



BD FORUM 2006
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Part 6: Audience Q&A

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MODERATED BY THOM ELKJER

Thom Elkjer: I'd like to take the conversation out into the audience now and ask the same question I asked Grady Wann and Ivo Jeramaz. Bob Blue, are you in the audience? Bob, we're going to ask you the same question I just asked those other two guys. What have you seen -- this is Bob Blue from Bonterra. He's got a biodynamic property in Mendocino. He's been making wine out of that for how many years?

Bob Blue, general manager and winemaker, Bonterra Vineyards: I bought grapes from Jimmy [Fetzer] in 1997 from the ranch, so, but I've been doing organic farming since the early 1990s.

Thom Elkjer: So what do you notice when you transition into biodynamics from organic [viticulture]? What do you notice in the vineyards? What do you notice in your wine?

Bob Blue: Well, I think I'll parallel what Grady said. I think probably the difference is that the people get more involved in it. The thing that we embrace is the idea of holistic farming that Alan was talking about earlier, where you look at all the systems and you connect them all together. And so that's probably the big difference for us.

Thom Elkjer: It's the holistic view, looking at everything all together?

Bob Blue: We use the analogy that when you go to the doctor you can just get something fixed. Something's bothering you? You get some medicine and you take care of it. But when you go to the doctor and you're getting a physical, you look at the whole being and you realize that it's all connected. And so when you look at a farm situation that has boundaries you operate within you also have this self-sustaining organism. And when you start looking at it you treat the soil, you look at the conditions of the vine and the vigor of the vine. And all these things are all connected and they help you reach an end when they're all working in concert.

Thom Elkjer: Thank you. We have another in-process biodynamic vintner over here. Marimar, would you be willing to tell us a little bit about where you are with biodynamics in your vineyard and your winery on an experimental basis? This is Marimar Torres from Marimar Estate in Sonoma County's Green Valley.

Marimar Torres, proprietor and winegrower, Marimar Estate: Well, we have completed our third year of organics. We're in the process of certification, which has turned out to be more complicated than we expected and more confusing. But we're starting with biodynamics, with the preparations. We have Zack Berkowitz(ph) as our consultant and we have a program in place. Also Ginnie Lambrix -- who I see over there -- has been a great advisor and pushed us through the decision. So that's where we're at.

Thom Elkjer: And what is motivating you to even experiment?

Marimar Torres: Well, we started [with organic farming] in 2000. So in our fifth year we definitely have seen in the wine the effects of what everybody has been saying. For example, we have [vinified] a wine [each year] from a particular clone. Back in 2000, this block had a lot of concentration but it was a little angular. And as the years went by the wine became more round, more polished, more of a stand-alone wine. So we've gotten to the point where now we find that we can bottle certain blocks separately and make wines that are really very distinctive -- they're complete wines. Yet they have different characteristics that we find really fascinating. So I think biodynamics is a step forward after organics. It just follows and it makes all the sense in the world.

Thom Elkjer: Okay. Thank you. Do you have any questions for the people on the panel? Okay. Anybody have a question for someone on the panel? I'll bring you the microphone. And if you have a question for anyone specific you can ask a specific question, or if you just want to ask a general question feel free.

Don Neal, publisher, *Practical Vineyard and Winery*: Grady, at Quivira you've put in an awful lot of time in the past on sorting fruit. You've now been harvesting biodynamic for three years. Have you reduced your time and effort on sorting?

Grady Wann: I can't say that we have, in the sense that we still sort all the fruit that comes in. I can say that in 2005 -- which was a challenging growing year from the wetness factor and the longevity of the hang time -- that we sorted a surprisingly little amount of fruit in the sense of sorting it *out*. We saw the fruit quality from our vineyards being a lot higher than I expected it would be.

Alan York: The trick to sorting is to drop it in the vineyard so it doesn't get on the table. That really reduces your sorting.

[Laughter]

Thom Elkjer: Katrina, would you give us your perspective? Anything that you heard that you strongly agree with or disagree with?

Katrina Frey, co-proprietor, Frey Vineyards: Hi, I'm Katrina Frey from Frey Vineyards in Mendocino County. And it's been wonderful hearing the commentary up here. We've been certified Demeter since 1996. We put our first wine in the bottle in 1997 and we actually have an example of that wine [here for the tasting]. And that's one aspect of biodynamic farming that Steiner talked about is the keeping qualities of fruit and vegetables. And I think that's a really interesting topic ahead of all of us to see how these wines are aging. We're making our wines without sulfites and this '97 Merlot's tasting pretty good. So I invite all of you to come and try some of that.

And the other thing, just as far as our personal experience at the farm, has been the wonderful interplay of our family with the animals that are part of biodynamics. And we now have sheep and goats and cows wandering through the vineyards, being shepherded through the vineyards.

We can't just let them go, and I know Paul is enjoying his chickens and his little daughter. And it brings a richness that I think we're all yearning for in this age.

Thom Elkjer: Let's go down in front.

Leslie Harlib, food and wine columnist, *Marin Independent Journal*: Hi, I'm interested -- this is for the panel in general -- from a marketing standpoint one of the things that appears to have been very successful in the organic food movement has been, especially on the farmer's market level, that people can develop a personal relationship with the source of where their food is coming from with the farmers. How much do you think, in order to sort through the huge amount of wine that's out there, is it going to be about helping the consumer develop a sense of a personal relationship with the wines as well because of the way they're grown?

Mike Benziger: Yeah, I think that the real challenge is, you know, how do we get people to actually experience what biodynamics is all about. And for me if it's slow, that's okay, you know, because I think a slow build will stick. We're lucky enough that at our place we get over 40,000 people a year, that we have an opportunity to spend up to 45 minutes to an hour to explain what biodynamics is all about.

And then luckily because I have a large family we're on the road all the time to be able to talk about biodynamics and to bring our wine to the public. But it's not easy to get the feeling and the emotion of what biodynamics is all about when you're on the road. I think that best way that can be expressed is through the products you make and if you can bring your wine with you, if you can bring your olive oil with you and I agree with Paul, if you can, if you emanate this sense of passion I think that people will become believers.

Jim Fullmer: I would throw into that also that we work with a lot of small growers, a lot of [Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) groups], that type of thing, and it's very much within the biodynamic movement this idea of a local food system, and it's almost a natural progression of the organics movement, assuming it doesn't stop at the fence line, that it takes in the local community. The wine's a little bit different because it does get shipped around, but when you start getting into the food it's very much part of the fabric.

Leslie Harlib: I noticed something else as well, which is on restaurant menus, wine lists do not in any way, shape, or form really sell in general to the consumers, help explain to the average drinker the different wines. And how much do you work with restaurateurs to help them describe, bring terminology, bring a sense of yumminess to the wine lists and help them understand through that kind of selling tool.

Jim Fetzer: Well, I'd just like to add, like Mike we have a tasting room and a whole farm we built in Lake County right on Highway 20. And so we get a lot of people coming there and I think that's the best way for people to see what biodynamic farming is: to actually tour. They see the little egg-mobiles and the chickens in the vineyard and the sheep roaming around the vineyard, and how the animal kingdom and the plant kingdom can connect. And when they see that, they go, "Wow, this is incredible." It's really fun. The challenge is to get it to the general consumer and do they even know about biodynamics and what is biodynamics?

Thom Elkjer: Do we have a sommelier in the house? Okay. The question for you -- this is Chris Sawyer. Chris, do you sell wines to people as biodynamic wines?

Chris Sawyer, sommelier, Carneros Bistro & Wine Bar: Absolutely, Thom. I'm just glad to be here. And I think a lot of the people out here know me as a wine writer, but I'm also a sommelier and I'm also one of the biggest fans of biodynamics in the world. I think Thom and I, maybe David Darlington and some others who I've seen out here in the crowd, Ziggy "the wine gal" of course, are big fans. And I can't write enough about it. But as far as being a sommelier, my program [is that] I do at least five wines right now that are biodynamic. And I'm very happy to put that in [my wine list]. And actually it's much more of a hand sale kind of thing. People want to know about it. They're intrigued by these wines. What is biodynamic? And it's the responsibility of us as sommeliers to tell them what biodynamics is, to make it concise, but get them very interested in this. And I think it's just in the beginning stages right now.

Thom Elkjer: Can you describe who's interested? Is there a demographic profile?

Chris Sawyer: Well, I've got to agree with Mike Benziger. I think that the younger people are definitely interested. A lot of people make this comparison [with cooking]. Ten years ago [no one knew] how to cook, how to do all these things with oils, salts, everything. Everyone has grown up very fast thanks to the Food Network, to the Internet, all of these things. So everything is growing all at the same time. Kids coming out of college, they're still in that learning phase. Food, wine, all these things, are very important to them. So I think it's the younger generation.

Thom Elkjer: What happened to sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll? Now it's olive oil, biodynamic wine, and salts?

[Laughter]

Thank you, Chris. Do we have another sommelier in the house? How about a wine retailer, anyone who sells wine at retail? Okay. Same question for you. Let's pass the microphone down.

Kevin Weaver, national wine buyer, Wild Oats Markets: Well, I think you have a challenge in communicating what biodynamics are to the customer. I'm with Wild Oats Markets. I'm the national wine buyer. And it's my feeling that our customers are looking for the next thing. I think as organic becomes more of a marketing tool, more of a logo, I think our customers are looking for that next connection to the farmer. And I see that as a challenge for the wineries to get to make that connection with the customer, to get that story, at least our customers.

And our customers shop our stores specifically looking for organic. I mean, I merchandise our organic wines separately because our customers don't want to pick through everything else to find them. I know it's not a strategy in the conventional store and I know it's not a strategy a lot of wineries like. But I know that our customer tells me that they're looking for those wines. And so now in this organic set I want to also, and I am, adding the biodynamic set. But it's hard to communicate that to the customer. I think the customer right away is going to assume that these wines in my set are just organic, if that's proper to say, not understanding what the benefits of the biodynamic farming is.

And so my challenge to you is how do we get that message to my customers so that we can sell more biodynamic wines and just get the message in general on biodynamic farming out there so that we can create more of an interest? And I agree, I think our customer who is shopping the organic set for the most part is at the same age group that you're talking about. We are also gaining more and more people who are older whose doctors are telling them to clean it up and start eating better. And that creates a need for knowledge with them and they want to learn more and they want to know what the next thing is. And I think in our markets especially we like to stay ahead of the curve. And so whatever support and help we can get from you I think will benefit everybody.

Mike Benziger: Yeah, I think there's two things going on right now. There's a huge population of people that are kind of invisible. And these are people that are becoming more and more aware of what they're putting in their body. These are the older people. And then there's a whole demographics of people out there that are becoming more and more conscious about the products that they're buying and how they're being made. And I see this more in the younger population. So it's kind of like a tipping point.

I think it's a little bit invisible right now, but there's an incredible amount of awareness developing out there. On the other side, we really haven't gotten our story together completely yet. And to be honest with you that's the reason why these forums are so important, these tastings are so important is so that we can be, we can be out there talking with our constituency just like this to try to figure out what words to use. To describe biodynamics in 15 minutes like Alan had the challenge to do is pretty daunting. To describe it in one page, that's pretty daunting. To describe it in a sound bite -- this is not a sound bite type of thing. That's the problem. Biodynamics is not a sound bite. So just like you develop a relationship with the vineyard and the wine, we have to develop a little bit of a closer relationship with the customer to be able to get the point across.

Thom Elkjer: Speaking of sound bites, is Doug Tunnell in the room? Doug used to work for CBS news -- he's a master of the sound bite. Doug, the question I have for you concerns the relationship of 90-point-plus scores in biodynamics, 'cause you get a bunch of them [for your wines at Brick House Vineyard]. Is there any relationship between selling biodynamic wine and getting big numbers?

Doug Tunnell, proprietor and winemaker, Brick House Wines: I don't think so. I think it's pretty much that you get the score and people then come and taste the wine. And it's in the bottle. Somebody said it earlier, you know, that if you build it they will come. And what's in the bottle will tell the story in that regard. We don't really think about scores. In fact, that's pretty far down the list of concerns, especially when we're farming biodynamically.

Thom Elkjer: Do you think that's true for all biodynamic farmers or just for you because you get those numbers?

Doug Tunnell: I'm not sure what's true for all biodynamic farmers. I think maybe part of it is what Mike Benziger just mentioned: we're still working on our story. Part of the problem. Which someone said earlier, is that the ego, the role of the farmer. is very important and the role of the individual is very important. And every farm, every organism, every farmer is distinct and

different. And so that presents us with an interior problem. We're all going to tell a little different story. We're all going to practice a little differently than the next person.

Thom Elkjer: Thank you. Another question for the panel?

Paul White, winemaker, Coturri Winery: There's been a lot of talk about authenticity. How do you reconcile having a production that's so large that it's impossible to have all of your production be biodynamic and then present to the consumer that you are biodynamic? And where is the role of sulfites in the cellar? Because I hear a lot of talk about farming, but biodynamics shouldn't stop just at the farm. It should come into the cellar as well. I think that most consumers would like to see some sort of truth in labeling. What is it that is actually going into their wines? Because there's a lot more than just sulfites that are put into wines? Maybe someone could jump into that.

[Silence from the panel.]

Thom Elkjer: Don't all jump at once.

[Laughter.]

Alan York: I'll jump in. First of all, thank you for asking that question because I was going to bring that up towards the end if it did not come. In New York [at an event featuring French biodynamic vintner and author Nicholas Joly] there was a panel and that same question came up and you know how entertaining Nicholas Joly can be. And you also know that in France there is no such word as winemaker, right? So Nicholas made the very interesting comment that when you raise a chicken do you call yourself a chicken-maker? So when you raise wine grapes, what do we call ourselves?

Now, personally, I thought that was funny. But it's disingenuous because you don't eat raw chicken -- there is a process involved from a live chicken to the chicken on your plate. It's the same with wine: we don't drink raw grape juice, we drink wine, right? There is a process that's involved. Now, to be congruent with the practices that we have in the vineyard is to respect the integrity of the fruit that we bring in. And I'm not saying that we should all employ hands-off winemaking, but anything that is done that changes the nature and integrity of the fruit that you bring in is a step away from the authenticity of the wines.

So what would those be? Adding cultured yeast would be one. Anyone who's ever had the opportunity to taste exactly the same wine that was made with indigenous yeast on the grapes with no added cultured yeast and wines that have been made with cultured yeast would not believe that they were the same wine. It has that big an impact on the nature of what you brought in. Acidulating, de-acidulating, changing the character of the vintage, these are really big issues. If we are to remain true to this idea of authenticity then we ourselves will question this more than anyone else.

So as we all know, fine wine is made in the vineyard, but it is not a hands-off process. And so thank you very much for asking that question 'cause it's really important.

Thom Elkjer: I'd like to invite you to keep asking questions as we move into the lunch and tasting. We have quite a number of people who need to get back to offices today, so we're going to turn you loose to have some lunch. You should also taste as much wine as you can. Ask as many questions as you have. I'll be up here with Alan if you want to come up and give us your impressions. Otherwise, thank you for coming and enjoy the rest of the event.

[Applause.]