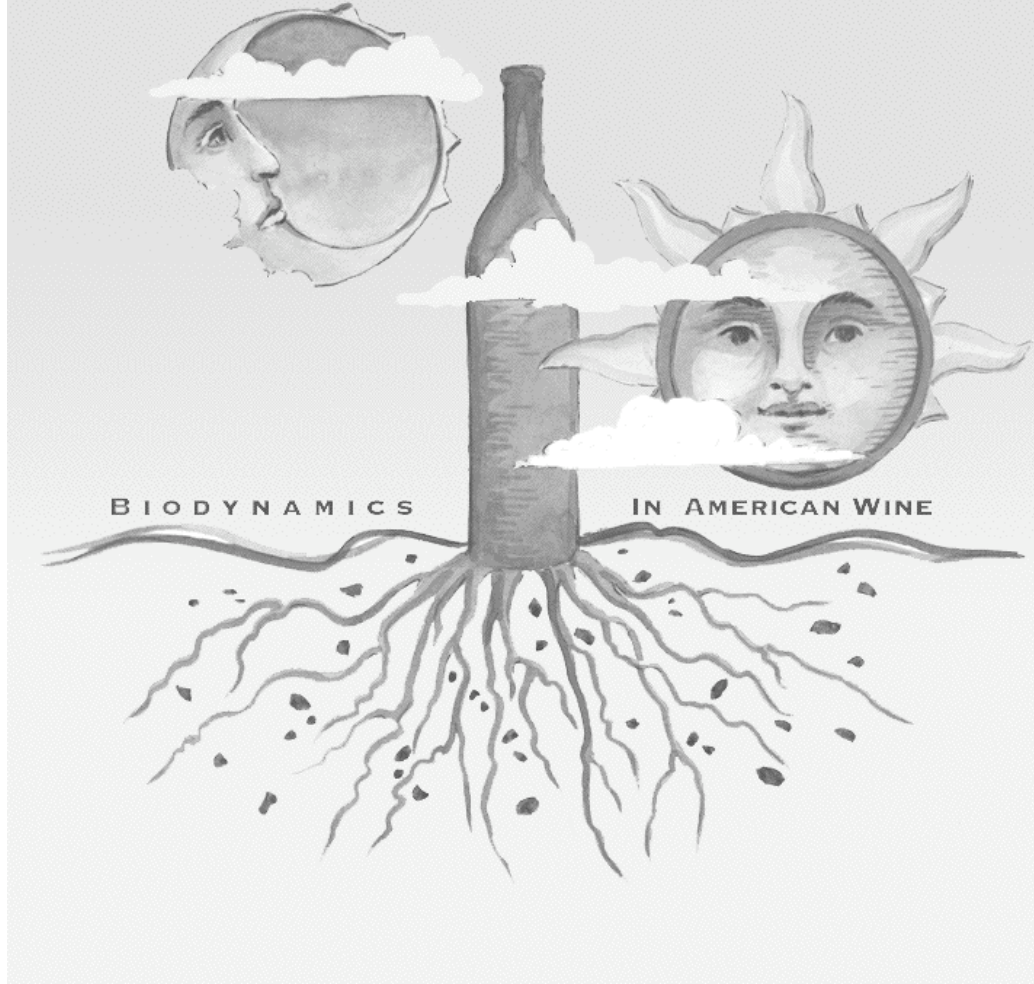


BD FORUM



BD FORUM 2006
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Part 5: Grape to Glass

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IVO JERAMAZ, GRADY WANN, ALAN YORK

MODERATED BY THOM ELKJER

Thom Elkjer: We're going to bring a couple of winemakers on: Ivo Jeramaz from Grgich Hills Cellar and Grady Wann from Quivira Vineyards. There are some similarities between these two gentlemen. Obviously the way they're dressed is one.

[Laughter.]

Another is the exceptional quality of their sauvignon blanc. Those of us in the wine business tend to think of sauvignon blanc as one of the transparent grapes that really does telegraph what happened to it along the way, how it was grown and how it was vinified. And both of these guys are producing exceptional SB. And I feel pretty clear that these are among the wines that clearly benefit from the way that they're farmed.

They also make really good red wines. They're both 100% estate producers, [one from] Napa Valley [and one from] Dry Creek Valley -- two of the great wine valleys in California. How many years ago did you start with the farming, Grady?

Grady Wann: This is, we're into our fourth year.

Thom Elkjer: Okay. And Ivo?

Ivo Jeramaz: Biodynamic farming, third year.

Thom Elkjer: So it's early days in some ways and it's too soon to have a lot of data points, but I want to ask first, what is it, when you step back and look at the difference that biodynamics has made in your vineyard and in your wine, to the extent that you can see it, what qualities step out for you as things that you've noticed that you're willing to share with us now? Ivo, you want to take a swing?

Ivo Jeramaz: We never believed in chemicals, to just go back to how we started this. And we've been more or less organic for many years. In 2003 I read many articles about biodynamics and took a course by Nicholas Joly in 2003. I was convinced straightaway that this was the only way to go forward. My uncle, Mike Grgich, is very conservative guy. You would think I would have hard time selling something so new to him. It took me five minutes to convince him. If I ask for a new press or something else I would never succeed.

[Laughter.]

But he lived in Croatia with his father and his grandfather. He could go back 150 years how farming was done then in Croatia. It wasn't called biodynamic farming, it was called natural farming. Most of the stuff that I told him -- I omitted the horn manure though -- it was very, he was very familiar. So he saw no harm in converting. Some people start with a couple

acres for five years, to try [out a new method of farming]. We immediately started with 20 acres. And by 2006 all our five vineyards, all 366 acres are in biodynamic. So as you can see, we are fully committed.

And back to your question, why do we do this? This is not religion that we do something we believe in. We do this because we believe it works. I certainly cannot explain everything [in terms of] how it works, but I see results. You start with the soil. I know how the soil looked before we started, the structure of the soil, the weeds that [Jim Fetzer] was talking about, the cracks. We were kind of sustainable -- we were forced by Napa County to be kind of sustainable because they would not let us till the soil [in order to control erosion]. So when you do that you have cracks in clay soil that you can push your fist through. Once we started biodynamic farming, tilling soil, our soil became spongy. I have to repeat many things that you have already heard before, but it's all true. The soil became spongy, full of air, full of life. And there are no weeds anymore. We have beautiful cover crop. Maybe too high this year because we can't mow it [due to incessant rain]. It's going to be an interesting year.

[Laughter.]

So we saw a difference in the structure of the soil. We saw a difference in the health of the plants. We have this 45-year-old vineyard, cabernet vineyard in Yountville next to Dominus [winery]. It was virtually dying. We were just about to pull it out and then we started applying biodynamics. At that time during harvest, [the vineyard] had this leaf virus that turns the leaves red, and 90% of the leaves were like that. With the past couple years of biodynamic farming, maybe only 10% are infected now. The vineyard rebounded. This is proof of something I read before: many times when you start biodynamics the oldest vineyards are first to show the effects of biodynamic farming.

Thom Elkjer: Has anyone else seen that, that the older vineyards respond faster?

[Agreement from panelists.]

Is there anyone else out here in the audience who farms who has seen that before? Because I've heard this before, but I haven't had a chance to see it.

[Nodded agreement from some audience members.]

I've seen it with organics a couple of times. Chappellet was going to pull out a series of vineyard blocks because of phylloxera, and they just couldn't replant them all out fast enough so they left the oldest block in because they got their most expensive wine out of it. They stopped giving it chemicals because it wasn't worth it anymore, and it started to come back.

Grady Wann: We had a much similar experience. It's always hard to tell. I think it's easier to tell with older vines when they respond because you have a history with them. It's a little bit more difficult to tell with younger vines. And so the comparison is somewhat difficult. But we too have a block of sauvignon blanc, one of the original ones that Henry and Holly Wendt planted in 1981 which they were scheduled to come out because of phylloxera. I think we actually had it scheduled to come out about three years ago. We were just waiting

for it to come up in the schedule to remove that last four-acre block. And I can say that in 2005 we harvested both the biggest and also the best crop that we've taken from that block in probably 10 years. And it's no longer on the schedule for removal. I'm not saying that biodynamics is a cure for phylloxera, but it is a curious coincidence that that block is not only still surviving but thriving.

Thom Elkjer: Okay. So that's a difference that you can see in the plants. Ivo was talking about the soil, what about your soil, have you seen much difference in the life of the soil?

Grady Wann: Well, I'm struck by the similarities actually of what we've seen at Quivira compared to what Ivo described. We also were not far from the organic paradigm to start with. Henry Wendt, who's in the audience, the founding owner of Quivira, has farmed that property in a sustainable way since the beginning, for 25 years now. And we didn't venture across the certification threshold in the early days, mainly because we weren't convinced that there was enough knowledge out there that we were willing to put our entire crop at risk, and yet as we got closer, actually it was probably the creek restoration project that drove the conversion for us to biodynamics.

For those of you who are not familiar with Quivira, we sit on the western banks of Dry Creek, right in the heart of the valley, and our property is almost literally cut in half by a steelhead and salmon spawning stream -- called Wine Creek, appropriately enough -- that joins Dry Creek on our property. Along that third-of-a-mile stretch of Wine Creek we began some creek restoration work about six years ago now. [The goal was to] restore what was a somewhat deteriorated fish habitat. It was really through that process of going through that restoration work and working with the creek that it became a real severe disconnect for me that we had all this creek work going on for the fish -- and we weren't certified organic in the vineyard right next door. And so that really spurred our interest to formalize this process, to make it actually really count.

I had no intention of heading down the biodynamic direction until I met Alan York, and some might say that Henry and I are the least likely pair of biodynamic practitioners because Henry's history is as an international pharmaceutical company executive, and my background is as a PhD organic chemist. And yet we were struck by the philosophy that Alan described earlier: As a small winery, our goal is to produce wines that authentically represent the place and the people. And really that's the only differentiation that small wineries have in a true sense. You can do marketing and packaging and that kind of thing, but in a true authentic sense the only difference we have is the place that we grow our grapes and the people that make them.

And biodynamics strikes right at the heart of both of those things. It strives to make the property individual, to enhance the inherent characteristics of the property as best it can, and it also works hard, as all of us who have been down this route can attest. To strengthen the connection of the farmer with the farm. And that's an essential part of biodynamics, and one, I think, that you heard mentioned earlier. It would be hard to do with a vineyard management company. It takes the connection of the farmer with the farm to bring out the characteristics in the wine.

Thom Elkjer: Okay, let's talk about the wine a little bit. You guys both have some wine in barrel and some moving into the bottle. Given that it's still early days, what do you see? What do you find?

Ivo Jeramaz: In our case, just what we expected: biodynamics works for us because, in the wine business, we are literally in business of flavors. It is not enough just to grow a few tons of grapes with some acidity and sugar. They have to have flavors. Jim was talking about growing food, and that's true with biodynamics. Through this kind of farming, we can make wines that have better flavors, flavors that are true to the type to soil and climate where they are grown.

In 2005 when we had 255 acres -- the majority of our grapes -- grown biodynamically, we saw that. We had the American Canyon vineyard in South Napa. We weren't too happy with the quality until finally in 2005 we got flavors that we're looking for. Should I say this is 100% due to biodynamics? Probably not, but it's due to our farming practices in general. But there's no question and no denying that we have better flavors and better wines this year. So for us it's a true sign that it's practical, not just beliefs. We see practical signs that biodynamic is working and giving us what we want to have, which is great flavors with real personalities. Not necessarily better ones than our neighbors, but wines with a great personality.

And if I might say one more thing, may say one more thing about what biodynamics means to us -- at least to me on a personal level. I think it changed my life, improved who I am, how I look at people. We have these biodynamic meetings with our colleagues, and I cannot find one person that I dislike. They are nice people. And maybe I oversimplify this but it's very true. And it takes a special personality, a commitment to do this. And I'm thrilled to be part of this as a whole winery, and we are committed. So what I can tell you is that I believe strongly this is the future. And when we are standing in front of you and promoting our wines I believe we are promoting something that is good for everyone.

And also I have six kids and I'm not happy with the produce that we buy, so Jim [Fullmer] will like this. I went and ordered some biodynamic seeds and we're going to have this big biodynamic garden this year.

Thom Elkjer: At Grgich Hills?

Ivo Jeramaz: Actually this is done on my property.

Thom Elkjer: Eventually -- ?

Ivo Jeramaz: Hopefully, yes. We believe that a lot of the food we see today is of no value and there are all kinds of health problems. So biodynamics is far more than just growing good grapes and making wine and selling it for high price. It's a way of living. It's a new way to live basically.

Thom Elkjer: More on that in a moment. Grady, can you tell us a little bit about what you're seeing in the winery fermentations all the way into the bottle?

Grady Wann: I can start here.

Thom Elkjer: Now this is a PhD chemist, so he's going to give you a highly qualified answer. Just follow along.

[Laughter.]

Grady Wann: I really can't offer a lot of definitive things about the wines. We've been farming biodynamically since 2003, so the first wines [resulting] from our biodynamic transition are now on the market. And so we've had three vintages in the cellar. I feel very confident about talking about the changes that we've seen in the vineyard, such as the soil characteristics. For example, we don't have standing water in our vineyards where we used to in the past. And if we don't have it this year we might never get it again.

[Laughter.]

But the soil structure has definitely changed. The cover crop, the ability of the vines to both fight off and cohabitate with disease and pest pressures has definitely been increased.

But when we talk about the wines and the wine quality issue, which is really one of the things that biodynamics does address and why it works in the food and in the wine industry, then that's a subjective thing obviously. And I guess I'm too much of a scientist to say that two data points make a trend. But certainly we're encouraged by the last couple of years. We're seeing great flavors and remarkable characteristics from some blocks that we hadn't seen before 2004 and 2005. Whether that's a result of the vintage or something other than biodynamics, I'm not sure. It will take a couple more years, I think, for us to be able to really draw conclusions about that.

As I mentioned with the phylloxera block of sauvignon blanc, there are some striking coincidences that seem to follow along with our shift to biodynamics. And so as we go forward it's causing me to evaluate the way we make wine. This is much more than just the growing of grapes. This connection with the property and connection with the wine is also important. So it makes you stop and look differently at the way that you're making wines and what that should represent for a wine to be truly of a place.

And so we're encouraged at this point. I can tell you that I went into it about as skeptical as you can find, and I was ready to jump the biodynamic ship at the first sign that there was any indication that this was a direction we didn't want to go in. There's still a lot of things about biodynamics that I don't understand. And some of our discussions -- we have a discussion group, three of the guys who participate are on the stage now, and we meet monthly and talk about biodynamic stuff -- I can tell you a lot of those discussions for an organic chemist are mind-bending to say the least, but mind-bending in a good way.

[Laughter.]

And so this exploration, this personal exploration, and connection to the property is a large part of the benefit of biodynamics. We already see it in the soil, I think we're beginning to see it in the wines. I can certainly see it in our people. And not just as an effect on me, but

our vineyard manager is much happier now, going back to an intuitive way of farming. Not just to his liking, but also to a more traditional way of farming that he understands. His vineyard guys are also more connected to the property. It's the same with our winery staff, who don't spend that much time walking in the vineyard. There's something about biodynamics that grabs people, and I think we're beginning to see it in the marketplace.

Alan York: Grady, do you find yourself spending more time in the vineyard than you did before?

Grady Wann: I certainly do. I've told you [Alan] this before. It's not just because of Alan's incredible richness of knowledge about viticulture. I've learned more about viticulture in the last three years than I did in the previous twenty. It's not so much from an academic viewpoint as it is from an experiential, personal viewpoint. That's what biodynamics has to offer. I sometimes wonder how much of this is the preparations and how much of it is the process. That's an exploration we'll be taking on in the years ahead.

Alan York: It's ongoing.

Grady Wann: It's ongoing.