

## THE LOIRE VALLEY - Septembre 1997 [The Loire Valley]

### **Biodynamics: Back to the Future**

Biodynamics (biodynamie) is not only an idea whose time has come, but one that has come just in the nick of time for the world of wine making. For the last few decades, vineyards in France and elsewhere have been bombarded with tons of chemical fertilizers, insecticides, and fungicides. These were first hailed as a means of making vineyard cultivation - always a business - much more predictable and profitable. But the long-term problems brought about by their use are beginning to come to light. One, of course, is the effect on the wine drinker of consuming wines made from chemically treated grapes.

There are other negative consequences too: Vines subjected to strong doses of heavy-duty fertilizers and insecticides tend to lose their natural immunities and become, ironically, even more vulnerable to disease. And, even more disturbing for the wine connoisseur, wines made from grapes grown in chemically treated vineyards can lose their special character. It's only logical: What separates a great vineyard from a mediocre one is a complex balance of soil quality, sun exposure, microclimate, and the unique qualities of the vines. Chemically tampering with this balance changes the quality of the wine, and not for the better. Chemically treated grapes are even proving to be incapable of forming their own natural yeasts, another key element in a wine's special taste. And chemically treated grapes are producing wines that do not age as well as they once did, a real problem in places like the Médoc, where the cabernet sauvignon - based wines need a long time in the bottle.

For all these reasons, many French wine makers have switched to organic agriculture in the past few decades, but with very mixed results. Deprived of the chemicals that have been protecting them, grapes become so vulnerable to disease that a whole crop can be lost. That's not a risk owners of great vineyards want to take. And a lot of organic wines just don't taste very good. But there's an alternative: biodynamics. This approach employs some of the methods of organic agriculture, but goes much further to preserve the special nature of a vineyard's soil and microclimate and to achieve a proper balance among the four elements that affect the life of the vine - earth, water, air, and heat.

In the biodynamic approach, even so-called organic fertilizers and insecticides are avoided, because they could destroy microscopic elements of the soil or vine that contribute to the vineyard's authentic character. The poverty of vineyard soil - which results in low yields, but better wine grapes - is maintained in the biodynamic approach: fertilizers, usually animal manures, are used only sparingly. Techniques include spraying the vineyard with a diluted solution containing quartz crystals to intensify the light the vines receive from the sun, spraying with a mild nettle solution to perk up circulation of sap; and spraying with a gentle valerian "tea" to bring heat to the vines, if such help is needed. And the biodynamic grower takes into account other forces that affect the vines, such as the phases of the sun, moon, and planets, and even electromagnetic fields. Our ancestors made wine in this way for centuries, by tradition and instinct. Now, many of France's top wine makers are returning to the practice by design, and succeeding. According to one of them, Nicolas Joly of la Coulée de Serrant - source of one of France's rarest and greatest white wines - the time has come to shift the focus from popular and stylish wines to authentic wines that reflect their particular terroir, microclimate, and vintage.

No authentic wine is ever like any other wine, nor even like itself in other vintages. The life of the vine always shines through, if it is allowed to. All this may sound like New Age idealism, but the proof is on the vine and in the bottle: Biodynamically raised grapes tend to be more disease-resistant than grapes grown using other methods, and biodynamic wines tend to have more individual character than standard wines. Highly respected French wine makers who have adopted biodynamics include Joly, those at Domaine Leflaive in Puligny-Montrachet (in some of its prime vineyards), and Lalou Bize-Leroy, a producer of great burgundies at her Domaine Leroy. Wines made from biodynamically grown grapes have the right to a "Demeter" certification on their labels, which indicates that all the vines in the vineyard used to make the wine have been cultivated biodynamically for a minimum of three years.

French wine lovers, faced with the fact that many of their favorite wines have been losing their identities over the past few years, have been quick to accept biodynamics. One of France's best wine stores, Caves Taillevant in Paris, has opened a special section for biodynamic wines, and they've become top sellers. When you try them, you'll notice right away that they don't taste like any other wines. And there are no artificial chemicals mixed in with the bouquet.