



REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

Not so long ago it was the preserve of the wacky brigade, now biodynamics has become the talk of the industry.

By Max Allen

(a version of this article first appeared in Harpers Wine and Spirit Weekly in the UK in March 2007)

I have been a bit obsessed with biodynamics recently, mainly because I'm in the process of establishing a web site about biodynamic wine in Australia. As it is in the rest of the world, biodynamics is really taking off here, with some very high profile producers (notably Henschke in the Barossa) converting to BD practices in their vineyards.

Even so, I was surprised when biodynamics turned out to be arguably the hottest topic at two international wine conferences that took place in New Zealand and Australia last month: at Pinot Noir 2007 in Wellington and the Pinot Noir Celebration the following week on the Mornington Peninsula, winemakers viticulturists, media and trade couldn't stop talking about BD.

This first became obvious at Pinot Noir 2007, when Beverley Blanning MW took a straw poll of the 500 delegates at the beginning of her presentation on BD. She asked for a show of hands to the question 'Who thinks biodynamics actually works?'

To her - and everyone's - amazement, more than half the room put their hands up.

Blanning offered one explanation for this remarkable shift in acceptance: 'Motivations behind (buying) biodynamics (and organics)

are changing,' she said. 'I believe what used to be a personal, individual and essentially a selfish decision to purchase organic goods - in other words because they tasted nicer or you thought they were better for your health - is changing to become something that's more to do with the environment and society. People are beginning to feel an obligation to society and indeed to the planet.'

For Nick Mills of Rippon vineyard in Central Otago, biodynamics is about improving both the quality of his land and the people who work there.

'Some of our ... failings as humans is that we come into an ecosystem, whether it's a farm, a forest or a city and we say: this is what we want, this is our goal, this is what we're going to do' said Mills. 'Biodynamics presses you to ask: what does the soil want, what does your property want? One is pressed, therefore, to lighten up, to become more subtle, and not be stiffened by dogma.'

Mills uses biodynamics 'to try to render the vines as receptive to their surroundings as possible' as a way of helping him make a wine that is a true reflection of its site. But there's much more to it than that.

'Enthusiasm is the best fertiliser,' he said. 'It's easy to talk about the benefit of microflora on the property (as a result of BD), but less is said about the effect on humans. People on the property are genuinely happy ... It's a matter of integrity. When the customer sees the Rippon label, they know precisely where the fruit's come from, and hopefully how it's been treated. The consumer might be able appreciate a product with less pesticide residues, arguably higher anthocyanin levels - but that's not the main goal. The main reason (for adopting BD) is the fact that we've been four generations on this property and we'd love to be here another four generations.'

This humanist view of biodynamics was echoed by the guest of honour at the Mornington Peninsula Pinot Noir Celebration, Aubert de Villaine of the Domaine de la Romanee Conti. As delegates swooned over the DRC Grand Crus from 2004 (if only every domaine could afford to practise the painfully strict selection that led to these wines being such a stunning success in such a difficult vintage), M. de Villaine explained his attitude to BD.

'We became completely organic in 1985,' he said. 'We decided ten years later to experiment with biodynamics. Since then, we have been improving the biodynamics and we are going to increase the

biodynamics. I am especially interested in using decoctions and tisanes to increase the self-defence of the vine, so that copper and sulphur sprays can perhaps be put aside.'

But, although de Villaine has 'utmost respect' for biodynamics, it's not the preparations and working with the cosmic rhythms that's the key. 'What is more important is the discipline that these methods gives to the people who use them.'

The people - and the animals. 'We have had ten years experience now with biodynamics,' he says. 'And to be honest, between organic and biodynamic, we don't see much difference. We see more difference in the vineyards worked by horse: a difference in texture and sensation in the soil.'

So, there you go. Perhaps at Pinot Noir 2010 or the Peninsula Pinot Celebration 2009, winemakers will be swapping stories about their horses.

Stranger things have happened: at least one Australian grape trader with biodynamic tendencies (Bill Downie of De Bortoli in the Yarra Valley) has already headed in the equine direction: Downie was moved to join the state Draught Horse Association after witnessing a Burgundy vineyard being worked with a horse.

Hey: as recently as five years ago, biodynamics was mostly viewed with suspicion and derision. Now look. Who would have predicted it?

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