

# Grape Talk: Biodynamic wines



BY DEBBIE TOLLEFSON

**“Organic,” “natural” and “sustainable”**—words you hear in reference to farming, wine-making and grape-growing. All of these farming philosophies produce healthier products and are better for the soil and the environment. For this article, though, I wanted to examine another farming philosophy with which I was not totally familiar: “biodynamic farming,” especially as it pertains to wines and grapes.

As it turns out, biodynamics is a relatively old idea. In the 1920s, a visionary and social reformer from Austria, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), wrote a book titled *The Agriculture Course: The Birth of the Biodynamic Method*. This course views the farm or vineyard as a cohesive, interconnected living system with its own cycles, energies and life-forces.

Steiner called the field “anthroposophy” and based his farming philosophy on creating healthier soil and plants using nine biodynamic preparations, ecological self-sufficiency and spiritual considerations. These preparations use cow manure, powdered quartz (silica) and seven medicinal plants, including chamomile, yarrow, oak bark, dandelion, horsetail, valerian and stinging nettles. Specific buried animal parts (cow horn) are used as vessels and planting techniques are based on the phases of the moon and other spiritual considerations—all of which initially seemed pretty strange to me. Are all these farming techniques common sense or “voodoo farming” as some have reported? My curiosity was piqued and I wanted to learn more.

There are currently about 450 biodynamic wine producers worldwide

that are certified by the Demeter Biodynamic Trade Association (DBTA), the international certifying body. Luckily for me, there is a certified biodynamic wine producer right here in the Applegate Valley, so I set up a visit to see the technique at work for myself.

**The biodynamic Cowhorn Vineyard** is located on Eastside Road about five miles from Ruch off Upper Applegate Road. My appointment was with Bill Steele, owner and winemaker. Bill and his wife Barbara came to the Applegate Valley by way of the Bay Area, where he was a Wall Street analyst and Barbara a chief financial officer of a company specializing in business strategies.

In 2001 Barbara and Bill took a vacation that led them on a path to find some land and phase into a new career: farming. They purchased 117 acres of “weeds, rocks and abandoned metal” as far from chemical drift as feasibly possible and set out to create a farm.

Working with the late Allan York, an international expert on biodynamic farming, they let the land decide what they would grow. Allan helped the Steeles create their master plan, which included integrating orchards, grapes and crops for the best use of the land. Bill states that about half of their acreage was good for grapes (rocky river bottom) and the other half was good for growing food. They planted Viognier, Syrah, Grenache, Marsanne and Roussane wines, all Rhône wine region (southern France) varietals.

**One of their most successful farm crops is asparagus**, of which they harvest and sell over 10,000 pounds yearly. The working farm also uses sustainable

practices like saving the river rocks and crushing them for roads, and using trees from their property for buildings.

Everything done at Cowhorn is based on attention to detail. Bill and Barbara are pragmatic farmers with charts and graphs of all aspects of their operation. These are not “voodoo farmers,” but educated businesspeople who use all aspects of science and spirituality to create a farm/vineyard that integrates the land with their plantings and works in phase with the moon and natural earth cycles.

**Their use of biodynamic principles focuses on the health of the soil** and goes beyond the organic to create preparations and amendments that produce higher quality products. Bill uses cow manure sourced from a farm in Williams (he trades wine for manure) and creates the preparation that he sprays on his vines according to Steiner’s principles.

Bill applies these biodynamic principles to the fermentation process as well, using native yeast from his own plants rather than manufactured yeast. His SO<sub>2</sub> (sulfur dioxide) is created in-house and only a small amount (10 to 15 ppm) is used to stabilize the wine for shipping.

**All this has led to a biodynamic certification by DBTA** (Bill was formerly on its board) as well as organic certification by Stellar Certification Services. It has also led to some really impressive wines. Both *The Wine Advocate* and *Wine Spectator*



Former Wall Street analyst Bill Steele now runs, along with wife Barbara, Cowhorn Vineyard and Garden, a certified biodynamic operation in the Applegate Valley.

magazines have given Cowhorn Vineyard accolades and high ratings, including Wine of the Year (Matt Kramer, *Wine Spectator* columnist). Their wines have complex nuances that reflect the Steeles’ vision and attention to every detail.

We are lucky to have Cowhorn Vineyard, the only biodynamic vineyard in southern Oregon, in the Applegate Valley. The tasting room is open from 11 am to 4 pm daily and is located at 1665 Eastside Road, Jacksonville, OR.

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