

# RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL

## Romancing the vine

Vino-voodoo or not, devotees say biodynamic wines are better

[Johnathan L. Wright](#)

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With his strong features and silvery sweep of leonine locks, Jim Fetzer looks more than a little like the cinematic version of an Old Testament prophet.

Which is entirely appropriate, when you think about it, because Fetzer is one of the leading prophets of biodynamic farming, a set of agricultural practices increasingly considered or adopted by vintners like Fetzer, a member of the Fetzer wine clan and the owner of Ceàgo Estate Wines.

“Biodynamic farming moves beyond organic farming and the prohibition on the use of chemical pesticides,” Fetzer explained. “It’s a way of managing your resources to produce the best grapes possible.”

Biodynamic wine makers try to farm in ways that nourish, sustain and replenish these resources. At Fetzer’s vineyards in California’s Lake and Mendocino counties, for instance, cover crops that meander among the vine rows help stabilize the soil and store moisture and nutrients. These cover crops and weeds provide forage for sheep whose manure, in turn, is used to make vine compost. Chickens that also wander throughout the vineyards supply eggs and eat cutworms that attack vine roots.

Biodynamic vintners also employ more esoteric agricultural strategies. They make crop sprays from silica- and manure-filled cow horns that are buried and later disinterred according to the seasonal equinoxes. The horn, as Fetzer put it, “is the shape that most connects things in the cosmos,” and biodynamic cultivation is therefore timed to celestial events because of this interconnectedness.

### Is it sound science?

Some observers dismiss all this as nothing more than agro-voodoo. But Fetzer and other bio-adherents respond that such methods, while unusual, do have a practical purpose.

“The silica spray of ground up quartz is billions of little prisms that direct light to the vine and enhance photosynthesis,” said Josh Metz, who works with Fetzer as part of his doctoral studies in environmental science at the University of California at Santa Barbara. “With the spray, we can grow a healthier grape.”

Likewise, Metz said, the manure spray is “an organic nutrient tea filled with beneficial micro-organisms. The spray inoculates and builds life in the soil.”

Still, biodynamic wine makers said, it would be wrong to focus narrowly on cow horns or sidereal fireworks. Biodynamics, they said, encourages responsible, sustainable farming, which leads to better grapes, which leads to wines that best express the character of the soil they arise from. Fetzer and others acknowledged that the biodynamic creed requires a measure of pure, unreasoning belief, but then again, what creed doesn’t?



Provided by Ceago Estate Wines Provided by Ceago Estate Wines

TENDER LOVING CARE: Katrina Fetzer of Ceago Estate Wines ties biodynamically nurtured grape vines with tule, a kind of cattail reed once used by California’s Pomo Indians as a building material.

Details

Other California biodynamic wines

- o 2002 Benziger Estate Sauvignon Blanc
- o 2000 Benziger Estate Zinfandel
- o 2000 Sinsky Vineyards Merlot

Where to buy Ceàgo biodynamic wines

Reno:

- o Beaujolais Bistro, 130 West St. 323-2227
- o 4th St. Bistro, 3065 W. 4th St., 323-3200
- o Nothing to It! Culinary Center, 225 Crummer Lane, 826-2628

o Whispering Vine Wine Co., 3886 Mayberry Drive, 787-9463

o Wild Oats Market, 5695 S. Virginia St., 829-8666

Lake Tahoe:

o Incline Village, Village Market, 770 Mays Blvd., 831-5025

o Crystal Bay, Crystal Bay Club, 14 Highway 28, 831-0512

All about biodynamic certification

o [www.demeterusa.org](http://www.demeterusa.org)

Staff and wire reports

## **European origins**

Biodynamics is based on the work of Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian philosopher and scientist who died in 1925. A fundamental concept biodynamics takes from Steiner is that the land is a living organism, an idea that many scientists reject.

“Soil is made up of mineral particles that have living organisms in them,” said Grant Cramer, a biochemistry professor who directs the University of Nevada, Reno’s grape research program. “But soil itself is not a living organism as we define it in science. What I see being presented about biodynamics has not been subjected to scientific study and published in scientific journals,” a point that biodynamic enthusiasts concede.

Still, Cramer added, biodynamic practices like cover crops and pest management programs are an accepted and important aspect of general agriculture.

Biodynamics first gained acceptance in Europe, and some of the continent’s greatest wine houses, including Romanée-Conti and Domaine Leflaive in France, are practitioners. By next year, about 20 U.S. wine producers are expected to be certified biodynamic by Demeter, the international association that maintains biodynamic standards. This small number is misleading, however. True biodynamic believers form the leading edge of a trend toward less invasive, less chemically oriented wine making.

“Even if they’re not biodynamic, growers are ready for healthier, more environmentally sound and more responsible agriculture,” said Katrina Fetzer, Jim Fetzer’s daughter and Ceago’s director of sales and marketing.

## **Winemaking trend**

In California, certified organic acreage devoted to wine grapes doubled in the past five years, and about one-third of California’s grape growers have begun experimenting with reducing chemical use and other methods of “sustainable” agriculture. Other producers may be testing organics or biodynamics on the down-low because organic wines enjoy a widespread reputation for tasting atrocious. And taste, Katrina Fetzer emphasized, is what ultimately matters.

“We can’t sell the wine based solely on biodynamic grapes. We have to sell the wine on its quality.”

Wine making has always been a confluence of art and science, hope and faith. It’s a truism that biodynamic grape growers bring into relief because of their easy mixing of modern agriculture and ancient belief. But if Ceago’s 2000 merlot and 2002 sauvignon blanc are any indication — both have uncommonly bright, balanced and well-articulated flavors — then the Fetzers have been more than justified in making their biodynamic leap of faith.