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FT Magazine Wine

The bizarre but also beneficial methods that make biodynamic wine

A step beyond organic viticulture, producers are reaping the rewards of regeneration

Jancis Robinson MARCH 11 2023

The most instructive tasting I experienced during my two weeks in New Zealand recently was not specifically linked to either wine or New Zealand.

I was given two wine glasses filled with soil by Grant Rolston, a ruddy-faced viticulturist from a long line of farmers. The contents of the left-hand one looked and, with a bit of encouragement, smelt like dust. But out of the right-hand glass leapt a complex array of aromas that seemed as lively as the earth inside, which was full of fragments of vine roots and tiny insects.

The soil in the left-hand glass had been taken from an unidentified vineyard farmed conventionally, so treated with chemical fertilisers and fungicides. That on the right came from Rudi Bauer's biodynamic Quartz Reef wine operation in Central Otago in the south of the South Island, where I was tasting. The two vineyards, Rolston said, had been planted at the same time.

Biodynamic growing is a step beyond organic viticulture, whose adherents simply forswear agrochemicals. Bauer is an avid follower, which means being guided by the phases of the moon, burying homeopathic doses of special "dynamised" (stirred) preparations in cow horns at propitious times and other bizarre rituals. But all over the world producers of some of the most admired wines follow biodynamic principles, with a demonstrably beneficial effect.

The soil demonstration took place in Bauer's open-sided "centre of biodynamic operations", more accurately described as a wooden shack. It was flanked by beds of valerian, chamomile and yarrow, and an old meat safe used for drying these ingredients for various biodynamic preparations hung from the ceiling. Butterflies flitted everywhere. The earth floor was home to a colony of sandflies.

Like farmers of all sorts, vignerons are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of what goes on below rather than above ground. Soil, often degraded by decades of agrochemicals, is becoming the new focus of vine-grower attention. We now understand the importance of underground networks of microbes and fungi in promoting healthy growth — the more earthworms the better.

One requirement of biodynamic growing is to abandon tillage, which turns over the soil, breaking up these networks and reducing the soil's water-holding capacity. One of its most visible effects is the planting between vine rows of a healthy mix of different cover crops that sequester carbon in the soil, and can be designed to attract predators that will keep vine pests at bay without recourse to pesticides. Bare earth is no longer a badge of honour in a vineyard, rather the reverse.

Another buzzword is biodiversity. Even the Bordelais, who at one time rejected organic viticulture, boast of how many trees and hedges they have planted in their vineyards. In New Zealand, demand is so great that nurseries are short of native tree saplings.

Every year we have a writing competition for visitors to JancisRobinson.com and the theme last year was regeneration. We had entries citing at least 24 wine producers committed not just to sustainability but to regeneration.

The wines I recommend here are made by those profiled in the competition. They are mainly produced from regeneratively grown vines, although some of the producers cited, while on the path to regeneration, have not yet arrived.

The Torres family of Spain and Chile are wine producers who have long been more aware than most of the effects of climate change on viticulture. Miguel Torres Maczassek was present at the launch of the not-for-profit Regenerative Viticulture Foundation in London last year, along with Mimi Casteel of Hope Well Wines in Oregon, herself one of the most persuasive advocates of regenerative viticulture.

Torres told of how, when he started to sow cover crops in his vineyards in 2020, his neighbours were convinced that these “weeds” were a sign that Familia Torres was going down the tubes. Most of the Torres wines that will result from this new philosophy are as yet unreleased, but I include the first to emerge on to the market in my recommendations. As he explained to me, “the wine does not cite regenerative viticulture on the label because there was no proper certification at that time”.

Torres is president of Spain’s RVA (Regenerative Viticulture Alliance), which has been developing an international protocol with associated certification. The idea is that under the auspices of Ecocert, the well-established international organic-certifying body, individual soils will be audited every three years. There will also be an app, linked to the certification, to help vine growers monitor regenerative practices in their soil. “We made it all very simple and with no bureaucracy so any vine grower can join.”

The American ROC (Regenerative Organic Certification™), launched in 2020, is more demanding because it’s even more wide-ranging and requires a commitment to organic farming. It also requires integrating animal welfare and livestock operations, where appropriate (it can be applied to a wide variety of products — not just wine) as well as the social aspects of sustainability (looking after the workforce and so on).

The organisation’s motto is “Farm like the world depends on it”. So far the only wine operations to be fully ROC-certified are Domaine Bousquet in Argentina, Troon in Oregon and Fetzer, Neal, Sominer, Tablas Creek and Truett-Hurst in California.

The nexus between wine production and fauna is an interesting one. Working horses have become increasingly common in vineyards as they generally entail much less harmful compaction of the soil than all but the most recently designed tractors. Sheep are also increasingly put to work in vineyards to keep cover crops trimmed (if cover crops grow too abundantly, they start to compete with vines for nutrients and may even risk imposing themselves between vine leaves and the sunshine needed for photosynthesis and grape ripening). Geese have also been known to do this job, and there is one farm, Antiquum, in southern Oregon, that grazes not just sheep and geese but also pigs, chickens and turkeys in its vineyards.

But animals and, especially, birds are more often seen as pests by vine growers. Vines are commonly and cumbersomely netted as grapes approach ripeness in much of New Zealand and parts of Australia and the UK, so attractive are they to the local bird population. This is rare in France, a fact not unconnected to the popularity of *la chasse* among the French.

And in many parts of the world vineyards, especially tender young vines that grow conveniently close to the ground, have to be fenced to keep out animal predators: wild boar (in Tuscany especially), more exotic wildlife (in parts of Africa) and rabbits (in Central Otago), for instance. During my recent visit to Quartz Reef, Bauer provocatively pointed out that the most effective defence against leaf-munching rabbits was one few growers would choose: urban development.

Best biodynamic wines

SPARKLING

- **Wyfold Rosé Brut 2018 England 12%**
£33 Laithwaites

WHITES

- **Reyneke Organic Chenin Blanc 2020 Western Cape 13.5%**
£8.99 Waitrose
- **Henschke, Peggy's Hill Riesling 2022 Eden Valley 12.5%**
£19.30 Vinum, £20.46 Shelved Wine, £22 Oz Wine
- **Filipa Pato & William Wouter, Nossa Calcario Bical 2020 Bairrada 13%**
£32 Festa Wine
- **Clos de la Meslerie, Sec 2017 Vouvray 13.5%**
£34 Buon Vino

REDS

- **Torres, Clos Ancestral 2021 Penedes, Spain 14%**
£14.88 Nickolls & Perks
- **Thymiopoulos, Jeunes Vignes Xinomavro 2020 Naoussa, Greece 13.5%**
£16.25 Hennings, £17.10 Theatre of Wine
- **Te Mata, Bullnose Syrah 2018 Hawke's Bay, NZ 13.5%**
£35.68 Lay & Wheeler, £39.05 Vinum
- **Ch Haut Bages-Libéral 2019 Pauillac 14.5%**
Four Walls Wine £41.70
- **Tablas Creek, Esprit de Tablas 2017 Adelaida District of Paso Robles, California 14.5%**
£49.95 AG Wines