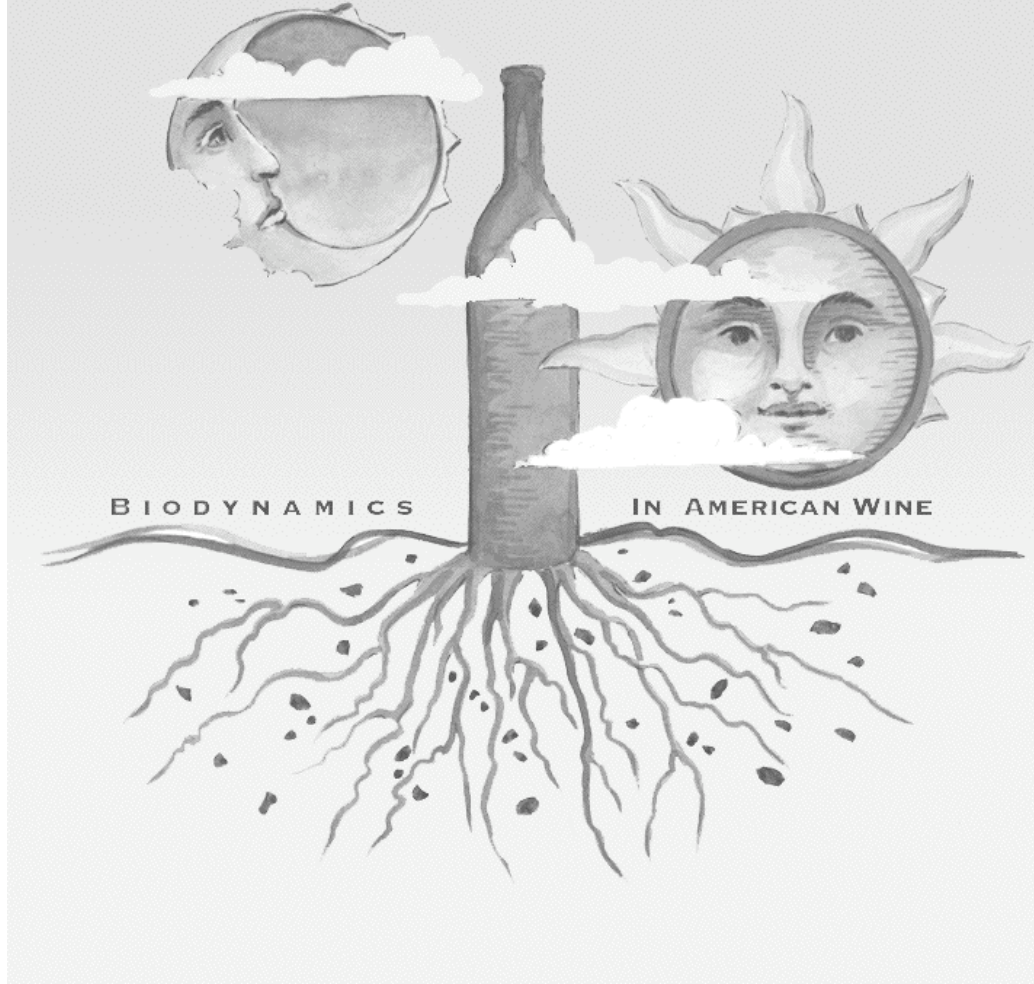


BD FORUM



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Part 3: Why Biodynamics?

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JIM FETZER, PAUL DOLAN AND ALAN YORK

MODERATED BY THOM ELKJER

Thom Elkjer: So now we're going to slide this table out of the way and I'm going to introduce Jim Fetzer from Ceago Vinegarden and Paul Dolan from Mendocino Wine Company.

These guys are well-known to most of you as being a couple of the organic pioneers in the American wine business. And one of the reasons I wanted to get them up here right out of the box is to ask people who have already looked into the holistic macrocosmic view of viticulture to talk to us about how they see biodynamics in the broader field of green viticulture, where it stands relative to organics for example, what motivated them to go toward it, not just as farmers, but also as businessmen and as human beings. Because as Alan was just saying the human element in biodynamics is big. And I want them to talk to us about that a little bit. So one of you guys want to take a swing at that?

Jim Fetzer: Well, I think 10 years ago we would need only two rows of chairs, so it's exciting to see a good group out there. And I am a hunter, Alan, so I kind of got a sense of what you were saying there, [that sense of authenticity you were] describing.

I think really what set the stage for me was early on in my life. I was seven years old when my dad bought the home ranch in Redwood Valley. This was about an 800-acre property. It had some oak woodlands, we had some conifers on the mountain. We had a stream running through it. We had sheep. We had cows. We had vineyards with Alicante Bouschet, Golden Chasselas, and Mission: those three grapes. We had a pear orchard that was interplanted with grapes. We had alfalfa fields, timothy fields.

So you get the sense it was basically a farm with some vineyards in it. And in those days there was no trellising so we could cultivate both ways. And there was no need for herbicides. The only chemical we used was some organic sulfur and that was about it. We had meadowlarks in the fields. We had butterflies, spiders, mustard. I mean, it was naturally a beautiful place. And we had deer. We even had a rattlesnake occasionally wrapped around the vine. And we did the hoeing, we hoed by hand, my brothers and sisters. And I guess you'd call my dad a good family planner, having 11 children when you're farming this way.

So it was, I think, around 1967-68 when we started using chemicals. And my brothers and I thought, "Wow, this is great now. Now we can spray this stuff. We have more time to go hunting, do more things." It was really cool. I mean it just killed all these weeds. I mean, we had no problems until about 10, 12 years later we noticed there was no birds. There was no singing of the birds in the field. There were no butterflies. There were no spiders. There was virtually nothing. I mean, it was dead. We had some weeds, but the weeds we had were like cactus. They were the worst weeds that would come out of the ground.

So my brother Bob and I, we kind of followed Alan Chadwick, who Alan York was working with at that time. He was a biointensive gardener and he had traveled up into Covelo. So we visited the gardens, we saw what he was doing, and we took that knowledge back to the farm and we started gardening that way. And then it was in 1984 when we hired Michael Maltas. We were developing the food and wine center at Fetzer. Michael's background was biodynamics, although he was gardening with a more biointensive method.

And so Michael said, "Hey, the easiest things we can do organically is growing grapes." So we started to convert the vineyards back to organic. And by the time we sold the winery in 1992 we were certified with about 1,400 acres of CCOF. And then we sold the winery and you probably remember that back in that time there were some wines that were pretty poor. We weren't too proud [that they were] labeled organic.

So my brother -- you know, I think there's a low-end organic and there's a very high form of organic, basically what Alan talked about, maybe short of the preparations and the field sprays. So we thought we -- we felt we were at that pretty high level and we felt, you know, let's just go to the next step, let's go be certified biodynamic and get away from these other people that were farming organic by default.

Thom Elkjer: So it was a competitive impulse?

Jim Fetzer: It was, yeah, competitive and a marketing strategy I think.

Thom Elkjer: Differentiation. Sort of wholehearted differentiation.

Jim Fetzer: Yes. So that's kind of in a nutshell where I came from. And we've been doing that -- we haven't looked back since then.

Thom Elkjer: What's the difference between organics and biodynamics besides your differentiation, I mean, in terms of how you live or what you look at or what you see?

Jim Fetzer: I think, Thom, I was talking about it earlier, I think to be a biodynamic farmer you have to be an owner, you have to have an estate. There's going to be somebody there that's in charge. And I think we see it with some of these big corporate operations. You know, nobody's there that's really going to take charge. I know if I walk away from my farm for probably 30 days, I come back it's going to be different. Things are going to start changing. So you really have to have that gut feel, that sense of ownership, and to really make these things happen.

I think organic's going to be something for the corporations, but I think biodynamic is going to be for the family farm where you have the owner walking in the field. My dad always said, "You can tell a good vineyard because it has a lot of footprints in it." And it's sort of that way.

Thom Elkjer: So if that's true that you've got to have that gut feeling and be in the vineyard, can biodynamics break big in the wine business, Paul? Can it change the whole game or is it really just a small farm kind of private choice?

Paul Dolan: Well, I guess I was particularly struck with Alan's reading of Pollan, and that concept of that connectedness to the land, that razor-sharp connectedness. And that, I think, is ultimately what we're all looking to achieve in farming and particularly in biodynamics. That really kind of comes out in the conversation of biodynamics.

And I was struck with the gap that exists on the planet today. I mean, we are so far from that as human beings. We have disconnected ourselves so significantly. And yet at the same time I do see that there is an awareness of that disconnection in that we want to move towards that place. And for me biodynamics has that vision, has that sight, has that possibility. So in many ways they're the leaders. They're the leaders in that respect. They're the leaders in their ability to be -- to see the gap, to see what's missing, to see what it is that we don't see. And what I'm also struck with is the responsibility that comes with that because there's a need to share. There's a need to have this kind of conversation.

You know, we, the -- my biggest concern is the planet is in incredible crisis. I mean, we're experiencing a species extinction like we've never experienced it on the planet before. We've destroyed 70% of the forest. We are over-fishing. All 17 oceans are being fished unsustainably. Our water systems are unsustainable. We have seven major rivers on the planet today that don't reach the ocean any longer. So this need for this conversation, the need for this level of understanding, this level of engagement is really critical.

And I don't know that biodynamics will be the way of farming. That would be a real stretch because to be willing to engage -- to be willing to give up what you already hold to be true and let go of that and step into a place that you don't know about, and the willingness to explore is not so easy for us as human beings. But yet inside of this world, this world of biodynamics, this place that Rudolf Steiner saw 100 years ago, he saw this crisis coming, is a phenomenal place to start.

Thom Elkjer: The wine business is different from other forms of agriculture because it produces a luxury product. What about that, does the fact that wine is a luxury product that rich, influential people drink make it a better ambassador for biodynamics than other things might be?

Jim Fetzer: Well, I think it's a good opportunity because we have a chance to travel all over the world, and we do a lot of winemaker dinners, we do a lot of speaking engagements. So we have the opportunity to reach people. And what amazes me is when, you know, we try and describe what biodynamic farming is, and it's not easy to describe it, especially when we talk about the forces of nature, the bio, the white forces.

So I like to talk a little bit about, you know, our dad -- Paul worked with us for many years, but Barney told us back in the late '70s, he said if you guys have the opportunity to rack wine, move it from barrel to barrel, leave the sediment behind, that if you have a choice of doing it on the full moon or the dark of the moon that we should always choose the dark of the moon.

He knew this stuff way back then, that we had gravity, the utmost gravity pulling down. So I think, you know, that was interesting to kind of start learning this. You know, I have a teepee and I've had teepees since I graduated from high school. We cut these teepee poles that are

about three inches around, they're 25 foot tall, and we want to get the bark off the trees. So we've learned over these sessions of cutting poles that the optimum time to do that is on the full moon, the longest day of the year. So we're using the solar cycle and the lunar cycle. And if we do that like on June 21st, around that full moon, I can basically unzip that pole with a piece of bark and take it off in one piece. If I tried to do that on the dark of the moon in December, I would have to take a razorblade and cut every little thread off or it would not release.

So I think the important thing with the biodynamics is working with nature, taking advantage of Mother Nature because if we do that at the right time it just makes our life a lot easier. We have more time to drink wine and do some of the other things Alan talked about. So, you know, I think we have that opportunity to go out. And it really amazes me when we sit down with a crowd and we explain that and talk about those kind of things, they go, "Wow, this is incredible. We never really thought about it, you know, how life works."

So I think, you know, we all have a real huge opportunity to learn more about the rhythm of nature and really take advantage of it in our lives other than just wine.

Thom Elkjer: Paul, why do you think biodynamics is coming into the wine business in this country at this point? Why now?

Paul Dolan: Oh, I think we're really crying out for it. I mean, I think it's this gap that was describing earlier is that we're looking for answers. And the whole conversation around sustainability has really increased significantly. I mean, how many biodynamic farmers did we have 10 years ago? Maybe one or two. And, you know, here we have a room full of people, as Jimmy acknowledged, it probably would have been a row or two.

So it's driven by need. But I think it's also driven by this awareness. You were asking is there value inside of biodynamics for the consumer? I truly do believe that because as Jimmy described you have to be close to your vineyard. You have to be close to those decisions that this whole sense of authenticity that Alan was describing earlier, you know, we, the way I describe it sometimes is you could take a piece of land and actually it probably exists today, take a 40-acre piece of ground and you can spray it and kill every weed and then you can drip it and you can put your inorganic fertilizers through the drip system, and you can sustain that vineyard, but essentially what you're doing is you're putting the vineyard on artificial life support. Or you can go to the other side and you can actually create an environment for the plant to thrive, for the plant to live the life that it wants to live fully and to be able to, for it to fully express itself completely. And then ultimately, of course, it's going to show up in the bottle.

Now that is what we, as winemakers, want. We want the best. We want the most complete expression. We call it, or we have been calling it, "terroir." Maybe there's another description for it now. But ultimately I think biodynamics provides that. And it's the only vehicle right now that I'm aware of that really can provide the insight as that possibility for greatness in wines.

Jim Fetzer: Paul, I think you mentioned, I think it was last summer we had a meeting and you said it's really the organic *food* movement that's pulling the organic wine movement.

But it's the biodynamic *wine* movement that's really pulling the biodynamic movement in California or the U.S. I think that's true.

Alan York: Unless you know Jim it would be really easy to miss a statement that he made that really is the crux of this whole thing. And that is he said, "If I'm away from my farm for 30 days it goes in another direction." Now Jim has some of the best [farm and vineyard] management that there is. For him to say that he needs to be there, he's not saying that his management is incompetent, he's saying that it requires an ego, and an ego is an individuality. Biodynamics cannot be managed by group consciousness. It has to be managed by individuals that state their goals and set the direction and it's that relationship that's really expressed in the wines.

Thom Elkjer: One of the things that Steiner mentions among the many things that don't meet the eye, human attention and human intention is one of the most important. And that's a theme we're going to come back to.