

How Green Is Your Wine?

Today's organic and biodynamic producers

JULIANNE WILL

About 40 consumers filled a classroom on a recent weeknight at Just Grapes, a wine store in downtown Chicago, to hear a presentation on biodynamic wines. Erinn Benziger was on

hand to describe the methods used at her family's Sonoma vineyards, all of which are either Demeter-certified Biodynamic, certified organic, or sustainably farmed. Almost before she could



Flow forms used to mix biodynamic preparations at Patianna Organic Vineyards in Mendocino County, Calif. (above); workers till the soil on Domaine Leflaive's land in Burgundy (right).

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begin, hands went up to ask the question: What is biodynamics, and how is it different from organic winemaking?

It's a question consumers are asking now more than ever, as interest in green agricultural practices has skyrocketed. Products labeled "natural" or "organic" have seen double-digit sales growth in recent years and now net close to \$21 billion annually, according to the December 2007 "Healthy-by-Design Foods Report" from Technomics; the company predicts sales of organic and natural products to grow at a 15-20% compounded average annual rate through 2010.

The rise of the Slow Food movement, the explosion of farmers' markets and gourmet groceries, the growth of the foodie culture with its omnipresent blogs, and the popularity of chefs who tout their local, seasonal, and natural in-

gredients are all spurring consumers to wonder what's in their glasses.

"I think demand for these types of wines is very high because as a planet, we are starting to think more about what we consume and how it made it to our table," says Brian Vaughan, a Chicago consultant for Distinctive Wine and Spirits. "It seems like more of a psychographic rather than a demographic. More educated consumers are more concerned with global warming and organic wines and foods."

That psychographic is what prompted the class on biodynamics at Just Grapes. Don Sritong, the owner and a corporate sommelier, says he has seen a dramatic increase in consumer curiosity over the past year: "The reasons range from being environmentally conscious and myths of allergies to purity of flavor. What we have found with most customers is that if they can get an organic/biodynamic wine that is as good for the same price or slightly more, they will choose the organic/biodynamic wine eight of 10 times."

That doesn't necessarily hold true everywhere—even within the same city. Tony Basich, owner of Chicago's Vintage Wine Bar, says he hasn't felt the impact of the green movement



Photos by Marc Planter, courtesy of Domaine Leflaive (previous page, bottom); photo courtesy of Patianna Organic Vineyards (top)



Workers at Burgundy's Domaine Leflaive (above); chickens patrol for insects at Patianna Organic Vineyards in Mendocino County, Calif. (right).



Photo courtesy of Patianna Organic Vineyards (top left); photo by Marc Plantec, courtesy of Domaine Leflaive (top right)

from the customers filling his establishment. He's still working on basic wine education for those who have only recently decided to trade in their vodka martinis.

But at The Little Nell in Aspen, Colo., wine director Richard Betts, MS, finds a constant demand for recommendations on organic and biodynamic wines. "I'm hearing more interest in organic wine all the time," Betts says. "Some—that's all they want to drink."

What's in a Label?

Organic and Biodynamic certifying organizations have sprung up worldwide with the purpose of reassuring consumers that a precise, rigorous set of standards has been met. As with Benziger Family Winery, certification can demonstrate a winemaker's commitment to these practices—but can still be a source of confusion for many. Frequent changes in U.S. organic labeling laws aren't helping matters.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is responsible for food-labeling standards in this country. To be labeled "100% organic," a product must contain 100% organically produced ingredients. To be labeled simply "organic," a product must contain at least 95% organic ingredients. Generally speaking, an organic wine must be made without the use of genetically modified organisms or artificial pesticides, fertilizers, and other compounds. And because an organic product cannot contain added sulfites, the use

of sulfur dioxide limits a wine to the category of "made with organic ingredients," where the product must be at least 70% organic. Even then, total sulfite concentration cannot exceed 100 ppm.

That 70% standard is the one most closely aligned with the European Union's definition of "wine made from organically grown grapes." The EU applies its certification only to practices in the vineyard; winemaking procedures and permitted levels of sulfur dioxide may vary among individual certifying bodies.

Sulfur dioxide is used by almost every wine producer as an antiseptic, preservative, and antioxidant, whether in vineyard spraying, in barrel aging, or in bottling. Popular perception blames sulfites for the infamous red-wine headache, but research has shown that histamines or other sources are as often the cause, and that people with true sulfite sensitivities may have reactions to a variety of foods. Even without the addition of sulfur dioxide, the grape seeds, stems, and skins naturally contain trace amounts of sulfites, making it impossible to eliminate them from wine entirely.

Digging a Little Deeper

While organic winemaking follows a naturalistic approach to viticulture, biodynamics goes several steps further. Based on a philosophy outlined by Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner in the 1920s, biodynamics takes a holistic view of growing systems and their interconnectiv-

Don Sritong of Chicago's Just Grapes (top); the Loire's Nicolas Joly (bottom).

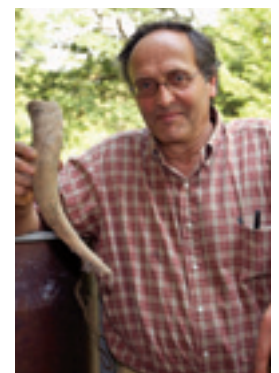


Photo courtesy of Just Grapes (top); photo by Mick Rock/Cephas (bottom)



A biodynamic preparation is sprayed on Domaine Leflaive's vineyard (left); Domaine Leflaive's new school of wine and terroir teaches professionals about the importance of soil, biodiversity, and organic viticulture (above).

Rachel Driver of Chicago's Lush wine shops (top); German exporter Georg Mueller (bottom).



ity with the earth's seasonal rhythms and lunar cycles. To wine drinkers who have heard about stuffing cow horns with manure and burying them at a certain time of the year, or of concocting all-natural sprays that are stirred first in one direction and then the other, biodynamics may seem to have more in common with astrology than with agriculture.

The essence of biodynamic farming, however, is the development of a self-sustaining, self-contained ecosystem. Flowers are planted between rows to attract the good bugs that eat the bad bugs that prey on vines; animals are raised to provide fertilizer and consume unwanted weeds; ponds are built with natural aeration systems to filter water. True biodynamics is specific in its use of horn manure and horn-silica field preparations. Biodynamic compost includes starters such as yarrow and chamomile. And the application of these compounds and other vineyard procedures are timed to the lunar cycle.

Demeter International is the worldwide Biodynamic certifying body. Its practices are outlined in a 41-page document, but its overall goal, as stated on its website, is simple: "The aim is always to practice agriculture in such a manner that structuring the farm as an integrated unit results in productivity and health, and that those inputs needed for production are generated out of the farm itself."

Nicolas Joly, who has been farming biodynamically in the Loire for years, is noted for his leadership in France. His second book on the

subject, *What Is Biodynamic Wine?*, was published last year, and in 2001, he founded the Return to Terroir/Renaissance des Appellations group (see table), whose members adhere to organic and biodynamic principles. Many growers, however, prefer practice over certification—which makes it a challenge to know what international wines are made organically or biodynamically without reading every label or visiting every website. "This method of cultivation is quickly spreading among discerning growers, so the list is expanding exponentially with little documentation or official certification," says Rachel Driver, manager of Lush wine shops in Chicago. "Some growers quietly get on with it, while others shout about it. And there are always those growers that practice 'almost' organic and biodynamic, or dabble in it and experiment with implementing pieces of the 'bio-d' philosophy. The system is always in flux, shifting as each season presents challenges and opportunities for growers across the world."

Georg Mueller, sales manager for his wife's wine importing and exporting business in Nackenheim, Germany, has seen a surge in demand for organic wines among his younger clients in the United States. But as he notes, many small, organic wineries in Europe have no website in English to explain their approach. "Here, only the salesperson can advise or educate," Mueller says.

A good relationship with a trusted representative is essential, and a little digging can also turn up a wealth of information. "I think



The biodynamic approach includes the use of fermented herbal and mineral preparations as compost additives and field sprays (above); Domaine Leflaive's horse Ouragon plowing the vineyard (right).



the best 'CliffsNotes' for a buyer or consumer would be the winemaker's personal notes on the winemaking process," says Vaughan. "The winemaker's notes explain why they believe in their process."

The Process and the Pour

Once you determine whether a grower or winemaker is truly organic or biodynamic, you and your customers can rely on the certification as an indicator that rigorous agricultural standards have been met. But organic wines are still battling a bit of a perception problem. At one time, they were "destined for the local co-op, on the shelf next to the patchouli," says Betts. Some producers are still sacrificing consistency and quality for process—meaning every bottle in a case is different. "As a sommelier," Betts adds, "it's not serviceable."

"Organic wines in the past were focused more on the practice as their point of difference," says Sritong. "You found wineries that entered the market with the sole intention of producing organic wines. The level of quality they accepted was what they felt was the best they could do as a result of being organic."

Today, there is a recognition that the organic or biodynamic process should not be the only determinant—that a really great pour is still critical. Conversely, top-end wineries that once practiced conventional farming are discovering the long-term benefits, in terms of both cost

and quality, of growing more sustainably. "The degree of sustainability is where the lines get drawn," Sritong notes. A winemaker or grower might feel that organic or biodynamic farming is more an agricultural philosophy than a marketing point, might not have the capital to invest in certification, might prefer to maintain some flexibility in managing what Mother Nature brings, or might want to avoid the old stigma attached to low-quality organic wines. On the other hand, many producers feel strongly that certification provides consistent standards, protects the investments and efforts of those "playing by the rules," and allows wine buyers and consumers to know what they're getting.

Getting Down to Basics

If you really want to know what happens in the vineyard, however, you might have to get your hands dirty. Kerri Thompson would likely welcome the help. After making wines at some of the top wineries around the world, she has recently created her own label, KT and the Falcon, in Clare Valley, South Australia. Thompson is an example of a winemaker who is a bit organic, a bit biodynamic, and a lot sustainable—and primarily interested in how those practices can make great grapes. She farms where she lives, so she has additional motivation. "It's very important when you live and work in an environment to make it as healthy and sustainable as possible," Thompson says. "Initially, we wanted to make

Burgundy's Anne Leflaive (top); Australian wine-maker Kerri Thompson (bottom).



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Racks at Just Grapes wine store in Chicago.

sure we weren't making ourselves at risk."

She applied her first round of purchased biodynamic preparations four years ago, and has since tried making her own preparations, with varying degrees of success. "We really don't want to lock ourselves into any one thing in particular," Thompson says. "For us, it's been a process of reduction heading toward elimination."

She noticed slow progress: first, a change in the soil and weeds, with more worm activity; next, an increase in the wildlife around her patch of dirt. Now, Thompson is seeing the fruits of her labor in grapes that ripen before bad weather sets in, with thicker skins that don't split during late-season rainfall. She has created "a vineyard that's in tune with itself," as she describes it. The vines "just seem to naturally regulate themselves. What I've learned this year is that some parcels of grapes know exactly where they're headed, and, as their custodians, we need to stand back and support them steering themselves."

Ultimately, Thompson believes, the result is better fruit and better wine, particularly her Riesling. But "if anyone is adopting biodynamics purely for the marketing opportunity," she says, "then it's a shortsighted approach. The novelty will wear off. Shoveling cow manure at 6 in the morning—you must be passionate about it. This is a lifestyle choice, not a marketing choice."

Betts is another winemaker who uses a little of this practice and a little of that practice, but has not yet sought certification for his Betts & Scholl label. "It takes an enormous time commitment, which I totally applaud," he says. His wine is largely organic, though, "because we realize that that's the way to get the best grapes. The best raw material is generally obtained when you grow organically."

Betts's perspective is echoed in his home life, where his children talk about being an "organic family." That kind of self-identification will continue to drive consumers to inquire in increasing numbers about organics and biodynamics. "The advantage of the good biodynamic/organic wines is that even a consumer who is absolutely into the organic nutrition can still enjoy great wines and miss nothing compared to the standard processed wines," notes Mueller.

Such interest also presents a great opportunity for the sommelier to share knowledge—to clear up misconceptions about sulfites, to explain what the certifications mean, to address quality issues, and to make interesting recommendations based on an understanding of a winemaker's process and philosophy. "I think each wine needs to be looked at from a single standpoint," says Vaughan. He encourages customers "not to just generalize and say, 'I only drink organic wines.'"

Photo courtesy of Just Grapes

In the end, both the certification on the label and an awareness of a winemaker's practices will allow sommeliers to serve their customers at

all points on the spectrum. As Betts puts it, "It's not about the superstar sommelier; it's about the superstar guest." 🍷

CERTIFIED PRODUCERS OF BIODYNAMIC OR ORGANIC WINE*

Australia

Castagna Vineyard
Cullen Wines
Jasper Hill Vineyard
Ngeringa Vineyard

Austria

Geyerhof
Meinklang
Nikolaihof
Schönberger

France

Alsace

Domaine Barmes Buecher
Domaine Josmeyer
Domaine Marc Kreydenweiss
Domaine Marc Tempé
Domaine Marcel Deiss
Domaine Martin Schaezel
Domaine Ostertag
Domaine Pierre Frick
Domaine Valentin Zusslin
Domaine Zind-Humbrecht

Burgundy

A. et P. de Villaine
Domaine d'Auvenay
Domaine Comte Armand
Domaine Derain
Domaine Giboulot
Domaine Lafarge
Domaine Lefèvre
Domaine Leroy
Domaine Montchovet
Domaine Pierre Morey
Domaine Trapet Père et Fils
Domaine des Vignes
du Maynes
SCEA de Quintaine

Bordeaux

Château Falfas
Château Fonroque
Château Gombaude-Guilhot
Château La Grave
Château La Grolet
Château Lagarette
Château Moulin du Cadet
Château Le Puy

Domaine Ferran
Domaine Rousset Peyraguet

Champagne

David Léclapart
F. Bedel
Fleury

Corsica

Domaine Comte Abbattucci
Domaine Pero Longo

Jura

Domaine André et
Mireille Tissot
Domaine Pignier

Languedoc-Roussillon

Domaine Beauchorey
Domaine Cazes
Domaine Les Enfants Sauvages
Domaine Fontedicto
Domaine Léon Barral
Domaine du Rouge Gorges
Domaine du Traginer
Le Petit Domaine de Gimios

Loire

Château Tour Grise
Clos de la Coulée de Serrant
Domaine de l'Ecu
Domaine Gaillard
Domaine de la Garelière
Domaine des Maisons Brulées
Domaine Mosse
Domaine des Sablonnettes
Domaine Saint-Nicolas
Ferme de la Sansonnière
Olivier Cousin
Pierre Breton

Provence

Château Romanin
Château de Roquefort
Château Sainte-Anne
Domaine Les Fouques
Domaine Hauvette
Domaine de Trévallon

Rhône

Clos du Joncuas

Domaine Les Aphillantes
Domaine du Coulet
Domaine La Fourmente
Domaine Monier
Domaine Pierre André
Domaine de Villeneuve
Domaine Viret
M. Chapoutier
Montirius

Savoy

Domaine Prieuré
Saint-Christophe

Southwest

Château de Mayrague
Domaine Le Bouscas
Domaine du Pech
Domaine de Souch

Germany

Christmann
Eymann
Hahn Müller
Sander
Wittmann

Italy

Borc Dodon
La Busattina
Campinuovi
Casavecchia
Casina di Cornia
Casina Degli Ulivi
Casina la Pertica
Cefalicchio
Emidio Pepe
Fabbrica di San Martino
Fattoria Castellina
Fattoria Cerreto Libri
Loacker
Montesecondo
Paolo Francesconi
Il Paradiso di Manfredi
Podere la Cerreta
Podere Concori
Poggio Trevalle
San Giuseppe
San Polino

Tenuta di Poggio
Tenuta di Valgiano
Terre a Mano
Tre Poggi

New Zealand

Milton Vineyard

Portugal

Quinta de Covela

Slovenia

Cotar
Movia

South Africa

Reyneke Wines
Rozendal Farm

South America

Antiyal
Santa Emiliana

Spain

Albet i Noya
Alvaro Palacios
Descendientes de J. Palacios
Dominio de Pingus
Lezaun
Mas Estela
Telmo Rodríguez
Quinta Sardonía

Switzerland

Domaine de Beudon

United States

Araujo Estate Wines
Benziger Family Winery
Brick House Vineyards
Cayuse Vineyards
Ceago Estate Wines
Cotturi Winery
Evasham Wood Winery
Frogs Leap Winery
McNab Ranch Bonterra
Mendocino Farms Winery
Patianna Organic Vineyards
Robert Sinskey Vineyards
Tres Sabores

*Members of the Return to Terroir/Renaissance des Appellations group who have applied biodynamic or organic vineyard practices on their entire estates for at least three years and have earned organic or Biodynamic certification.