected to pesticides, artificial fertilizers, antibiotics, growth hormones, additives, or genetically modified. Piecing the bio-dynamic part of the Ceago package together, the class was told that the “vinegarden” includes wild turkeys, birds, native bees, butterflies, fig trees, walnut trees, lavender fields, blue agaves, Italian cypress trees, and olive trees. The animals and the plants live in a synergy that supports each other. Fetzer uses the example:

“Cover Crops are beneficial plants intermingled among the vine rows to store nutrients like nitrogen. They also stabilize soil during heavy rains and hold moisture during drought periods and provide forage for the animal life at Ceago. Crop rotation provides soil enrichment, natural habitat, encourages beneficial insects while reducing soil compaction and recycling plant nutrients into our soils.”

The sheep control the weeds, produce manure that goes back into the garden and the vineyards. The sheep also supply meat and wool. The chickens control cutworms that feed on vine roots, but also supply eggs for the staff that work at the “vinegarden”.

As part of the tour, we were told about “homeopathic teas” that were used in Biodynamic farming. These are not the healing teas that one would put in a teacup in the morning. One of my students, a retired oral surgeon, raised his eyebrows with skepticism as Jim told us about horn manure and horn silica as being part of two homeopathic preparations.

Stuffing sheep manure into a cow’s horn in the Fall and burying it until Spring makes horn manure. According to Fetzer, the manure must be placed in the horn, the same day it is produced. After it’s buried, the manure is removed and stirred with water

creating microorganism growth. The water is then spread over the vineyard to improve the quality of the vine growth.

Packing a cow horn with ground quartz in the Spring for six months produces the horn silica "tea". It is then uncovered and then mixed with water as a spray that promotes photosynthesis. The quartz allows for enhanced light refraction. The ultimate goal is improvement in the color and flavor of the grapes. Placing quartz or manure in a cow horn seemed oddly ritualistic to my students. According to Biodynamic farmers in Australia, "The cow horn preparation preserved Sun forces that work through the planets nearer the Sun, causing germination, root development and plant growth. The spiral stirring is of significance as it echoes the rhythmic and spiraling nature of all life. Vortexing stirring in one direction echoes the 'Winter Sun' while the other direction relates to the 'Winter Sun'"(<http://www.aracaria.com.au/preparations/500.shtml>). If this sounds a little esoteric, you are probably right.

Biodynamic farming has its roots in the work of 20th century philosopher, Rudolph Steiner. When I was a Philosophy major in Canada, I recall asking my professors about Steiner on several occasions. Since many viewed him as being on the fringe of traditional philosophy, they never wanted to speak of him. A recent article in the SF weekly.com (<http://www.sfweekly.com/>) titled "Voodoo on the Vine" described Steiner as "a self-professed clairvoyant and occult philosopher from Austria who conceived of Biodynamics during his telepathic visits to the realm of spirits he claimed existed "behind" our material world." When Jim Fetzer mentioned Rudolph Steiner, bells started ringing that I had not heard in years. According to the SF Weekly article, most Biodynamic winemakers stay away from cow horns and Steiner's interest in spirit beings in the earth and air. Steiner believed that Gnomes assisted in pushing plants upward, actual beings, not the porcelain variety that can be found in some gardens and tourist gift shops.

Whether the focus is simply marketing, improved viticulture, or the spirits affecting the quality of vines and wines, there are now over 100 certified Biodynamic growers, including winemakers in the United States. Certification is done by only one company, Demeter USA (<http://www.demeter-usa.org/>). They implement and train organizations on the agricultural teachings of Rudolph Steiner. Biodynamics is becoming the "Rolls Royce of organic farming". Perhaps in my next wine class, I will compare and blind taste two Cabernet Sauvignons, one that is Biodynamically produced and one that is not. We will see who can determine the influence of Biodynamics on overall quality

For more information on this topic, I would recommend these resources:

<http://www.organicwinejournal.com/index.php/2008/03/demeter-demystified/>

http://www.rudolfsteinerweb.com/Rudolf_Steiner_and_Anthroposophy.php

<http://www.sfweekly.com/2008-11-19/news/voodoo-on-the-vine/>

http://www.winereviewonline.com/Elin_McCoy_on_Going_Green.cfm