



# WINE ENTHUSIAST

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# THE ENTHUSIAST DEGREE

## TRICKY DYNAMICS

### Is biodynamic winemaking an art, a science, or a trade? California's Stags Leap winemakers force the issue.

What are we to think when we see the word *biodynamic* on a wine label or a winery's Web site? Is it simply a matter of marketing? Are we meant to understand that biodynamics is an art? Is it a science?

These are questions that perplex even winemakers.

Doug Fletcher is vice president of winemaking for the Terlato Wine Group, where he oversees winemaking for Chimney Rock Winery in Napa's Stags Leap District and several other Terlato family properties.

Despite his strong skepticism about biodynamics, Fletcher acknowledges the merits of the original vision of this approach to agriculture, first conceived and championed by Rudolph Steiner in the early 1900s.

"I think the modern version of it is that you have to live within your ecosystem, and that whatever you do affects everything in the ecosystem, so you need to have a more holistic view of your actions," says Fletcher, noting that this is exactly the approach he takes in his work in Terlato's vineyards.

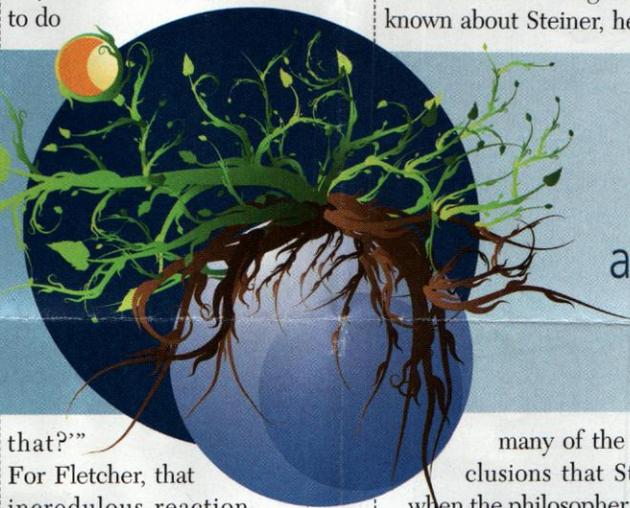
Still, Fletcher's natural curiosity about how his peers in the wine business handle the challenges he himself faces has led him to ask some probing questions about certain biodynamic principles. One in particular that piqued his interest is the rule that according to the biodynamic calendar, you can only pick grapes on a "leaf day," as opposed to a "root day"—with these different days determined by the phases of the moon. Fletcher recalls asking biodynamic wine-

makers if they'd blind-tasted grapes picked on leaf days versus root days, to confirm the theory that leaf-day grapes were superior. "They looked at me like I'm crazy," Fletcher recalls. "It's like, 'Well, why would we want to do

that?'" familiar to Jeff Virnig, winemaker at Robert Sinskey Vineyards, back in the early 1990s, when Virnig was first trying to figure out why some of his employer's vineyards in Carneros were suffering from lean soil. But while Virnig may not have known about Steiner, he still drew

From there, biodynamics seemed a natural next step, and the vineyards were all certified biodynamic as of 2008.

Given that Sinskey Vineyards—now best known for its farming methods, dubious attitude toward wine ratings and production of a



Some of it is pure marketing, says Doug Fletcher. There's ample scientific research to support it, says Alan York.

For Fletcher, that incredulous reaction just furthered his impression that market response, not grape quality, is the impetus for much of today's biodynamic farming.

"It's a marketing deal. At least that's my take on it," says Fletcher. "Now of course they will all say, 'We've been practicing this for years, and it's just turned our life around, and everything's great.' But until you actually apply the scientific method to it, you really can't say that."

A neighbor of Fletcher's in the Stags Leap District insists that he is testing his application of biodynamic practices scientifically—although *timing* and *observation* are words he'd choose over the more strictly defined *science* to describe his approach.

Rudolph Steiner's name wasn't

many of the same conclusions that Steiner had when the philosopher first began to formulate the beliefs about agriculture that eventually became the foundation for modern biodynamics. Among these was the realization that salt chemistry and Liebig's theories about the role of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium in agriculture were just, in Virnig's words, "a small part of a bigger picture." He quickly concluded that the soil system was much more complex than he and his team had previously realized.

Virnig soon started down the path of organic farming, moving to enhance fertility through composting, green manuring and cover cropping—all in an effort to get away from salt chemistry and achieve long-term soil balance. By 2001, all of Sinskey's vineyards were certified as organically grown.

wide range of varieties, including its much-loved Carneros Pinot Noirs—started its organic and biodynamic journey when even *organic* was a strange and unfamiliar word in the marketplace, the more positive recent response has been very welcome, says Virnig. But he insists it's not a motivating factor.

"You don't want to use the biodynamic and organic monikers as a means to an end," explains Virnig. "I never intended to use this as a marketing tool. My biggest concern is making delicious, yummy wines."

Virnig's belief that farming should rely less on science and more on timing and observation led him to take incremental steps with both organic and biodynamic practices. When Sinskey began to go organic, Virnig and his team started with 10 acres, which they closely monitored, expanding the acreage

PHOTO: BILLY BEAN/SHUTTERSTOCK; MICHAEL DELAPORTE

only after proof of early successes. Today they continue to run annual soil samples and thoroughly analyze the results. As for the wines, Virnig says he's observed darker colors, superior flavors and increased aromatics since they've been made with biodynamically grown grapes.

Besides being winemakers in the Stags Leap appellation, with their wineries a mere three miles away from each other, Virnig and Fletcher have something else in common. Years ago they both pursued the services of Alan York, an internationally renowned biodynamics consultant with clients on four continents. York was one of the consultants Virnig called upon in the '90s, when Sinskey's Carneros vineyards were struggling. As for Fletcher, he invited York for a visit when Tony Terlato, chairman of the Terlato Wine Group, asked Fletcher to look into making Chimney Rock a biodynamic winery.

Fletcher recalls that at first he was quite taken by York's pitch on biodiversity and encouraging interaction between insects and plants.

"I thought, 'That all sounds really wonderful. That sounds great. Maybe I've got the wrong view of all this,'" says Fletcher. "And finally my associate, who was in the meeting too, couldn't stand it any longer, and he said 'OK, tell us about the cow shit in the cow horns.' Alan laughed and he said, 'Everyone wants to know about that—that's what everyone writes about.'" When this anecdote was relayed to York, he countered that people who make wine are kidding themselves if they don't acknowledge that they're part of a business—and that press helps business.

York also dismisses the idea that biodynamics doesn't hold up under scientific scrutiny, citing an April 1993 article by John P. Reganold in

*Science* magazine that favorably compared biodynamically farmed soil to soil farmed conventionally. "There's ample scientific research that's been done that shows that biodynamics increases ecological processes and generally produces superior product," he says. "So those are bogus arguments—it's just that people haven't done the research to dig up the papers."

Having offered a scientific defense of biodynamics, York is quick to amend it, proposing that science isn't necessarily the right lens through which to look at this issue anyway. "Biodynamics is an art form, and no art forms are judged scientifically," he says. "I mean, how many scientific studies were done on Van Gogh?"

"Wine is a sensual product," York continues. "When you put it in your mouth and you get that mouth feeling that's just as round and soft as it can be to the point where you don't even want to swallow it—it's such a tactile sensation. What's that got to do with science?"

A lot, according to Doug Fletcher. "You know, it's a little like the Flat Earth Society. When you asked 'em why the world is flat, they'd say 'Just look! It looks flat. What's the matter with you? It's crazy to think of it as round,'" Fletcher says. "None of them want to apply the scientific method to any of this—everybody on down. When you start digging into the particulars of all this stuff, it makes it sound pretty crazy."

Jeff Virnig is very conscious of that "crazy" reputation. "You want it to be something that people can understand and know why it is you're doing what you're doing, rather than 'like, wow, that's really kooky!'" he says. "I don't want to embrace another religion."

—BLAIR CAMPBELL

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