

# WINES & VINES

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## Putting Their Faith in Biodynamic Grapes

Vintners discuss why they have pursued Biodynamic grape growing at conference held by Demeter USA

by Stacy Briscoe

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*San Francisco, Calif.*—“The gift of the wine industry to the marketplace is the introduction to biodynamics,” said Elizabeth Candelaria, president of Demeter USA.

According to Candelaria and the Demeter Association, in 2006, most Demeter members consisted of small family — non-vineyard — farms, distributing produce regionally. But since that time, winery membership has grown extensively, and in 2017 the association recorded a total of 603 Demeter wineries in 19 different countries, producing biodynamic wines from 32,514 certified acres.

Wineries choosing to farm and produce wines biodynamically come in all sizes, some remain small family farms, while others sell wines in the consumer marketplace. And yet it seems that within the industry, as well as in the larger marketplace, there are still certain preconceived notions and stereotypes about what biodynamic means and debates about the quality of the wines produced.

On Monday, May 7, Demeter USA gathered together viticulturists, winemakers, growers and scientists from across the globe to educate and celebrate what biodynamics really mean — in the vineyard, in the bottle, on the shelf and in the glass.

### What science says

“The most important part of the vineyard comes from the unseen,” said Jean-Charles Boisset, vintner and proprietor of Boisset Collection, which includes vineyards and wineries in Burgundy, Napa and the Russian River Valley. Over the course of his career, Boisset said he has transitioned all of his family’s estate vineyards to organic and biodynamic farming. “The quality of a wine comes from the invisible part of mother nature; the feeding mechanism of the plant” he said, “*Terroir*, comes from underneath.”

Biodynamics refers to a self-sustaining farm or vineyard, one that uses its own natural resources to create and regenerate life. It is, as Boisset said, a “theatre of nature,” and the show goes well beyond fermenting cow manure in a cow horn (although that is a part of it). Biodynamic farming prohibits chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and fungicides; it integrates animal life, animal feeds, perennial plants, flowers, trees, and composting to feed the soil; and farms are required to set-aside and maintain at least 10% total acreage for biodiversity, which can include wetlands, grasslands, and forests. In short, the vineyard is its own, self-contained eco-system.

The results? According to Glenn McGourty, University of California cooperative farm advisor for Mendocino and Lake Counties and panelist during the conference’s science session, long term studies on biodynamic farmlands have shown an increase in overall soil health, characterized specifically by

on biodynamic farmlands have shown an increase in overall soil health, characterized specifically by increased microbial activity that then feeds into the vines. McGourty cited a study conducted by the University of California, Davis that concluded this microbial activity ultimately reveals itself in the resulting wines.

### **Conventional vs. biodynamics**

Bob Lindquist, founder and winemaker of Qupé in Santa Maria, Calif., straddles both sides of the debate, crafting conventional wines from Bien Nacido vineyards, and biodynamic wines from vineyards in the Edna Valley.

His biodynamic wines, which consist of Syrah, Grenache, Marsanne, and Viognier, are all produced in small lots in limited releases. It's his conventional wines that line the shelves of the consumer marketplace.

Though he's lobbied the owners of Bien Nacido to transition to biodynamics, they're hesitant. "It's a complex process," said Lindquist, referring to both the certification process and the investments required for the transition, namely the infrastructure: spray rigs, tractors, stirring machines that all meet the Demeter specifications.

When asked which wines he prefers, he points to his biodynamic wines. "Better grapes," he said. "Better for the environment. ... Being a winemaker is a constant quest to get the best out of the land. Biodynamic farming is farming with observation and gives you better tools to be a better winemaker and make better wines."

Lindquist said he is looking to increase his biodynamic wine production from Edna Valley and working on getting these wines into the larger, consumer marketplace. "I'm doing this (biodynamic winemaking) because it means something to us but would love recognition in the marketplace."

To those in the industry considering biodynamics, he encourages getting certified. "It's an important step and companies like Whole Foods recognize that extra step and appreciate the Demeter logo. And when a company like that pays attention, it gets the consumer's attention."

### **Investing in the future**

As of October 2017, Tablas Creek Vineyard winery in Paso Robles, Calif., is officially Demeter Certified Biodynamic — but it's nothing that general manager Jason Haas is planning to publicize. For him, the mission of Tablas Creek is to produce Rhône varietals expressive of their Paso Robles vineyards, and the choice to convert to biodynamic viticulture and winemaking was dictated by desire to showcase the *terroir*.

Since its start in 1989, Tablas Creek has always farmed organically (officially certified in 2003). In 2010, with the encouragement of winemaker Neil Collins, the iconic winery turned its sights to biodynamics, transitioning an experimental 20 acres. "I was tasked with making wines with focus and that show a sense of place from day one," said Collins, "Biodynamics seemed like the next natural step to do that."

Both Haas and Collins are happy with the results in the vineyard, but Haas doesn't feel he has enough data yet to confirm the effects on the wine. "2017 was the strongest collection of wines I've ever seen from Tablas Creek," Haas said. "But do I know that's from the biodynamics and not the fact that we actually got 43 inches of rain after five years of drought? I don't know how to tease those apart."

Despite his uncertainty regarding the wines, Haas does say the vineyard has never looked healthier, specifically noting the soils' ability to accept large amounts of water during the heavy rain during January and February of this year. "There's no erosion in the soil; the water doesn't run off and take the top soil with it."

Haas remembers his father, Robert Haas the founder of Tablas Creek who recently passed away in April, telling him "I didn't build this (vineyard) for myself. I'm not going to be around when the vines are at their peak. And I didn't really build this for you either. But for your kids and the generations after."

For Haas, the investment in biodynamics is more an investment in the future of his business and family. "The vines will be a lot healthier and we won't have to replant every 25 years, which in a high stress environment like Paso Robles is a big deal," he said. Referring to his wines, he added, "I don't know that we're going to see our benefit in the short term, but certainly in the long term."