

Back to the earth

by Thomas Pellechia

Rochester Magazine, January 2006

The future of wine-making might include returning to past methods.

“Great wine starts in the vineyard.” It’s an old axiom that has come up against a nagging question lately: Can today’s generally accepted viticultural practices sustain great wine production into the future?

Some winemakers who answer no are going organic, or even biodynamic, for their stake of the future.

Prior to the 20th century, soil and plants were viewed as part of an environmental ecosystem (lack of a viable chemical industry helped preserve the concept). Just about all farmers were “organic.” In European viticulture today, many top French, Italian, German and Austrian producers still farm this way, but they haven’t been saying so on their wine labels. They simply see nothing special about how they grow their grapes.

The view of post-World War II agribusiness in the United States is that soil is inert—unable to grow anything without the help of new and improved synthetic chemicals to rid it of diseases and pests. International wine writer Monty Waldin claims that the result of this practice leaves a residue of about five ounces of synthetic chemicals in every bottle of wine—close to 20% by volume.

In the United States, the word “organic” now has cachet in food marketing—just look at the Whole Foods phenomenon. Viticulturists who want to get in on the act must eschew synthetic chemicals before they apply for organic certification, which gives them the right to use the word “organic” on their labels.

But with a growing list of wine producers claiming to be organic, it was inevitable the ante would be upped. Organic producers wanting to differentiate themselves in the future had best consider something today called biodynamics.

In the 1920s, the Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner claimed that certain spiritual or mystical forces were necessary to all life. He prescribed farming methods based on the belief that not just animals but also soil and plants are sentient living beings and that the complete universe plays a natural role in the health and growth of all living things.

Whatever one thinks of Steiner’s theoretical ideas, his practical farming methods have taken root in some 21st-century vineyards, under the name “biodynamics.” To be biodynamic, you must first be organic. But biodynamic growing adds nine preparations required to enhance soil quality and stimulate plant life. Various combinations of mineral, plant or animal manure extracts are fermented, diluted, stirred and applied in homeopathic-like proportions to compost, soil, or directly onto plants. Before application, biodynamic preparations are buried in the earth usually for six months at a time to ferment.

One application used to control or suppress fungal diseases is actually prepared from a plant

that grows as a weed in our region: the silica-rich horsetail. Richard Figiel, one of the few grape growers in the Finger Lakes trying to grow organically, has tried this preparation.

“You have to harvest the horsetail plant during the summer solstice, which I do. and I get to do it for free because it is all around me,” says Figiel. “I dry it, boil it, dilute it, bury it and spray it under certain prescribed conditions of the sun.”

That’s because biodynamic theory also claims that the ultraviolet light of the sun, in a certain position in the sky, helps the leaves of the vines to accept and assimilate the spray.

Okay, so organic and biodynamic viticulture is good for the earth, and since it leaves no synthetic residue in the wine we drink, it is likely good for our bodies. But has the wine gotten any better? Can we taste the difference?

Figiel, for one, is excited about organic growing and biodynamics as ways to bring farming back in harmony with the earth and the universe. But when asked if either method can be detected in the quality of the wine, he answers bravely, “I don’t know.”

“So many factors affect taste—not the least of which is the winemaker’s intervention,” Figiel says. “But I know that synthetic chemicals poison the land. I wonder to what extent they create unhealthy plants, and thereby an expensive dependence on chemicals. I also know that healthy grapes produce great wine.”

Figiel takes us back to the beginning: “Great wine starts in the vineyard.”

Recently, the California Association of Winegrape Growers (CAWG), in conjunction with

two insurance companies, developed a Wine Industry Property & Liability insurance package that rewards growers with reduced premiums if they practice sustainable viticulture. CAWG's mantra includes words like "managing risks proactively" and "implementing sound environmental practices."

If I were a betting man, I would lay a few dollars down on big changes for the future of viticulture. And I might even be inclined to up the ante, to bet on biodynamics. As for betting that the new direction will produce great wine: like Figiel, I don't know. But it will be fun to find out, sooner or later.