



A QUIET REVOLUTION

Australian wine goes biodynamic.

By Max Allen

(a version of this article first appeared in Selector magazine in Australia, Autumn 2007)

I've come to visit Bress vineyard in Harcourt, just south of Bendigo in central Victoria, and I'm up to my elbows in fresh, steaming cow poo.

Now, as you know, when you travel to a winery, you're usually invited into a nice, clean cellar door and offered a taste of a few wines.

This, obviously, is no ordinary winery visit. There is a nice, clean cellar door here, and there are some very good wines for tasting. But as soon as I pulled up in the car park, winemaker Adam Marks dragged me off to help him make some 'cow pat pit'.

Which is why I'm now pushing a wheelbarrow full of poo across a paddock towards a waiting shallow hole in the ground. We've mixed the fresh manure with crushed eggshells (from the chooks that Marks breeds on the farm), basalt dust and a few sprinklings of herbal 'compost preparations' - chamomile, stinging nettle, oak bark and dandelion among others - and the poo concoction will now sit quietly, covered, in the pit for a couple of months, gently fermenting. After which, says Marks, it will be mixed with water and sprayed onto the vineyard as a kind of liquid compost.

Spraying cow pat pit - also known as barrel compost or manure concentrate - is just one of many methods used in the system of organic farming called Biodynamics. And Adam Marks is just one of an

increasing number of Australian grape growers and winemakers adopting Biodynamics (or 'BD') in their vineyards.

In some ways, an Australian Biodynamic wine movement is no surprise. Organic food and environmental issues, once the preserve of fringe-dwellers and hippies, have moved very much into the mainstream in the last couple of years, and it was only a matter of time before more people in the wine industry started turning green.

Having said that, though, it is in many ways surprising that so many vineyards - at least 50 across the country - are embracing Biodynamics in particular rather than organics in general: after all, Australian winemakers tend to be a no-bullshit, pragmatic bunch, and some elements of Biodynamics are, well, pretty wacky.

For example, as well as applying the manure concentrate and compost preparations (or 'preps') already described, Biodynamic farmers also spray a prep called 500 (derived from cow manure that has been buried in a cow's horn over winter) and 501 (ground-up silica buried in the horn over winter), diluted to 'homeopathic' concentration in water that is 'energised' by stirring (first in one direction, then the opposite, in order to create chaos).

Not only that, but many of the BD vineyard activities such as planting, pruning and picking - and winery activities such as racking and bottling - take place according to phases of the moon and positions of the planets and constellations. And spraying the preps occurs at specific times: 500 in the afternoon, when the earth is 'breathing in', 501 in the morning, when the earth is 'breathing out'.

The concept of Biodynamics was introduced to the world in 1924 by Austrian philosopher and educator, Rudolf Steiner, in a series of lectures given to a group of farmers, concerned that years of industrial farming techniques had resulted in dwindling fertility of their land and declining health of their livestock.

Steiner was founder of the Anthroposophical Society, a movement dedicated to bridging the gap between the physical and spiritual worlds. He called his lectures 'Spiritual Foundations for the Renewal of Agriculture' and the solutions he proposed (including use of the preps and composting) were both practical - to increase microbial life, structure and nutrient availability in the soil - and spiritual: to reconnect the earth to the life forces of the cosmos.

See what I mean? While on one hand Biodynamics is eminently sensible, on the other hand it's pretty challenging - if not downright confronting - for many 'conventional' grape growers.

So why are so many Australian winemakers - not to mention a growing band of vineyard owners across the globe - busy burying cow horns, consulting their astro calendars and piling up their compost heaps? The answer is simple: because Biodynamics appears to really make a difference.

Some producers have come to Biodynamics for reasons of environmental sustainability and health.

When Rob and Pauline Bryans, for example, bought their 120-hectare Avonmore Estate farm near Elmore in the hot, flat country north of Bendigo close to twenty years ago, the soil was exhausted, dry and dusty. The Bryans saw Biodynamics as a way of bringing life back into their land, and now have a thriving, healthy farm running sheep and cattle, growing cereals, and vines - and a winery, where son Shaun has joined his father at the fermenting vats.

The Bryans took me out to their vineyard and stuck a fork into the soil under the vines. Unlike the light, flyaway structure of the dirt in other farms in the area, this was well-structured, friable, chocolatey, and had worms wriggling contentedly through it.

'I find a lot of the spiritual side of it a bit frustrating,' said Rob Bryans. 'But look at that soil: as a means to an end, all I can say is that the Biodynamic methods work.'

'You just have to look at the animals,' continued Pauline. 'Because they're eating healthy grass, the cows don't get bloat, the sheep are never vaccinated and we never have to drench them. We have a bloke with a mobile abattoir who kills a couple of lambs for us each season, and every time he comes here he says he's never seen livers in such good condition.'

For renowned South Australian viticulturist Prue Henschke, BD is the logical extension of an ongoing conservation process she had already initiated in some of the Eden Valley's most famous old vineyards, Hill of Grace and Mount Edelstone.

'We've been moving towards organics in the vineyards for ages,' says Henschke. 'We've been mulching under-vine and planting native

grasses as a permanent sward between the vine rows. But then I went to a Biodynamic workshop in June last year and realised that it aligns with the way I think about soil management.'

'The essence of BD,' Henschke continues, 'is soil health and condition. It's about increasing the fungal life and bacterial activity in the interstitial spaces in that soil, making more nutrients available to the vine's roots.'

Again, it's the practical results rather than the spiritual aspects that have convinced Henschke: after initial trials and a bit of fun making her own cow pat pit (which she sensibly calls 'cow pat peat') she is in the process of converting all her Keyneton vineyards (including Hill of Grace), plus a few others such as a chardonnay block in the Adelaide Hills - about 40 hectares all up - to Biodynamics.

Most growers and makers, though, are moving to BD because they believe it can produce better wine.

This is definitely a quality-driven movement: as well as Henschke, the roll-call of Australian vineyards adopting BD also includes established names such as Jasper Hill, Cullen, Castagna, Lark Hill and Elderton, and up-and-coming superstars like Kalleske, Sutton Grange, Tarrington and Gemtree. Internationally, the list of high-profile BD converts includes luminaries such as Leroy and Leflaive in Burgundy, Zind Humbrecht in Alsace, Millton and Rippon in New Zealand, and Bonny Doon in California. And it's the calibre of the people embracing the philosophy that is mostly responsible for converting others.

That and the taste. For both winemakers and consumers, the ultimate (indeed, the crucial) 'proof' that BD makes a difference can be tasted in the glass.

Leading Margaret River winemaker Vanya Cullen crushed her first Biodynamically-grown grapes in 2004, and was convinced immediately that the fruit tasted better - more complex, with 'an extra dimension'.

I agree: for me, there is, more often than not, a brightness and a vitality of flavour in well-made BD wines that sets them apart. I have also tasted that extra dimension in the 2004 Cullen Diana Madeline (sampled in a blind-line-up), and it's something I keep finding in BD wines. They make their presence felt on your tongue, they are multi-faceted, there is an urgency about them; flavour descriptors just come tumbling out as you sniff and sip.

Don't, though, take my word for it that BD can produce better flavour: just look, as Pauline Bryans says, at the animals.

'We put sheep through the vines during winter,' says Gilles Lapalus, winemaker at the Biodynamically-run Sutton Grange vineyard, just to the east of Harcourt. 'We spray 500 on the vineyard in autumn, and the growth of the grass between the rows is amazing: so green, so lush. What's incredible, though, is that sheep always go straight to those patches that have been sprayed. It obviously tastes better to them.'

The point of this story, of course, is not just that sheep think BD grass tastes better, but that there are sheep in the vineyard in the first place.

Biodynamics encourages you to think of the farm as a single, self-contained unit - indeed, it encourages you to think differently about the whole world around you. 'We are doing it for three reasons,' says Gilles Lapalus, echoing many other winemakers I've spoken to. 'For the health of the environment, for better wine quality and for the wellbeing of the people who work on this land.'

This holistic and compassionate but very site-specific way of thinking is inspiring Australian winemakers (and other farmers) to mould what was originally a European farming philosophy to our often very different conditions.

For example, many growers use the 501 preparation - designed to maximise the effects of sunlight on the vine - sparingly, if at all, finding it can be too effective in what are usually quite sunny growing conditions.

'I've found we have to use 501 with great caution,' says Sam Statham of Rosnay vineyard near Cowra. 'A couple of years ago I sprayed it on some merlot vines that were struggling to ripen during the end of the season and the sugar levels shot up way too far, too quickly.'

Similarly, sixth-generation Barossa grape grower and winemaker Troy Kalleske is selective about which of the BD methods he applies to his vines, some of which have been quite happily pumping out shiraz grapes each vintage for over 120 years.

'We spray 500 and occasionally 501 and use a little bit of compost, but we don't use the other preps,' he says. 'Hardcore practitioners would say that means we're not really BD. But I'd say that we have a pretty good idea by now of our property and how healthy it is, and if we feel we don't need to, then why should we?'

Others are embracing local variations on the Biodynamic theme. 'We want to do it in an Australian way,' says winemaker Stephen Henschke. 'We use casuarina (She-oak) here for one of the compost teas, for example, rather than the horsetail (equisetum) used in Europe. And I've heard of some people using burying manure in emu eggs instead of cow horns to make the 500.'

Back at Bress, his arms caked in cow poo, winemaker Adam Marks is smiling a broad, beaming smile.

'You know what I like best about Biodynamics?' he asks. 'It encourages you to find your own way. To find out for yourself how best to care for your land.'

breakout:

RECOMMENDED WINES

This is a selection of wines made by producers who use Biodynamic methods in their vineyards. I have indicated which wines are from vineyards that have been certified Biodynamic or organic by one of the three major certification bodies: the Biodynamic Research Institute (Demeter certification), Biological Farmers Association (Australian Certified Organic) or NASAA. The other vineyards are either in the very early stages of conversion to Biodynamic (and, therefore, not yet certified) or are fully Biodynamic but choose, for personal or ideological reasons, not to certify (Ron Laughton from Jasper Hill, for example, argues strongly that it's the 'conventional', chemically-dependent growers who should be subjected to the rigorous auditing organic and BD growers have to go through, rather than the other way around).

2006 Bress Rosé, Harcourt, Vic \$18

Lovely, crisp, dry pink wine with faded rose-petal aromas and a good, savoury palate. There is also a cider-apple orchard at Bress, as well as a Biodynamic vegie garden and poultry galore: hens, guinea fowl, ducks ... Very much a whole farm philosophy.

www.bress.com.au

2005 Burge Family Winemakers Clochemerle, Barossa Valley, SA \$18
A lipsmackingly delicious blend of shiraz, grenache and mourvedre -
spicy, medium-bodied and satisfying. Rick Burge stopped spraying
chemicals on his vines five years ago, and is just beginning to work
500 and compost onto his land.
www.burgefamly.com.au

2004 Castagna 'La Chiave' Sangiovese, Beechworth, Vic \$75
Julian Castagna is one of the most vocal advocates of BD in Australia,
and has inspired many others to adopt the methods. This is a majestic,
firmly-structured sangiovese, with glorious herb-scented, dark plum
fruit.
www.castagna.com.au

2005 Carlei Tre Rossi, Heathcote, Vic \$40
Sergio Carlei is in the process of converting as many of the vineyards
he buys grapes from as possible to BD (a big task, as they're
scattered across southern Victoria). This is a dusky, rich blend of
shiraz, barbera and nebbiolo.
www.carlei.com.au

2005 Cullen Mangan, Margaret River, WA \$45
A fabulous three-way blend of malbec, merlot and petit verdot, this
youthful purple wine effortlessly combines succulent, slurplable, plush
fruit with fine, powdery tannic grip. In conversion to certified
Biodynamic (ACO).
www.cullenwines.com.au

2004 Hochkirch Shiraz, Henty, Vic \$25
This is real, natural wine. A mere 12 per cent alcohol, wild-yeast
fermented, but pure, focussed and mouthwateringly spicy. Superb with
roast lamb (from the Hochkirch farm, preferably ...). Certified
Biodynamic (Demeter).
(03) 5573 5200
hochkirch@bigpond.com

2005 Kalleske Greenock Shiraz, Barossa Valley, SA \$40
Growers of top-quality grapes for generations, the Kalleskes decided a
few years ago to start making their own. The results - like this big,
open-textured, strong shiraz - have earned them an enviable
reputation. Certified organic (ACO).
www.kalleske.com

2004 Kiltynane Pinot Noir, Yarra Valley, Vic \$40

For grower/maker, Kate Kirkhope, Biodynamics is a 'survival technique' - a way of building strength and resistance in the vineyard and the business. The result in the glass is a pinot of subtlety, charm, delicacy and grace.

www.kiltynane.com.au

2006 Krinklewood Semillon, Hunter Valley, NSW \$20

Everyone told Rod Windrim he was mad throwing away the chemical sprays in the warm, humid Hunter. But Biodynamics is obviously working here: this is scintillating, crisp, lemony white wine. In conversion to certified Biodynamic (ACO).

www.krinklewood.com

2004 La Pleiade Shiraz, Heathcote, Vic \$55

A joint-venture vineyard established by the Laughtons of Jasper Hill and the Rhone Valley's Michel Chapoutier using Australian and French shiraz vine cuttings. Powerful, tightly-coiled, packed with bramble and earth flavours.

www.jasperhill.com

2006 Lark Hill Riesling Auslese, Canberra District, NSW \$20

Gorgeous sweet wine, the first from this well-known Canberra winery made from BD-grown fruit: searingly intense, with concentrated lemon syrup flavours and a long, citrusy finish. In conversion to certified Biodynamic (NASAA).

www.larkhillwine.com.au

2005 Ngeringa Syrah, Mount Barker, Adelaide Hills, SA \$40

From a new vineyard established from scratch as Biodynamic, this is an exciting addition to the new wave of Aussie shiraz: seductively floral and sappy, with layers of dark fruit and spice on the palate. Certified Biodynamic (NASAA).

08 8398 2867, erinn@ngeringa.com

2002 Robinvale Wines Kerner, Robinvale, Vic \$16

An unusual, fascinating white wine from one of the oldest BD vineyards in the country. It is both crisp and fresh like a riesling (from which the kerner grape was bred), but also has fat, honeyed, tropical fruit flavours. Certified Biodynamic (Demeter).

www.organicwines.com.au

2005 Rosnay Semillon, Canowindra, NSW \$16

Proving that the Hunter doesn't have a monopoly on good New South Welsh semillon, this has some good, youthful apple and citrus fruit flavour, plus a touch of creamy, toasty complexity. Certified Biodynamic (ACO).
www.rosnay.com.au

2004 Sutton Grange Estate Syrah, Bendigo, Vic \$50
Fantastic, cellar-worthy shiraz, full of lifted, assertive, floral perfume, prickly wild berry fruit and grippy, firm, lingering tannin. The 2005, tasted from barrel, is even better. Wines also produced under the Fairbank label.
www.suttongrangewines.com

© Max Allen www.redwhiteandgreen.com.au