



FORCE OF NATURE

There's more to this mystical, holistic subject than buried cows' horns and phases of the moon - such as top-quality wines with purity, clarity and real energy.

By Max Allen

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JULY, 2000. Mid-winter in Beechworth, an old Victorian gold-mining town high up in the hard granite hills of Australia's Great Dividing Range.

New Zealand's high-profile Biodynamic winemaker, James Millton, has flown over to talk to a few of the local vignerons about the super-charged form of organics he follows. And I'm tagging along for the ride.

I'm interested in organics; I'd like to know why more Australian grape growers and winemakers aren't adopting this common-sense form of viticulture. I want to know more about the rather mysterious field of Biodynamics, too, and Millton seemed like the bloke who could enlighten me.

Now, suddenly, on this crisp, cold day I find myself right in at the deep end. We're standing next to the Shiraz vineyard planted a few years ago on a steep Beechworth ridge by ebullient Sydney film director, Julian Castagna. Talk has turned to preparation 500, the cornerstone of Biodynamics, developed by Austrian philosopher and teacher, Rudolf Steiner, in the 1920s: famously, 500 is made from manure that has been stuffed into a cow's horn, buried in the earth and left to mature

over winter. Then Castagna takes us over to proudly show us his Flowform - a diagonal stack of what look like large kidney bowls, through which water is poured so it can be 'dynamised' before being mixed with the 500 and sprayed on the vineyard.

I'm beginning to have trouble coming to grips with all this. I'm trying to make the leap of faith, I am. But when I find out the Flowform was made in Byron Bay (the centre of Australian hippy culture and alternative healing up on the northern New South Wales coast), and when Castagna starts talking about connecting his vineyard with cosmic energies, and when Millton starts explaining about chromatography - how a drop of non-Biodynamic grape juice crystallises in a random, broken pattern while crystallised Biodynamic grape juice makes a regular, geometric form - well, sorry, but they lose me, I'm afraid.

I'm not alone in my scepticism. Australian and New Zealand grape growers and winemakers tend to have a very low bullshit threshold, and in 2000, it seems, the apparently less-rational aspects of Biodynamics - the cosmic forces, the planting by the phases of the moon - has scared most of them off. At a wine masterclass in Melbourne in the late 1990s Michel Chapoutier, Rhone winemaker and Biodynamics advocate, explained how he didn't use stainless steel tanks because wine stored in them is susceptible to harmful electromagnetic radiation: he was met by loud, rude guffaws of derision from the audience.

Not only that, but the couple of Australian Biodynamic wines which are available in 2000 - Robinvale and Cassegrain - are patchy at best and downright woeful at worst, and hardly do anything to further the cause. James Millton must feel like an evangelist.

NOW IT'S JUNE 2003. Young winemaker Nick Mills is striding around his family's vineyard, Rippon, on the shores of Lake Wanaka, in New Zealand's southernmost wine region, Central Otago. I'm struggling to keep up again, but only physically: what this winemaker is talking about seems to be making sense.

Mills has come back to the family business after some years away, working vintages in Burgundy and Alsace - and skiing. He seems acutely aware of the special qualities of the place he will inherit; he's also deeply aware of the historical importance of this vineyard (it was one of Otago's first in the modern era) and the quality of its fruit.

Biodynamics for him, then, is simply a way of realising, enhancing and preserving those special qualities.

Mills shows me a huge flat shelf that's been dug into the soil. 'This'll be our compost platform,' he says, excitedly. 'All the grape skins, vine clippings, green waste, everything will come here and be returned to the soil. The compost pile is like the liver of the vineyard. I see it all - the vineyard, the winery, us - as one whole.'

This passionate focus on the importance of site, the reality of 'terroir', and the need for sustainability is being echoed across the Tasman by Australian winemakers in 2003. Far more single vineyard wines are released during this year than ever before: site-specific, proudly claiming their provenance rather than multi-region blends hiding behind brands. It's a gradual change in attitude that's making winemakers (and wine writers) more amenable to Biodynamics, with its emphasis - as influential French winemaker Nicolas Joly puts it - on 'helping wines catch the climate and soil in the wine'.

Nick Mills has a grander vision, too. He'd like to see the whole of Central Otago become organic, with as many vineyards as possible run Biodynamically. Indeed, he and James Millton are developing BD seminars and workshops for growers across the twin islands. For Mills, this is undoubtedly a philosophical position, but it's also undeniably a great marketing angle.

Something James Millton had said in Castagna's vineyard three years before pops into my head: 'When people ask me why we've gone Biodynamic I say it's for two reasons. One, we want to make the best wine we can, and two, we want to make shitloads of money.'

BY OCTOBER, 2004, I'm beginning to warm to Biodynamics in a big way. And I'm not the only one. The attitude shift away from the rather arrogant cult of the winemaker and towards a more humble appreciation of the vineyard is spreading.

All year I've been hearing and reading about winemakers in Australia and New Zealand converting to Biodynamics or exploring the possibilities. Ron Laughton at Jasper Hill in Heathcote; Vanya Cullen at her family's vineyard in Margaret River; Troy Kalleske at his family's vineyard in the Barossa; Sergio Carlei at the Green Vineyards just south of the Yarra Valley; Blair Walter at Felton Road in Central Otago - the list seemed to be constantly growing.

Importantly, these winemakers were already all producing extremely good wine - and they were all people with formidable intelligence. If they were willing to take a punt that Biodynamics can really improve what's already good, then perhaps I should too.

In June I heard Michel Chapoutier speak at The Shiraz Alliance, a tasting and conference devoted to the grape held in the Barossa Valley. His passion for Biodynamics hadn't dimmed, but it seemed more measured, more mature. This time he spoke in analogies: 'The soil is like the mother, the vine is like the baby; bacteria in the soil convert the mineral to vegetable for the vine just as the mother eats the beef and converts the animal protein into milk.' So, says Chapoutier, the healthier the mother (soil) the healthier the baby (vine). This time, the winemakers in the audience weren't laughing.

The clincher, though, came when a Sydney-based wine importer, James Johnston, gave me some wines to try from Tissot, a Biodynamic producer in France's Jura region. These wines had a purity, a clarity, an undeniable energy to them that absolutely blew me away. Sure, these could just have been exceptional wines that happened to be Biodynamic - but I was prepared to believe they were exceptional because they were Biodynamic. What's more, I'd also tasted that clarity in a couple of Australian Biodynamic wines - notably Jasper Hill's 2004 Riesling, the first to be made from grapes grown Biodynamically and a massive step up in quality from previous vintages - and I was prepared to believe this was more than coincidence.

So now, in October, I'm standing on a hill just outside Canberra, listening to winemakers David and Sue Carpenter tell me about their plans to plant Australia's first Biodynamic Gruner Veltliner vineyard and, rather than retreat into scepticism, I'm all ears. Sue - who, apparently, has the gift for water divining - says she can feel the energy of the place, feel its calmness, feel how well-suited it will be for Gruner. She asks me whether I can feel the calmness too.

And you know what? I think I can.

Then David Carpenter brings it all wonderfully back to earth. 'Are you going to the Biodynamic wine conference next month?' he asks. 'It'll be great fun. A room full of nutters all trying to be madder than each other!'

NOVEMBER, 2004. So here I am, back in Beechworth, at the inaugural International Biodynamic Wine Forum, organised by Julian Castagna and Biodynamic Agriculture Australia. In a neat twist (that must tickle David Carpenter no end), the event is being held at a university campus that was once a sprawling mental asylum.

Look around the room at who's here. As well as those I already knew about - Cullen, Millton, Laughton, Kalleske, Mills - there's Bart Arnst, viticulturist from Seresin Estate in Marlborough; Philip Jones, arguably Australia's leading Pinot Noir maker from Bass Philip; Eduardo Chadwick from Vina Errazuriz in Chile; even a representative from Sevenhill Cellars in Clare, the old winery established 150 years ago - and still run by - Jesuit priests.

Tellingly, no-one is here from the larger wine producers such as Southcorp or Montana - at least, not in an official capacity. Two young winemakers - one from Beringer Blass, one from Hardys - have turned up, but both are here for their own, rather than their companies' edification. Biodynamics in Australia is definitely a boutique wine game - at this early stage at least.

While about a third of the attendees are already practitioners, most are newcomers, here to find out what all the fuss is about. Take David Paxton, a professional, large-scale McLaren Vale grape-grower: 'I've seen people like Ron (Laughton) and Vanya (Cullen) getting into Biodynamics so I thought there must be something in it that's worth embracing,' he says. 'If this is the way things are heading, then we need to be a part of it.'

Unfortunately for Paxton and many others, the keynote speaker at this inaugural event is Nicolas Joly, France's most outspoken proponent of Biodynamic viticulture. Joly has a lot of wisdom and experience to impart - but he's also prone to spouting the wackiest nonsense: like how stainless steel tanks receive negative energies such as radio broadcasts ('Do you want your wine to contain a speech from a famous President?'), and the dangers of putting a bar-code on your wine label because the numbers, somehow, add up to 666.

Just as I was temporarily scared off by the quirkiest aspects of Biodynamics five years ago, I can feel many winemakers and grapegrowers in the room stiffen. 'I came here wanting to learn,' whispers David Paxton, 'but then I hear stuff like that and I start squirming in my seat.'

Luckily, more straightforward advice comes from the Australian speakers. Ron Laughton sums up his philosophy neatly: 'You don't need an aspirin to cure a headache; you need to get rid of the stress that caused the headache in the first place,' he says, adding: 'The concept of looking after your soil isn't Biodynamic, it's just good farming.'

Vanya Cullen describes how Biodynamics was the natural next step after converting to organics in 1998, echoing Nick Mills: 'I liked the holistic approach,' she says. 'It goes right through to all aspects of what you're doing, and fits in with the philosophy of quality and integrity established by my parents. We're all working towards a common goal now. The ego disappears.'

What's more, the wines get better. 'I felt there was a noticeable difference straight away,' says Cullen. 'Last vintage (2004, the first after using Biodynamic techniques) I saw an improvement in the quality of the grapes, especially in the reds. The wines they made had this brightness of fruit flavour to them.'

And veteran Biodynamic citrus grower John Priestley gives countless examples of how Biodynamics has improved the health of his land and the quality (and profitability) of his crop - without mentioning cosmic forces once.

The no-bull approach works: at the end of the conference, I see David Paxton deep in conversation with John Priestley. You can see the grape-grower soaking up the old citrus-grower's wisdom like a sponge. Later, Paxton tells me he's joined Biodynamic Agriculture Australia and has identified two vineyard sites that he'll start trialling Biodynamic techniques on later this year.

This could well be the next step in the journey of Biodynamic viticulture Down Under: larger scale developments, echoing those of Chapoutier in the Rhone. And it looks like being a new form of Biodynamics, too: already, people are discussing the significant issues that arise when you apply a method of farming developed in chilly, wet middle Europe to the ancient, dry, sun-baked soils of Australia and the younger, glacial, alluvial soils of New Zealand.

For example, the use of prep 501 (ground up quartz crystal buried in the cow horn over summer), originally developed to increase the plant's absorption of weaker northern hemisphere sunlight, is possibly

less crucial to an Australian grower: Ron Laughton, for example, doesn't use it.

And a European's understanding of seasonal cycles is quite different to an Australian's: as Hamish Mackay, CEO of Biodynamic Agriculture Australia, points out, 'Aborigines in some parts of the country will tell you there are 26 distinct seasons - something we have to bear in mind as we adopt European ideas.'

Personally, I'm looking forward to tasting that Biodynamic Gruner Veltliner from the Carpenters' calm hill near Canberra.

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