

DECANTER Septembre 1998 [Stephen Brook]
BIODYNAMIC WOMAN

Manager of a prestigious Burgundy vineyard, the forward-thinking Anne-Claude Leflaive lets STEPHEN BROOK in on how she has added a touch of the unconventional to this traditional domaine.

An alert, handsome woman with prematurely white hair and grey-green eyes was standing before me, and all of a sudden sank to her knees. My brief moment of concern was dissipated when I saw her attention was directed at a patch of soil around the row of vines. She scrambled vigorously through the crusty topsoil and cupped some brown humus into her palm, then sniffed it. She spun in a half-circle and repeated the operation at another row of vines, digging up a second ball of soil. Satisfied with her excavation, she opened both soil-filled palms, and instructed me to crouch down beside her. 'Here. Smell the difference.'

At this point, I should reveal that handful one was scooped from a row cultivated biodynamically by Domaine Leflaive in the grand cru vineyard of Chevalier Montrachet. Handful two was extracted from beneath her neighbour's vines, which were treated with herbicides.

The purpose of the exercise was to demonstrate that biodynamic viticulture could have effects on the soil composition so dramatic they could even be nosed. Perhaps it was my imagination, spurred on by Anne-Claude Leflaive's fervour, but there really did seem to be a richer, moister more nutritious smell to handful one.

In 1997 Domaine Leflaive committed itself wholeheartedly to biodynamism following the impressive footsteps of Nicolas Joly, Gaston Huet and Lalou Bise Leroy. Anne-Claude Leflaive had toyed with the system in 1990, consecrating a hectare to the experiment, and had declared herself entirely satisfied with the result.

Nothing else about Domaine Leflaive suggests a vein of eccentricity. The Château and cellars occupy an entire side of a square in Puligny-Montrachet, but the gates are firmly shut and there is nothing to identify the cluster of buildings as Puligny's most celebrated wine estate. The Domaine was created in 1905 by Joseph Leflaive, who decided to make the most of low land prices after the devastation of phylloxera. Of his five children, two, Joseph junior and Vincent, subsequently became co-directors. In 1982 Joseph Jr died and a few years later his son Olivier took his place. Vincent, a much respected and liked figure in Burgundy, retired in 1990, and his daughter Anne-Claude replaced him. Vincent died in 1993, and the Domaine was then in the hands of the two cousins.

However, Olivier Leflaive had by this time also developed a negociant business of his own. There may not have been a clear conflict of interest in his dual roles, but there was certainly some confusion, and by 1994 Olivier was no longer so closely involved in the Domaine. Anne-Claude was by now its sole gérante, and Olivier was left to continue with his prospering negociant enterprise.

The 22-hectare (ha) domaine had always owned superb holdings in Puligny: about 4ha with a village appellation, 10ha of premier cru (including 5.7ha in Clavoillon and 3ha in Pucelles), and no fewer than 5ha of grand cru. In 1991 a sufficient number of vines were acquired in Montrachet itself to produce about 280 bottles per year.

But it takes more than great vineyard sites to make a great domaine in Burgundy. Anne-Claude does not deny that in the late 1980s the reputation of the estate had slipped. I recall a number of disappointing bottles, wines that lacked the flair and concentration one had come to expect. No doubt transitions between two generations of managers and winemakers, as well as suspected tensions between the two cousins, may have contributed to the decline. But to Anne-Claude Leflaive the primary explanation lay in the increasingly inert vineyards.

Biodynamism has been slow to catch on in Burgundy, although Jean-Claude Rateau has been implementing its dogmas since 1981. In 1989 Anne-Claude Leflaive attended a meeting at which Rateau and Claude Bourguignon, the region's greatest authority on its soils, gave talks which confirmed her growing view that chemical treatments profoundly damaged the quality of the soil, not to mention their toxic effects on vineyard workers. The following year she adopted biodynamism for a single hectare, having persuaded both her father Vincent and winemaker Pierre Morey to accept her ideas. By 1992 she had extended biodynamic cultivation to 3ha, and by 1996 to 7ha. Today the entire estate is managed along these lines.

Although biodynamism does not reject the basic methods adopted by all organic growers, it has a philosophical rationale, based on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner, that many find hard to accept. No one disputes that the phases of the moon have long affected, say, times of racking and bottling, simply because those phases have an impact on atmospheric pressure, which in turn affects the placidity of the wine. However, the treatments prescribed by biodynamic authorities involve bizarre ingredients, including deer bladders and horsetails, some of which have to be buried for up to six months before use. The timing of treatments is precisely laid down according to planetary influences.

Not that long ago, at the Château de Monthelie. I heard a whirring sound in the courtyard. I spotted what looked like a butter churn half filled with liquid which was being stirred by motorised paddles. This was my first glimpse of a dynamiseur in action. At the appropriate times, the prescribed treatments are dissolved in water, and stirred in alternating directions. For some reason this is crucial. If I understand the somewhat mystical explanations offered by biodynamism's advocates - who tend to develop a crazed gleam in the eye as they expound the tenets of their creed - the stirring within the dynamiseur transfers the energies of plant material into the water, and this solution then transmits its 'memory' into the soil, on condition that the treatment is applied no later than two hours after the stirring.

My own inherent scepticism leads me to take the: assertions of biodynamic faith, in so far as I understand them, with an immense pinch of salt. But what matters is the creed's effect on the: vineyards and wine. Anne-Claude Leflaive has no doubt that biodynamic viticulture has transformed her vineyards with astonishing speed : not only does the soil smell better, but there is a more lively microbiological life within it, more brilliantly coloured foliage, and a lower incidence of rot (although some biodynamic vineyards at Domaine Leroy were revaged by mildew in 1993).

" Plants can't lie ", she insisted as we stood among her vines in Chevalier.Montrachet. " Just look at my neighbours plants. The soil is grey and compacted. It already looks dead. My vineyards are ploughed, and this not only aerates the soil, it also cuts any roots that may lie along the surface. This forces the roots to go down into the soil in search of nutrients and water. "

After our impassioned soil-sniffing, we went compost-snorting. On the other side of the N74 she assembles throughout the spring and summer the components of her compost. The ingredients are half-crushed sarments (the wood clipped from vines during pruning), cow manure, sheep manure, and the marc, the cake left after pressing the grapes. In the autumn the heaps are blended and turned to ensure the temperature never rises above 21°C. 'The compost must not get too hot, or it will cook. And it must smell wholesome.' In October the compost is applied, and gradually sinks into the soil, which it invigorates.

Adopting biodynamism does not mean that other quality-inducing practices can be abandoned.. 'We aim for reasonable yields. That is achieved primarily by pruning. There is no contradiction between employing biodynamic viticulture and obtaining high yields. Although in general biodynamism doesn't seem to affect pH and acidity, we have found that we often have higher malic acidities than most estates, especially in low-acidity years such as 1997. For us, acidity is more important than maturation, though we have had above-average sugar contents over the last four vintages. I don't want you to think we pick unripe grapes.'

There is little that is remarkable in the winemaking. The Pulignys spend about 12 months in 25% new oak and are stirred on the lees initially. After this period of barrel-ageing the wine is transferred to steel tanks, so that it can clarify naturally over the second winter. Then the wine is fined, occasionally filtered, and bottled.

'For essentially commercial reasons, most people want to make wines that are plump and easily enjoyable when young.' Anne-Claude asserts. 'At Domaine Leflaive we make wines that are intended to age, which is why they sometimes do not taste exceptional when young. We want finesse above all. If I want to define our style, it is one of purity, precision and a certain crystalline quality. The wines are very tight when young, which is why I recommend decanting them an hour before drinking them.'

She disappeared into a side room and reemerged with two unmarked bottles. Both wines, she explained, were 1995s from Clavoillon, one from an organic plot within the premier cru, the other from a biodynamic parcel. The grapes had been picked at about the same time and vinified identically. I was to taste the blind. Discerning distinct if subtle differences, I waxed forth. Her stern, though expression suggested I was favouring 'wrong' wine, but no, my preferred wine grounds of overall stylishness, turned out to be the biodynamic bottle.

By chance, François Carillon from well-known neighbouring estate came wondering in to the cellar and was invited to attempt the same blind tasting. He, he preferred the biodynamic wine, but we interested me was that his reasons for do so coincided with my own.

'We've been making this experiment for some years.' Anne-Claude explains, 'but until 1995 the differences were faint and sometimes the organic wine seen better. Since 1995 it has been the over round. It takes a little time, of course the beneficial effects of biodynamism become apparent.'

She, herself, has no doubts whatsoever that biodynamism has improved the quality of her vines and wines. It is more labor intensive, but she can now dispense with costly chemical treatments. So there was (?)tle to choose in terms of expense. Anyhow at a time of high unemployment she pleased to be able to offer additional we (?). There is no doubt in my own mind that the quality of recent vintages, notably 1995. In 1996 are a vast improvement on those to the late 1980s (we sampled a quite brilliant 1995 Bienvenues-Batard-Montrachet). (?)

is it simply a consequence of tighter yield, Anne-Claude Leflaive does not believe in adopting extremely low yields which, say, Domaine Leroy swears by. Everything must be in balance, Anne-Claude Leflaive believes, an healthy vigorous vine should be able to produce a reasonable cru such as the 40-45 hectolitres per hectare picked in 1996 although the 1995 vintage (?) paltry 25-28Hl/ha was problems during flower. With her respect to the soil, her passionabile dedication to her inheritance, and the skills (?) Pierre Morey to transmitte the raw materials (?) wine. Anne-Claude Leflaive has returned the domaine to the front rank (?) of white Burgundy producers. Vintages transmitting, the next few years should produce some supremely exciting wines.