

April 25, 2007

THE POUR; When the Wine Is Green

By ERIC ASIMOV

YOU'VE taken your hybrid car out to run some errands. You've stocked up on organic produce and nontoxic cleaning supplies at the supermarket. You've stopped at the Home Depot to take advantage of its new Eco Options plan, picking up energy-efficient light bulbs, paint that is low in pollutants and wood harvested according to the principles of sustainable forestry. You've dropped off the recycling. One more stop to make, the wine shop.

Why should wine be any different?

Green has not yet replaced red or white or even pink as the most important color in deciding which wines to buy, but people have started to think about it. Words like organic, biodynamic, natural and sustainable are increasingly resonating with consumers, not just because they are concerned about health and the environment, but because they are beginning to associate them with great wine, the way organic has become a synonym for high-quality produce.

That's largely because the growing number of producers who practice some form of natural grape growing and winemaking do so not just because they see it as environmentally responsible but because they believe these methods make better wine.

Wine distributors, the essential marketing arm between producers and consumers, are beginning to highlight winemakers who follow environmentally conscious methods. Restaurants are starting to single out these wines on their lists or even devote their lists to them, while wine shops now often call attention to wines made in this fashion. One shop, Appellation Wine and Spirits in Chelsea, has even dedicated most of its inventory to these sorts of wines.

"All you have to do is look at the success of Whole Foods to see how organic has moved from a crunchy granola fringe to mass consumer acceptance," said Tom Geniesse, owner of Bottlerocket, a new wine store in Chelsea that features a selection of "green" wines. "And all you have to do is look at different business segments, like lawn care and Home Depot, to see that consumers care for health reasons and environmental reasons."

But developing the appeal of organic wine hasn't been easy.

"That's the stigma left over from 15 or 20 years ago, when wines were marketed as organic and weren't very good," said Gregory Dal Piaz, the director of customer development for Astor Wines & Spirits in NoHo. "I don't think it's the best way to market wine. You market wine because it's good."

Nonetheless, Astor now puts special labels on the shelves, written in green, for wines that are made with natural, organic or biodynamic viticulture. The point is to associate a natural winemaking philosophy with good wines.

"It's a positive connotation that's moved beyond the health aspects and save-the-planet aspects, that for produce and food, organic items are better," Mr. Dal Piaz said. "And it can translate to wines also."

Slowly, people are starting to make that leap. Franny's, a stylish, wood-oven pizzeria in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, has always highlighted producers on its wine list who practice organic, biodynamic or sustainable agriculture, but people didn't always care, said Francine Stephens, who owns Franny's with her husband, Andrew Feinberg.

"When I first opened three years back, people did not ask about the wines the same way they asked about the food," she said. "It's definitely changed in the last year. People seem to have made the leap that it's an agricultural product, which is a big leap, I guess."

The most important consideration, however, may be the sheer number of great producers who are practicing some form of organic, biodynamic or natural winemaking. Biodynamic may be the most mysterious term of all, yet knowledgeable consumers can't help but take note of the producers who have adhered to it, most quietly and some for many years.

Their number includes Leflaive, Leroy and Lafon in Burgundy; Deiss and Zind Humbrecht in Alsace; Coulée de Serrant in Savennières; Chapoutier in the Rhone; Pingus and Palacios in Spain; Movia in Slovenia; Araujo and Grgich Hills in California; Brick House in Oregon; and Cayuse in Washington. And that's just a taste of a list that's growing all the time.

Biodynamic agriculture is essentially what the wine writer Jamie Goode has called "a supercharged system of organic farming," in which the farm is viewed as a self-sustaining, self-regulating eco-system. While biodynamics has become notorious for seemingly weird practices, like filling cow horns with dung and burying them in vineyards, and aligning certain chores with phases of the moon and stars, several scientific studies have shown it can be effective even if the underlying reasons for this are not yet understood.

"You have to talk about the quality first," said Mike Benziger of the Benziger Family Winery, who began converting his Sonoma Mountain estate to biodynamics in 1996, and in 2002 planted another biodynamic vineyard near Bodega on the Sonoma Coast. On that windswept hillside vineyard, swatches of bushes and trees are left intact in an effort to attract the wildlife that can help do the job of herbicides and pesticides, and Mr. Benziger has imported Watasi cattle, with imposing V-shaped horns, from Africa to provide a natural alternative to chemical fertilizers.

Not all the Benziger wines are biodynamic, but those that are carry only a single small reference to it on the back label.

"The product has to be good," he said. "If people ask you how you make it, then you have permission to talk about biodynamics."

It would be fair to say that few people would ever have heard of biodynamics had it not been for the wine industry. "Biodynamic agriculture seems to stand right now where organic stood 30 years ago," said Jim Fullmer, executive director of Demeter U.S.A., the American branch of an international organization that regulates biodynamic agriculture. "The wine industry has been huge and to a certain degree it is what has been catapulting it into the mainstream."

Other terms may be more familiar to the public but are equally vague. In a very rough way, natural winemaking refers to producers who try to make wine with as little technological intervention as possible. In the vineyard they avoid chemical pesticides and herbicides, plow the fields and pick by hand. For fermentation they tend to rely on yeasts that naturally cling to the grapes rather than introduce yeasts formulated in laboratories. They don't add sugar to increase the alcohol content or add enzymes or acid to make up for what's lacking, and they shun the high-tech tools of modern winemaking that essentially give more control to winemakers when nature's course is not to their liking. Most natural winemakers use as little sulfur dioxide as possible as a stabilizer.

The term organic includes many of these natural practices but also requires strict adherence to rules that can seem arbitrary or irrelevant to some farmers, like using wooden fence posts instead of metal. In addition, sulfur dioxide cannot be added to organic wines. For this reason wines are more likely to be labeled "made from organic grapes," a formulation that permits sulfur dioxide.

Finally, there is the catchall term "sustainable," for producers who adhere generally to organic, natural or biodynamic practices but want the freedom to act otherwise in an emergency or simply don't want to undergo the rigorous certification process required for organic by the government or by Demeter.

While many people in the wine trade say that the public is more aware of these wines, they agree that awareness is still in the early stages. Nonetheless, Michael Skurnik Wines, an importer and distributor, has begun to identify for retailers which of its producers are organic or biodynamic. So has Polaner Selections, another importer and distributor.

"It's kind of a germ of something that's happening rather than a big movement," said Doug Polaner, an owner. "There's a whole new aesthetic and quality to these wines, but it's still ahead of the curve as far as public awareness."

Still, few in the trade doubt that the time is coming when these wines will have a marketing power to be reckoned with.

"Because you have excellent producers and such good wine it's not questioned the way it was before," said Scott Pactor, owner of Appellation, the Chelsea wine shop that is dedicated to biodynamic, organic and natural wines. "The more information that is given, and the more people are exposed to it, the less mysterious it becomes."

Or as Mr. Skurnik put it, "Everything is better done the way your grandfather did it."