



## **BIO-DYNAMOS**

As more world-class wineries go biodynamic, even the sceptics are starting to go au naturel.

By Max Allen

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There are two glasses of Victorian shiraz in front of me. One is a 2005 barrel sample from Avonmore vineyard, located in the hot, flat country north of Bendigo; the other is a 2004 shiraz from Hochkirch vineyard, down in the cool, wet country in the far south-west of the state. Both wines scream their provenance: the Avonmore is pitch-black-purple, full of rich berry fruit, and finishes with a warm alcoholic glow, while the Hochkirch is pale purple-red, spicy, herbal, lighter, juicy.

Nothing unusual here: I find myself with multiple glasses of wine in front of me almost every day of the year. What makes this occasion different is the fact that I also have two slices of roast lamb on a plate in front of me - one from a sheep allowed to graze through the vines at Avonmore, the other from an animal allowed similar free reign at Hochkirch. And these utterly regional, site-specific matches of succulent meat and flavoursome wine is spectacular.

There is another difference, too - and another reason, perhaps, why the flavours of this lunch are so vivid. Both Avonmore and Hochkirch are biodynamic farms: allowing the sheep into the vineyards helps to keep the weeds under control.

The lunch was held during a biodynamic wine workshop hosted by Vanya Cullen and your correspondent at Charlie Melton's cellar door in

the Barossa Valley earlier this year as part of the biennial Shiraz Alliance talk-and-taste-a-thon. Biodynamics - 'BD' to its friends - is a very hip subject at the moment in the wine world: we ran three sessions and each one was packed with winemakers, viticulturists and marketers, all keen to find out more.

How times change. As recently as five years ago, there was widespread scepticism about BD in the wine industry. And it's not too hard to understand why. Unlike 'ordinary' organic farming, which is all about not using artificial, man-made herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers, BD farmers go one step further, and apply 'homeopathic' doses of 'preparations' such as manure that has been buried in a cow horn over winter, or finely-ground quartz, also buried in the horn, this time over summer. Not only that, but biodynamicists farm according to lunar cycles and the constellations.

So how has that former scepticism turned into the current intense interest?

Well, for a start, look at the fast-growing list of the world's top winemakers publicly embracing BD - Leflaive, Leroy and Domaine de la Romanee Conti in Burgundy; Chapoutier in the Rhone; Zenato and Riecine in Italy; Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon in the US; Cullen, Jasper Hill and Castagna in Australia; Millton, Rippon and Seresin in New Zealand to name a few.

As Shiraz Alliance moderator, wine writer Robert Joseph put it: 'It looks a lot like a club that, if I were a winemaker, I would very much want to be a member of.'

More importantly, BD more often than not delivers a noticeable difference - in both the vineyard and particularly in the glass (or indeed, on the plate). It was this 'extra quality' that convinced sceptical large-scale McLaren Vale grape-grower David Paxton.

The last time we met Paxton in this column was after the ground-breaking Biodynamic Wine Forum in Beechworth in late 2004. The grower couldn't stand all the cow-horn, moon-planting mumbo-jumbo he heard at the forum - but when he tasted the wines from many of the producers mentioned above he was so blown away that he returned to McLaren Vale to start vineyard trials.

'And within three months,' David Paxton told me, 'the place *felt* different. Now, two seasons on, when you look at the soil, it's

dynamically different. Since then, we've changed over 180 acres - well over 50 per cent of our vineyards - to biodynamics.'

At the workshop in the Barossa, Paxton's viticultural manager, Toby Bekkers, explained the motivation for switching to BD: 'We're doing it because we think it can help us grow better fruit. And we're doing that because, to be honest, we're chasing the extra point - whether that's the extra point on the grading scale of the wineries we sell grapes to, or an extra point from the judges or the critics.'

But while the motivation may have been primarily financial, the adoption of BD has - almost by default - led to a significant change in attitude.

'One of the best things about it is that we're in the vineyard all the time now - and we're having a lot of fun' said Bekkers. 'Look, I come from a science background, so I have to put the spiritual stuff to one side.' He paused - and then continued, for all the world sounding like the most romantic of French vigneron: 'But I taste a difference in quality, texture and mouthfeel in BD wines, and I think growing grapes this way can give our vineyards a uniqueness.'

None of which is new to old hands at the BD game, of course. As John Nagorcka of Hochkirch said, smiling: 'It's just such a satisfying way to farm.'

#### AUSTRALIAN BIODYNAMIC WINES TO TRY (stockist leads in brackets)

2002 Robinvale Vineyards Demeter Kerner \$14

This remarkable white gets better and better every time I taste it. Made from an obscure, riesling-like German grape grown in the hot vineyards at Robinvale on the Murray, it's tropical and rich and pulpy and yet citrus-crisp at the same time.

( [www.organicwines.com.au](http://www.organicwines.com.au) )

2004 Hochkirch Shiraz \$30

This moderate (12 per cent) alcohol, medium-bodied, cool-climate red has sappy, hedgerow, peppery aromatics and a lively, mouthwatering juiciness that makes it delicious with roast lamb. Will pick up even more complexity in the cellar.

( winery: ph: (03) 5573 5200 [hochkirch@bigpond.com](mailto:hochkirch@bigpond.com) )

2004 La Pleiade Heathcote Shiraz \$65

A joint venture between Jasper Hill and the Rhone Valley's Chapoutier, this comes from a vineyard planted using cuttings both from France and Georgia's Paddock. It's dense, firm, saturated with licorice-like richness and deep black fruit.  
( [www.jasperhill.com](http://www.jasperhill.com) )

2004 Cullen Diana Madeline \$90  
An exercise in restraint, finesse and impeccable balance, this wonderful cabernet merlot is exquisite to drink now, but will improve with further cellaring. Pure red berry fruit, cedary oak, fine tannins, great length. Yum.  
( [www.cullenwines.com.au](http://www.cullenwines.com.au) )

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