

Doing What Comes Naturally

What “Going Organic” Means for Wine by Jennifer Rosen

Like mothers offering the breast after a half-century of formula, winemakers are waking up to nature; discovering the advantages of returning earth to its full and upright position.

Some went green to return bugs and butterflies to the desiccated family patch. Some were ill from inhaling pesticides. Still others started vineyards from scratch with a plan for sustainability. All report improved flavors and personality in the resulting wine.

But there are many shades of green. What do the labels really tell you?

Organic grapes must be grown with no chemical pesticides or fertilizers. Growers often plant cover crops between vine rows to conserve water and add nutrients to the soil. They might be grains, salad greens for the table or flowers that attract helpful bugs. Synthetic pheromones foil enemy insects by jamming their reproductive signals. In place of regular sweeps of the crop duster, natural fungicides are used sparingly, only where needed.

100% Organic takes the chemicals out of the winery as well as the vineyard. Unfortunately, it's almost impossible to stabilize wine without adding sulfites, and there's little reason to try: they're not responsible for the headaches that consumers pin on them and, added or not, they're present in some amount in every wine.

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Biodynamic is one part viticulture, two parts rhythm of the cosmos. Based on the anthroposophy teachings of Rudolph Steiner in 1928, bio employs a lunar calendar to determine auspicious days for planting and tending vines. The farm is considered a self-sustaining system, where animals and their manure play an important role. Special teas, mystical preparations of crushed quartz buried in a cow's horn, for one, and yarrow heads fermented in a stag's bladder, are applied to the vineyards in minute amounts, in the homeopathic hope that they will heal themselves.

Proponents range from Nicolas Joly, of the Loire Valley, who sees “enormous wisdom” and “life forces” in the shape of a barrel, although he's switching to amphorae because “clay can cure; it is strongly linked to the sun,” to Michel Chapoutier of the Rhône who embraces

the bio ethos, but thinks following all the details gets a bit silly. At any rate, many prominent wineries, notably in Alsace and Burgundy, have jumped on board and are producing excellent wine. Go figure.

Going native isn't easy. Europe and California battle fungi and pests that cede only to copper spray. Not on the organic menu. European mad-cow ministers have slapped a ban on the bovine body parts, so important to bio preparations.

In spite of the obstacles, the movement gains momentum. According to the California Certified Organic Farmers, about 2 percent, or 8,000 acres, of California vineyards are certified as organic today, which is double the number compared with 10 years ago. Wineries eradicating chemical use include such behemoths as Fetzer (whose former president Paul Dolan went organic 20 years ago), Clos du Bois and Benziger (who is also going biodynamic).

Chile and Argentina have it easier. Their only bugaboo, the nematode, found its match in new, resistant rootstocks. Phyloxera, mother of all pests, is foiled there by regular vineyard flooding, a total no-no in Europe. (Acquiring red deer bladders and yarrow, neither native to South America, took a bit of work.)

How do consumers feel about green wine? Europeans, who protest genetic engineering and snap up “natural” products from shampoo to diapers, apparently will pay a premium to save the earth.

Australians seem neutral. Although organic is a growing force in fruit, vegetables and meat, the demand has not extended to wine, according to Margaret Lehmann of Peter Lehmann winery. “The consumer does not seem to be agitating in this direction,” she admits.

As for Americans, Whole Foods reports warm reception, even requests for organic and sustainable wines. But to customers of mainstream retailers, “organic wine,” still smacks of something made from peaches and filtered through a bong.

But since many vineyards have gone this route without bothering to jump through the hoops that certification requires, we can sip away happily, not knowing we're part of a revolution.





It's Getting Easier, Being Green

More and More Wineries Jumping on the Biodynamic Bandwagon

By Kristen Wolfe Bieler

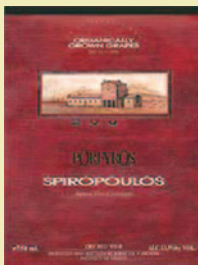
The appeal of organic and biodynamic wines isn't only motivated by health or environmental concerns. A growing number of winemakers are employing these methods – and wine drinkers are increasingly seeking out their wines – because they are more authentic expressions of terroir.

True, a lot of technological improvements in the last 30 years have helped eradicate bad wine around the world, but they have also worked to standardize wines, creating an monolithic international style. When wineries eliminate the chemicals, the additives and various other forms of overt manipulation that the biodynamic philosophy prohibits, they end up crafting wines that reflect the place from which they are from, which is, after all, one of the most important benchmarks of greatness for any wine. The whole point of the biodynamic movement – to work in tandem with a vineyard's surrounding environment and encouraging soil to return to its natural state – enables terroir to shine through with crystal clarity.

Never was this more evident than at a Biodynamic tasting in New York in June (“Toward a Renaissance of Terroir Wines”), the first of its kind in the U.S., where bio-

dynamic producers from around the world showcased a vast array of wines. Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of the tasting was just how distinct each wine was.

In his seminar during the event, Nicolas Joly, the famed winemaker at Loire Valley's Coulée de Serrant, who is also revered as one of the most enthusiastic proponents of the biodynamic movement, mentioned increasing consumer pull as one of the most compelling reasons to go bio. “More and more talented winegrowers are converting to biodynamics because of its results,” he said. “They also do so because more and more consumers are beginning to realize that modern technological wines taste the same anywhere on the planet and, depending on where the wine comes from, the same taste can be found for a fraction of the usual price. For once, the laws of economics go in the direction of truth.”



Domaine Spiropoulos Porfyros 2000

From one of Greece's most progressive producers. Made from a blend of Agiorgitiko, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, it is a rich, full wine with spice and firm tannins; a big wine that is balanced and round.

Suggested retail price: \$16
Available through **Athenee Imports; 516-505-4800**



Joms Meyer Riesling 'Le Dragon'

This esteemed Alsatian producer has been biodynamic since 2000. A fresh wine with aromas of lemon, citrus and peaches. Rich and dense, it drinks beautifully now and will age nicely as well. **Suggested retail price: \$34** Available through **Paterno Imports; 847-604-8900**

Ceàgo "Kathleen's Vineyard" Sauvignon Blanc 2003

Jim Fetzer's latest small-



production project, which has been This wine is rich in aromas of apricots, lemons and tropical fruits with lively acidity.

Suggested retail price: \$16
Available through **Ceàgo Vinegarden; 707-485-6061**



Descendientes de J. Palacios Villa de Corullón 2001

From a relatively unknown region in Northwest Spain, el Bierzo, Palacois works with the historical varietal, Mencía. Everything is hand-harvested and the vineyards are worked by mules.

A deep, dense wine outstanding wine. Only 660 cases made. **Suggested retail price: \$55** Available through **Rare Wine Company Imports; 800-999-4342**



Michel Chapoutier Ermitage "Le Pavillon" 2001

It would be difficult to find a man more obsessed with soil that Michel Chapoutier. Le Pavillon is a concentrated, cherry wine with smoky, meaty tobacco nose. Raspberries, blackberries and licorice on the palate. A round, elegant wine that is drinking well now and will continue to develop for years. **Suggested retail price: \$253** Available through **Paterno Imports; 847-604-8900**



Domaine Leflaive Meursault 1er Cru

Anne-Claude Leflaive is responsible for taking this famed white Burgundy winery entirely biodynamic in 1990. Each of the producer's 38 parcels is treated independently since, and the resulting wines have been exceptional. Ripe fruit with sharp mineral notes and subtle vanilla flavors.

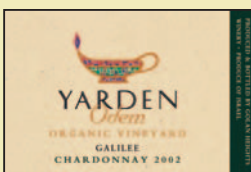
Suggested retail price: \$120 Available through **Wilson Daniels; 707-963-9661**



Domaine Zind Humbrecht "Zind" 2001

An intriguing blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc and Auxerois, this zesty wine perfectly balances 9 grams of residual sugar with vibrant acidity. Humbrecht happens to believe that Alsace is great terroir for Chardonnay, although including it in his blend renders him unable to call it a Pinot d'Alsace.

Suggested retail price: \$29 Available through **Kermit Lynch; 510-524-1524**



Yarden Chardonnay Odem Organic Vineyard 2002 (Israel)

Lush and full-bodied with rich, ripe fruit and spice. **Suggested retail price: \$17** Available through **Yarden Wines, USA**



Céago Vineyards and winery; Jim Fetzer



True, these wines do tend to be more expensive than many mass-produced commercial wines, but the "value-added" is a premium more and more consumers highly value. "In today's market it can be difficult to add a premium for organic/biodynamic," says Jim Fetzer, who recently began producing biodynamic wines under the Ceago label in Mendocino after his non-compete clause with Fetzer expired. "However, we feel that by farming using the biodynamic methods and controlling the crop level, we can achieve the highest quality standards that allow us to price our wines in a profitable range. I think it would be a very big challenge to compete at the lower level of the price range." That said, Ceàgo wines all retail for under \$30, some of the most affordable in this category. Fetzer has noticed that the fruit expression of his grapes is much more intense since going bio, and the wines are naturally more balanced, so there is no need for extra tinkering in the winery. He also believes that the wines have a longer shelf life once opened.

Of course, all the observations of all biodynamic winemakers have yet to be scientifically proven, but then again, wasn't it science that took the romance out of wine in the first place?