

Biodynamos
Cutting-edge vintners put their wines to a taste test

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New York -- I had read about them, but I wanted to see them in person. So I went to New York and watched the vaunted lineup in action -- one all-star after another stepping up and pouring it on, dwarfing the pitchers, delighting the crowds, drawing oohs and aahs with every slug.

Jeter, Giambi and A-Rod? Try Araujo, Benziger and Sinskey.

The pitchers were spit buckets, the slugs were wines and the crowd was New York sommeliers, wine sellers and wine critics. The event was the American premiere of a whole new league in the wine game -- a league in which the players don't use chemicals to artificially enhance their performance. They play clean and train hard all year. They are rivals yet also peers who share the same sacrifices, commitment and nuances. Like all-stars in any league, their motivation is on another plane. They're playing in public for paying customers, but they're driven by something deep inside.

So who are they? They are estate winegrowers inspired by the principles of biodynamic agriculture. In New York on June 14 there were 74 of them, from Europe and America as well as Australia, Chile and New Zealand, pouring their wines and talking about their passion. Never before had so many biodynamic producers come together in this country, on so public a stage. Ardent fans were impressed anew, while hardened skeptics softened and gimlet-eyed wine buyers who dropped in for a quick look wound up staying for hours.

Many of the 500 attendees came to the event at the Metropolitan Pavilion in New York for the rare opportunity to taste such famous French wines as Champagne Fleury, Domaine de la Coulee de Serrant, Domaine Leflaive, Domaine Leroy, Domaine Marcel Deiss and Maison M. Chapoutier.

A few attendees admitted that they came for a free taste of Spain's Dominio Pingus, which retails in this country for \$400 a bottle. What made people stick around was that dozens of lesser-known producers were pouring outstanding wines as well. Marc Tempe's 2000 Mambourg Grand Cru Gewurztraminer, Domaine Cazes' 2001 Trilogy Cotes du Roussillon Village and Weingut Sander's 2003 Mettenheimer Riesling Spatlese were among the top wines I've tasted this year. Wine after wine made a statement.

This was certainly true of the American lineup, which included the 2001 Araujo Estate Eisele Vineyard Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, the inaugural release of Benziger Family Winery's new 2001 Tribute Bordeaux-style red blend from Sonoma Mountain, Robert Sinskey Vineyards' 2000 "Four Vineyards" Carneros Pinot Noir, the 2003 Ceago Vinegarden Jeriko Vineyard Chardonnay from Mendocino County viticultural pioneer Jim Fetzer and the 2003 Patianna Mendocino County Sauvignon Blanc, the first release from a new winery launched this year by his sister, Patti Fetzer Burke.

Forward flavors

These are distinctly different wines from distinctly different regions, but on June 14 some fascinating parallels became apparent. First was the immediacy of the flavors. This sounds like a fine distinction but it really stands out when you taste professionally. There was no moment of hesitation, wondering what descriptors I would use to remember these wines. They logged themselves in, you might say.

Another quality the wines all shared was their balance. It's possible to balance wines in the cellar by adding acid, sugar, or wine from other places, but those tricks don't apply with the kind of noninterventionist, estate-grown wines that biodynamic producers make. These wines came by their poise in the vineyard -- it was a pleasure just to have them occupy my mouth.

But the most striking thing about the California wines was who was pouring them. Normally when there's a large trade tasting in a city far from Wine Country, the people with their names on the label stay home. They get their distributors or sales people to stand up for eight hours, talking to strangers and reciting the names of the same wines over and over.

Not this time.

There was Mike Benziger pouring the Tribute blend, a big, silky red with a great future ahead of it. There was Rob Sinskey with his lovely, supple Pinot Noirs. **There was Jim Fetzer, sampling his lushly tropical Ceago Chardonnay.** There were both Bart and Daphne Araujo pouring their cult Cabernet. There was Doug Tunnell pouring his complex, spicy Brick House wines from Willamette Valley, Ore. There were three members of the Coturri family pouring their mouth-filling Sonoma Valley wines. It really was like the Yankees, with more big bats in one inning than some teams have in a whole game.

"I haven't been at a tasting this exciting in a long time," Benziger said as people thronged around him. "We're seeing people in one day that it takes a year to see individually, and the level of interaction is way higher than usual -- everyone is talking about what they're tasting, comparing notes, making connections."

Taste will tell

Some of New York's top auctioneers, retailers and sommeliers made the scene, and hours later they were still energized. After the tasting that evening, Michael Greenlee, wine director at the Gotham Bar & Grill in New York, lingered in his packed dining room for long minutes to talk about what he had tasted.

"You have to take it seriously when so many important producers come this far to show off so many unique, individual wines," he said. "We sell food and wine, not philosophy, so something like biodynamics has to make a difference in the glass or we don't really care about it. What happened today got people talking."

Biodynamic viticulture has been compared to many things. Writing about the June 14 event, the wine critic for a certain large-circulation daily paper in New York trotted out the old metaphor of biodynamics as homeopathy for vines. With all due respect, that's just way too wimpy. Biodynamics is the aikido or ashtanga yoga of winegrowing -- a way to focus energy and awareness for peak performance and exceptional health. Sick vineyards need homeopathy; biodynamic vineyards radiate a vigor that can be felt. Like Barry Bonds turning a 100-mph fastball into a soaring arc headed for McCovey Cove, biodynamic vineyards are completely aligned with their purpose, and therefore able to channel all the forces of the moment into a powerful result.

Based on tradition

Most people in the wine business like to talk about the more unusual practices of biodynamics, such as packing cow horns with ground quartz and burying them in the vineyard for half a year. This focus on a few details -- usually way out of context -- seems intended to marginalize the whole enterprise. It's also an avoidance of biodynamics' logic and rigor. Perhaps we should expect this when the industry keeps using pieces of tree bark to close a luxury product. Scientific research says corks are an unnecessary failure at preserving wine, yet most vintners stick with them because of "tradition." You would think they would embrace biodynamics, which rests on traditions that science has never disproved (and may ultimately support).

In reality, biodynamics requires a fairly hard-headed approach to agriculture. Champagne producer Jean-Pierre Fleury once said that biodynamics increased his workload about 30 percent compared to conventional viticulture. Much of that increase, he said, was in planning, organizing and preparing precisely calibrated natural treatments for his vineyards. Quick fixes from synthetic chemicals are not allowed, so growers must keep their vines so healthy that diseases and infestations can't take hold. Artificial fertilizers are also out, so biodynamic vintners spend time and money developing their own composts instead of just pouring on some growth juice.

And that's only the baseline. Organic grapegrowers undertake these same obligations, as do many conscientious vintners who don't profess any particular practices -- they just want to make good wine, or make it safe for their dogs to run in the vineyards.

Biodynamics goes even further by getting the mentality of the winegrower tuned in to the energetic life of the vine. Nicolas Joly, proprietor of the celebrated Coulee de Serrant in France's Loire Valley, spoke to a standing-room-only crowd at the New York event. He observed that vines give in to gravity during their dormant season, when they put their energy into their roots. During their ripening season, on the other hand, they put their energy into rising toward the heat of the sun. In the seasons in between, their energy goes to the intermediate forms of matter, such as the liquid sap in their stems and leaves.

Much of biodynamics is concerned with thinking along with the vines and supporting what they are doing naturally.

"All life is a permanent battle between the soil and rocks and gravity of the Earth, and the light and heat and radiant energy of the solar system," Joly said. "With biodynamics we are working not just with forms of matter you can see, but also with the forces behind the matter."

That's why the horn is packed with ground quartz -- a light-holding form of matter that in spring is highly diluted and sprayed into the vineyard just as the vines are seeking light to turn their flowers into fruit.

Not just woo-woo

Patti Fetzter Burke has heard people describe this as "woo-woo" stuff, but she has a ready answer.

"Come to the vineyard and see what it does," she said. "The first time we sprayed the biodynamic preparations, you could see a difference the next day. Horacio Ortega has been managing vineyards for our family for 25 years, so he's done a lot of organic farming. He wasn't convinced about biodynamics, but he was amazed once he saw the difference in the vines."

Any biodynamic vintner will tell you this difference in the vines shows up in the wine. Joly takes an even broader view.

"One of the greatest inventions in the world of wine is the concept of appellation controllee," he said in

New York, using the French term for defined wine-growing area (here we call them "American Viticultural Areas" or AVAs). "This is the idea that specific places have their own identities, and it is these many identities that make wine so wonderfully diverse. This is why all wine-producing countries of the world define and protect these places. What we are doing with biodynamics is to discover and amplify all the things that make an individual appellation controllee mean something."

As an example, Joly pointed out that yeast is what ferments crushed grapes into wine. This interaction is one of the two or three most fundamental passages in winemaking, but it's increasingly untethered from any notion of place. Winemakers today can purchase hundreds of different fermentation yeasts, grown in laboratory cultures to enhance or play down particular aromas and flavors in wine. Biodynamic producers, on the other hand, use the yeasts that thrive in their vineyards. These yeasts are healthy, indigenous and already a natural partner for the grapes.

"When you drink the wine, you taste the place," Joly said, "not something a chemistry lab isolated from someplace else."

Of course, a beverage doesn't have to be unique to be satisfying. None of the biodynamic vintners in New York had a bad word to say about beer -- which we expect to taste the same every time we drink it. On the other hand, we don't want Barry Bonds to be walked every time he bats, because we know he's capable of doing something we never experienced before. We don't want to watch him walk down to first base without swinging the bat. We want something only he can deliver, something unique, authentic and exciting.

Wine should be the same way, especially when we pay more than a few bucks for it.

"It was good to see so many people come out and take the time to taste all the different wines," Bart Araujo said. "They probably thought biodynamics is just an idea or some odd set of things we do on the equinox. It's really about growing the best wine we can, in the one place on Earth each of us has to grow it. If we care, we have to give it our best shot."

Bound to biodynamics

The Metropolitan Pavilion in New York was the site June 14 of the first tasting of biodynamic (and some organic) wines in America. The 74 participating vintners subscribe to a charter that emphasizes vineyard methods that pursue the true and inimitable expression of terroir and cellar work that respects the high level of originality and unique characteristics of each terroir. They strictly avoid synthetic chemicals and ban viticultural and winemaking practices that falsify the unique expression of their terroir. Their sites are certified as organic or biodynamic by a recognized organization in their countries.

Austria

Nikolaihof Wachau; Weingut Geyerhof

Australia

Castagna Vineyard; Jasper Hill Vineyard; Cullen Wines

Chile

Viña Antiyal; Santa Emiliana

France

Champagne -- Fleury; F. Bedel; Larmandier-Bernier

Alsace -- Pierre Frick; Marcel Deiss; Zind-Humbrecht; Martin Schaetzel; Marc Tempe; Ostertag; Marc Kreydenweiss

Jura -- Andre et Mireille Tissot

Provence -- Chateau de Roquefort; Chateau Romanin; Domaine de Trevallon

Loire -- De Suronde; Tour Grise; Coulee de Serrant; de l'Ecu; Saint- Nicolas

Bourgogne -- A et P de Villaine; Giboulot; Leflaive; Pierre Morey; Trapet Pere et Fils; Leroy et d'Auvenay

Bordeaux -- Falfas; Gombaude-Guilot; Haut-Nouchet; Lagarette; La Tour Figeac

Rhone -- Clos du Joncuas; Domaine de Villeneuve; Montirius; Domaine Viret; M. Chapoutier

Languedoc-Roussillon -- Beauthorey; Cazes; Gauby; Leon Barral; du Tragner; Fontedicto

Germany

Freiherr Heyl zu Herrnsheim; Eymann; Hahnmulle; Prinz zu Salm-Dalberg & Schloss Wallhäusen; Wittmann; Sander

Italy

Cascina Degli Ulivi; La Biancara; Radikon Stanislao

New Zealand

The Millton Vineyards; Providence Vineyards

Slovenia

Movia

Spain

Albet I Noya; Alvaro Palacios; Compania de Vinos Telmo Rodriguez; Descendientes de J. Palacios; Dominio de Pingus; Mas Estela

United States

Araujo Estate Wines; Benziger Family Winery; Brick House Vineyards; **Ceago Estate Wines**; Cooper Mountain Vineyards; Coturri Winery; Patianna Organic Vineyards; Robert Sinskey Vineyard

A taste of something special

The following wines were tasted in at a seminar/tasting event entitled "Toward a Renaissance of Terroir Wines." All the grapes for these wines are biodynamically grown, which means they are farmed organically with additional seasonal practices and other techniques designed to strengthen each stage of a vine's annual growth cycle. All agricultural crops can benefit from biodynamic farming; wine grapes seem to be especially good candidates due to the subtlety and individuality of the product they go into -- premium wine.

2001 Araujo Estate Eisele Vineyard Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$150) -- Classic Napa Cab in a suavely powerful package. Many layers of rich red and black fruit flavors balanced with palate-pleasing nuances in the texture and aftertaste. World class.

2002 Araujo Estate Eisele Vineyard Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$29) -- Creamy, melony aromas and flavors that are opulently tropical one moment, citrusy and spicy the next. Wears its wood extremely well, especially in the plush texture.

2001 Benziger Family Winery Tribute Sonoma Mountain (\$50) -- Intoxicating aromas of Belgian chocolate and bell pepper introduce this Bordeaux-style red blend, with its cool dense core of sweet, dark fruit and a raw silk grip in the texture. Impressive premiere.

2002 Brick House Willamette Valley Chardonnay (\$24) -- Few American Chardonnays get this rich and smoky despite using no new oak, or this hedonistic with such European restraint. Could restore your faith in the grape.

2002 Brick House Willamette Valley Les Dijonnais Pinot Noir (\$40) -- Balances a warm flood of sweet cherry and strawberry flavors with bright acidity and good grip in the texture. Still integrating in the bottle -- best in four to five years.

2003 Ceago Vinegarden Jeriko Vineyard Mendocino County Chardonnay (\$16) - - Pure pleasure in a glass: lushly tropical flavors that stay cool, balanced and refreshing -- admirable qualities in a Chardonnay with 14 percent alcohol.

2000 Ceago Vinegarden Kathleen's Vineyard Mendocino County Sauvignon Blanc (\$16) -- Direct, transparent flavors of grapefruit, apple and lime with a good balance of grip and glide in the mouth.

2000 Robert Sinskey Vineyards Four Vineyards Carneros Pinot Noir (\$46) --

Black cherry, raspberry and baking spice in liquid form, with a wonderfully warm mouthfeel and long, sweet aftertaste. Ageable.

2001 Robert Sinskey Vineyards Carneros Cabernet Franc (\$36) -- Cabernet Franc is hard to get ripe, hard to vinify and hard to deny when it's this good, with plush dark fruit flavors and Franc's signature herbal edge honed smooth.

-- Thom Elkjer

Thom Elkjer writes about wine and Wine Country and is the author of "Adventures in Wine: True Stories of Vineyards and Vintages Around the World."