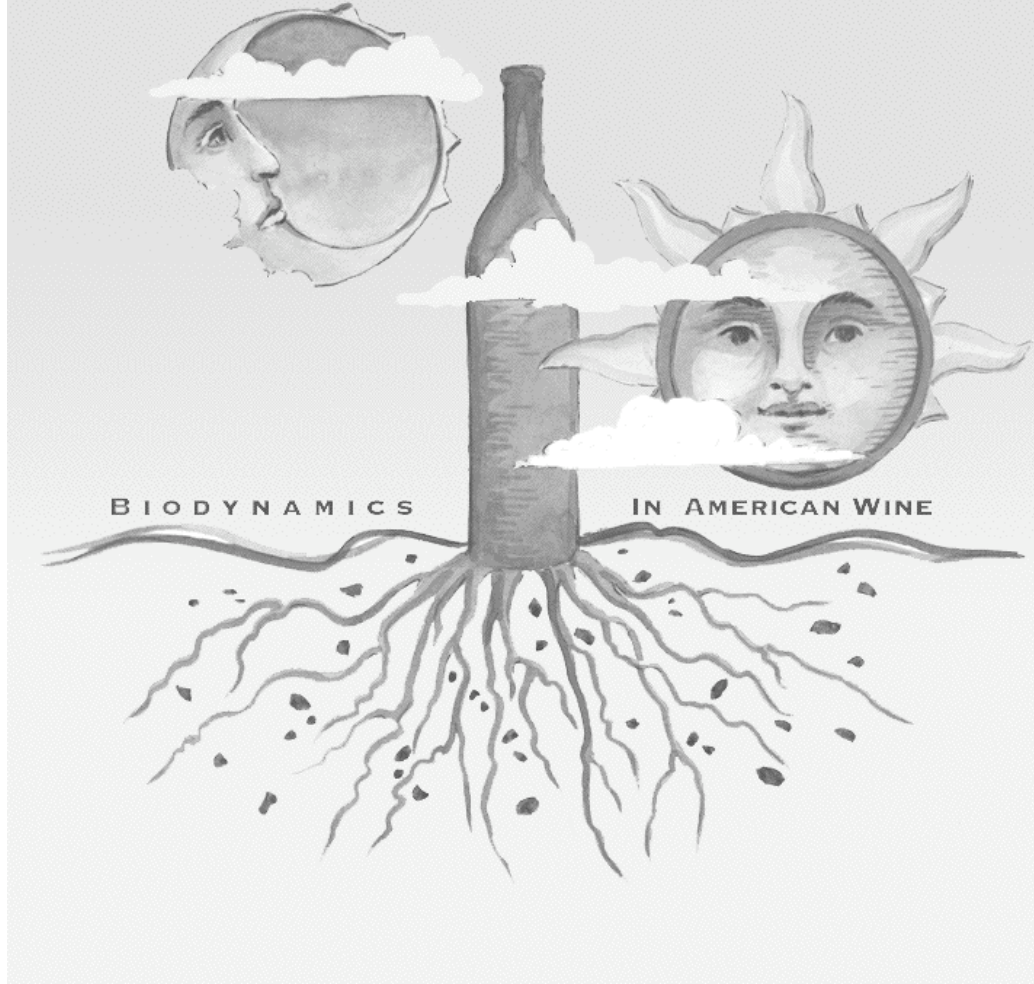


BD FORUM



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Part 4: Biodynamics in Context

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PART 4: BIODYNAMICS IN CONTEXT

MIKE BENZIGER, JIM FULLMER, PAUL DOLAN, ALAN YORK

MODERATED BY THOM ELKJER

Thom Elkjer: We're going to bring up Jim Fullmer from Demeter and Mike Benziger from Benziger Family Winery.

We didn't make an explicit statement about this, but just so you're clear, the wineries that are pouring today are all certified -- they have vineyards certified by Demeter or are officially in transition to certification.

This was what [BD Forum co-producers] Jan [Mettler] and Barbara [Bowman] and I referred to as our clear bright line. So that the wines we could bring you and the wineries we could bring you today would be people you could count on as willing to be public and go through the process of certifying and validating and committing. And so one of the first questions I want to ask Jim Fullmer from Demeter USA is to tell us what exactly certification is. How do you certify? What does it take to become certified?

Jim Fullmer: Demeter certification is not unlike the organic certification process, so many of you are probably familiar with it. And in that context it's somewhat bureaucratic. There is an application process where you apply, a review process of the application, and a whole flow through an office that gets to a point where an evaluator comes out and visits your operation, assesses to how it is in relation to these, the Demeter USA production standards, goes back to the office, goes through a review process that leads to a final decision, very similar to organic certification in its mechanics.

Thom Elkjer: Do people fail? Do you have to call them up and say, "Um, change your practices or...?"

Jim Fullmer: Yeah. It's rare that there are not conditions in a Demeter certification, as these guys [on the panel] all know. There'll be a list of things that have to be done. The one thing about Demeter certification and biodynamics is you're working with a living thing, so it's a living, evolving reality. And what we're depicting, for lack of another word, is an evolution towards this ideal that Alan was hinting at, that none of you are ever going to be able to obtain, but what matters is that you're moving in that direction.

Thom Elkjer: Mike, why did you decide to certify? What's in that for you?

Mike Benziger: I think one of the biggest pitfalls that we face in biodynamics is the possibility of losing trust with the customer. And also, so this is the reason why I think certification's important because the process has to be transparent and the consumer has to understand that there's some kind of regulation to this system.

Thom Elkjer: You mean that it's not a self-selected thing? I can't just spray some crops and call myself biodynamic?

Mike Benziger: Exactly.

Thom Elkjer: Do you think consumers know or care about that? I mean, how much do they know?

Mike Benziger: Well, I think there's a danger out there of consumers becoming confused between what's organic and what's biodynamic. At least that's my experience when I work out there in the field. And I think that they need to have a guarantee of some kind of integrity of practice. And so this is why I think certification is so important because not only can the consumer depend on a certain set of practices, but they also can be sure that there's a certain level of purity in the product.

Thom Elkjer: Who responds? When you are out in the market and you've got a wine that gets a big number from some influential critics and you go out there, people could easily focus on the number, they could focus on the wine, and yet you talk to them about the fact that it's grown biodynamically. Who responds to that information with a sense that that's a good thing and something added to the authenticity of the wine?

Mike Benziger: Well, you know, a couple weeks ago I had one of these biodynamic moments, you know, one of these just, I mean, it just all came together and --

Alan York: Is that kind of like a cannabis moment?

[Laughter]

Mike Benziger: Yeah. But a couple of weeks ago we were part of a wine tasting in New York. This is part of another group that has traveled around the world to promote biodynamics. And this was our third or fourth tasting in New York City. And it was hugely attended. I was blown away. But as I looked over the crowd the one thing that really stood out for me was the age of that group. Most of the people out there, the majority, were between 25 and 35 years old.

And this was a real eye-opener to me. That group to me presents an incredible potential because it's going to continue to grow, but it's also kind of a double-edged sword because I think they can be your best friends and they can also be your worst enemy. This is a group of people that don't want to be marketed to, they don't want to be sold to, and they seem to have the most incredible BS detector. By the time you finish a statement, they can go on a blog, they can go on the Internet, they can check out exactly what you're talking about.

Thom Elkjer: We're all average age 35 here, right?

[Laughter]

Thom Elkjer: To what extent is that audience age controlled by the business they're in, which is restaurant and retail? My experience is that most restaurant sommeliers are on the young side.

Mike Benziger: Most of the time when I'm on the road making calls I'm selling to people between 25 and 35 years old. These are the people that are buying wine for restaurants. These are the people that are the sommeliers out there in the marketplace. These seem to be the gatekeepers out there. And they are not easy to sell to because, like I said, they can see through a marketing scheme versus a real program.

Thom Elkjer: Jim, when you go out and talk about biodynamics, who's listening to you? Who comes to hear you talk? Who are you addressing?

Jim Fullmer: That's a really good question. I think generally it's the consumers. The consumer associates with a certification process in something like Demeter. However, getting back to the youth that's involved with this though, we see a lot of interest from youth that come to the Demeter office. And it's very difficult to take these standards here and say, "Here they are, do it." So it's become a crop improvement process really. There's a lot of questions that are asked, how do you do this? And there's kind of a fledgling extension element that's coming out of Demeter just out of necessity because there is a lot of interest, and it tends to be from younger folks that have a farming background or are interested in farming. So it's in that sense extending beyond just the consumer though. There's a real need for folks to be teaching people how to farm biodynamically so that this wine -- and one theme that I'd like to bring to this is that it's way more than wine. And probably what is more important to us as humans is the food that's going to follow the wine.

Thom Elkjer: Do you agree with Jim's statement that the wine -- biodynamics and American wine is kind of getting more attention and pulling people's attention toward biodynamics and food?

Mike Benziger: Yes, definitely.

Thom Elkjer: So what other crops or foods are also coming along with wine grapes?

Jim Fullmer: Yeah, it's interesting. The crops that are coming along with wine grapes or the products that are coming along with wine tend to be quality-oriented things like medicinal herbs and cosmetics and essential oils. But if you look back into the history of Demeter which goes back to 1928 in Europe where it's very well established, over there it's a quality-oriented brand. It really is much more of a branding concept in Europe than it is here in the U.S. where it's a certification seal. In cities there'll be a Demeter store where consumers will go looking for quality, basically. So back to '28 it's always been a quality kind of seal that has associated a product.

Thom Elkjer: Mike, when you are out in the market how much do people know about biodynamics, how much -- are they interested to learn?

Mike Benziger: Well, when I first went out into the field [to talk about biodynamics] I was absolutely terrorized. I had no idea what to expect. And as a matter of fact, I spent the first three years up in Canada test marketing it.

Thom Elkjer: Yeah, no one in Canada --

Mike Benziger: I didn't want to do it in my own neighborhood, but --

Thom Elkjer: We apologize to the Canadians in the room.

[Laughter]

Mike Benziger: No, no, they were incredible. What I learned up there is that, number one, [good quality] has to be in the bottle. It's more important to have a good wine than almost the message. And in biodynamics the definition of quality is different and this is what's attractive to the customer, too: it's not just about [the wine] being big and intense but it's also about a wine that's distinctive, a wine that I like to say has four fingerprints, which is the fingerprint of the variety, of the vintage, of the place, and of the passion of the people that made it.

And when that happens together it's very, very powerful. I see people naturally gravitate towards this message of doing the right thing -- *and* you can make better wine or better olive oil or whatever.

Thom Elkjer: Which is the wine, is it Quivira, that has the tagline 'Better wine, better world?' That's an interesting summation.

Alan York: Mike, could you, or anybody else, could you expand on what "doing the right thing" means to people that are buying these wines?

Mike Benziger: Well, I mean, we could all jump in here. But for me doing the right thing means conducting your business with responsibility, not just your farming practices but also your business practices too. And this is kind of what I mean with dealing with this younger constituency -- which I really think is the future of biodynamics -- is that our businesses have to be transparent. We can't be only good farmers, we also have to be good partners, and we have to conduct our businesses at a high level, too. It's the whole package the way I see it. You just can't be one -- you just can't be a specialist in one area so to speak.

Alan York: So are you saying that values and ethics play a role in their buying decision?

Mike Benziger: I think that when you can align with people's value systems, then you'll have a customer for life.

Alan York: Do you see that as the case?

Paul Dolan: Well, I think people can see through it. I mean, if you're really speaking with integrity, if you're really speaking with passion, if you really believe what it is that you're

doing, it's going to show up. And I think that's probably what people get enrolled in. Actually, everywhere I go, Mike's already been.

[Laughter]

Thom Elkjer: He's our trailblazer.

Paul Dolan: But, you know, when you talk about biodynamics they clearly don't get it. You clearly don't have enough time to talk about it. But what they *do* get enrolled in is what's your passion, your belief in it, your commitment to it. And that's the -- that's really the hook. And to your point, Alan, if it's not part of your value system, if you're not in integrity with what it is that you're doing, people are going to seek it out, they're going to know right away. They're going to zoom right in on it. And that's -- and so inside of biodynamics you just can't just say you're doing it. You have to live it. You have to be it. It has to be part of who you are every day all day.

And it doesn't mean, I don't think, that, I think Jim [Fullmer] made the comment that we'll never get to this point. We will never get our farms to be [fully] self-sufficient. But the point is that that's the direction to go in, that's the place to be, and that we're all in this process of becoming more in integrity with ourselves and our ranch and the products that we're representing.

Thom Elkjer: So, Jim, let me ask you a question. How many years did it take to get to the 20-odd certified or certifying producers you have now?

Jim Fullmer: People can chime in. I don't know what --

Alan York: Since 1924.

[Laughter]

Jim Fullmer: Yeah, since 1924.

Thom Elkjer: It's only taken 82 years, okay.

[Laughter]

How long will the next 20 take?

Jim Fullmer: Let me answer the first question. I think there were some, you know, pioneers in wine. We'll talk about the wine industry because that's what you guys are here for, and some of them are sitting on the stage, some of them are in the audience. They've got on board and it just kind of stayed like that for quite a while. I don't know, 10 years maybe.

And then the National Organic Program came along, and -- mind you, I'm still sorting this out in my own head how this is happening -- I think with that the fact that biodynamics holds the foundation of the organic movement itself and that its role is really to carry that on. The organic movement [has] started going off in tangents, much more of an industrial type of

agriculture. Whether that's good or bad or not I think that's starting, you know, that's driving some consumer notice of what biodynamics is. Because it really drives home the original impulse, you know, back to Rachel Carson in this country, what we were originally intending on when we started this movement in the first place. So think a lot of growth is coming out of that, and then also the quality aspect.

Thom Elkjer: Is there a pipeline of vineyards and producers who you think are going to come to you and be applying and certifying over the next 5 to 10 years?

Jim Fullmer: Yeah, there is. We get four to five calls a day. It's not only vineyards, but interested farmers. And the thing people need to understand about biodynamic product and the Demeter process in the U.S. is that it takes two years out of organic to even get to Demeter status. And in my mind that's good because it has to be real and it's slow and it's steady, it's not going to be this roll. And there'll be a shortage of supply for a long, long time just because it takes time and a biological time like Alan was pointing out to do this, and commitment.