



C the Menu

Vines at Sonoma's Quivira winery are tended with the utmost organic care.

NAPA UPDATE

The Biodynamic Perspective

Organic wine isn't just for health nuts anymore. Elite sommeliers around the state are embracing the new crop of sustainable vineyards BY NORA ZELEVANSKY

Wirginia “Ginny” Marie Lambrich is a farmer with the face of a beauty queen. Sans makeup, with hair tucked haphazardly into a floppy baseball cap, her grin radiates infectious optimism. In 2002, the chemical ecologist and self-proclaimed “total dork” exchanged her white lab coat for a perpetually dusty T-shirt and baggy pants, devoting her career to making wine according to the principles of biodynamic farming.

Getting hands (and clothes) dirty is part and parcel of the agricultural approach devised by Austrian scientist and mystical theorist Rudolf Steiner in 1924, which suggests burying unusual nutrient “preps” in the soil and following what Steiner calls “cosmic guidelines” in order to create self-sustaining eco-systems. Lambrich is a rising star in this movement, as partner and winemaker at Sonoma’s new Dry Creek Valley vineyard Truett-Hurst, as well as a panelist revising biodynamic certification regulations and a member of an elite biodynamic viticulture study group which includes leaders in the sustainable farming field like Paul Dolan, Mike Benziger, Alan York and Randall Grahm.

Lambrich is like a poster child for California’s new wave of progressive winemaking. The trend emerged several years ago in European hot spots like Burgundy. Still, many balked at Steiner’s “woo-woo” practices, which can involve powdered

quartz, chicken-dung compost and manure-filled cow horns. Now, thanks to the quality of the resulting wines, the biodynamic movement has gained credibility and momentum in the U.S.

But the story begins on another continent: In the early ’20s, with the onset of chemical agriculture, Steiner (creator of The Waldorf School) answered the call of failing European farmers with a natural alternative: promote hospitable farming environments with a holistic, symbiotic, “waste not, want not”

Ginny Lambrich leads the biodynamic way at Truett-Hurst in Sonoma.



approach. Instead of introducing foreign agents (pesticides), Steiner suggested nurturing soil like a living organism amidst biodiversity and in sync with “life forces” (from lunar cycles to climatic shifts).

The Austrian pioneer may not have had wine on the brain, but his theory dovetails nicely with French viticulture’s notion of *terroir*: Wine’s individuality is

“SOME CRY MUMBO JUMBO, BLACK MAGIC OR VODOO, BUT ULTIMATELY *it’s a farming technique* ADOPTED *by wineries* TO CREATE **BETTER WINE** FROM *healthier VINES.*”

or Rioja,” waxes Christopher Lavin, sommelier of Michael Mina’s XIV restaurant in Los Angeles.

So, in recent years, respected European vintners such as Austria’s Christine Saahs of Nikolaihof, Loire’s Nicolas Joly, and Alsace’s Zind Humbrecht have revived the all-natural practice. Now, the green movement has cast light on the links between healthy soil and elevated product, and Californians are charging ahead. “Biodynamic wine-makers are saying: ‘Everything is cool with the winery; now let’s examine the vineyard,’” summarizes Sona’s wine director, Mark Mendoza. Under his leadership the L.A. restaurant’s wine list has won multiple industry accolades. “There’s skepticism about the mysticism, but passionate commitment is required. California winemakers are coming

back to old-school, less-is-more approaches with regard to alcohol levels too.”

This quirky natural approach can attract wacky characters: Grahm (known to host “cork funerals” clad in a purple tuxedo) moved his Bonny Doon operation near Santa Cruz to go biodynamic. Still, the proof is in the pudding: Lambrich’s life was forever altered by a visit to an amazingly robust biodynamic Chilean farm.



Pete Kight and Steven Caanter apply organic principles at Quivira.

a product of the soil from whence the grapes came. “We want to taste a bit of where wine is grown—smell soil from Burgundy



“There were cover crops, shaded areas for workers, sheep running around, vines that were so alive—I didn’t want to leave,” she says. XIV’s Lavin concurs: “Some cry mumbo jumbo, black magic or voodoo, but ultimately it’s a farming technique adopted by wineries to create better wine from healthier vines.”

Fortunately, Lambrix’s Truett-Hurst partners (Paul Dolan, son Heath Dolan, as well as Phil and Sylvia Hurst) are no strangers to experimental farming techniques. Paul Dolan actually hired Phil Hurst in 1985 at Fetzer Vineyards, where they pioneered organic growing. “Back then, they looked at us like we had two heads,” laughs Hurst.

Since it generally takes at least three years for vineyard certification, Truett-Hurst’s Dry Creek Valley Vineyard (purchased in 2007) is still earning biodynamic status, though the winery’s certification is said to be imminent. Their highly praised first natural wine is the 2006 Dark Horse, a Grenache/Petit Sirah/Syrah blend created at Dolan’s Mendocino vineyard. “Initially, biodynamics seemed a little spooky for me,” admits Hurst. “We’re burying cow horns,

mixing compost and building playgrounds for goats.”

Skepticism is natural when burying stuffed stag bladders. But experts point to the technique’s scientific viability. “We haven’t held hands in the vineyard yet,” Lambrix jokes. “Ecologically, genetic diversity protects plant populations. Research supports having healthy soil.”

Ned Horton, assistant winegrower at biodynamic vineyard Quivira also argues the lunar calendar’s merits, citing massive tidal and barometric pressure shifts that illustrate its power: “Optimum conditions for wine racking are enhanced by the gravitational effects of a full moon in the southern sky.”

Steiner’s guidelines transcend a single crop or purpose. “Organic tells you what you can do, but not what you should do,” notes Nancy Bailey, Quivira’s general manager/director of marketing. “Here there’s recognition of interconnectivity—our whole vineyard is a garden—and a connection to the community too.” In April 2008, Quivira built 120 raised redwood beds in the

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MENU BITES



Wurstküche



Bottega Louie

LOS ANGELES

URBAN PALATE

Downtown L.A.’s bustling restaurant scene has discerning gourmands coming in droves. Here, the best of the bunch

BOTTEGA LOUIE The palatial 10,000-square-foot restaurant, gourmet market and patisserie is adorned with white marble and brass appointments. 700 S. Grand Ave., L.A., 886-418-9162; bottegalouie.com.

WURSTKÜCHE Purveyor of exotic grilled sausages, Belgian fries and homemade dipping sauces. 800 E. 3rd St., L.A., 213-687-4444; wurstkucherestaurant.com.

NOE Cal-American cuisine with Japanese overtones draws a sophisticated pre-theater crowd. 251 S. Olive St., L.A., 213-356-4100; noerestaurant.com.

CHURCH & STATE Built on a former loading dock in the heart of downtown, Steven Arroyo’s industrial French bistro features classic French fare. 1850 Industrial St., L.A., 213-405-1434; churchandstatebistro.com.

➤ BY KELSEY MCKINNON



➤ **COVETED COCOA**

Worried that cacao beans could soon be as precious as caviar due to factory farming, Michael and Richard Antonorsi are preserving their family’s legacy with **Chuaoc Chocolatier**. Responsibly sourced treats in unique flavors, like the recently released Panko Bar (premium cacao chocolate with toasted panko breadcrumbs and sea salt), can be found online and at the chocolatier’s three boutiques in San Diego. 760-476-1668; chuaocchocolatier.com.



Oil RUSH

Napa chef and orchard consultant Marvin Martin

has raised his culinary status with his award-winning line of olive oils. Farmed from more than 8,000 trees, **OliOdessa** is fresh-pressed into four extra-virgin varieties (OliOdessa, Cameros, California Koroneiki and Napa Templar) and three flavored varieties (Eureka Lemon, Meyer Lemon and Blood Orange). \$22; oliodessa.com.



Noe



Church & State