

cult it can be to nail down meaningful requirements for labels. As recently as April, the Department of Agriculture weakened the requirements for certification, permitting the use of antibiotics in dairy cattle and synthetic chemicals on crops. The move was rescinded after much protest, but served as a reminder that even after the first federal organic standards were put in place in October 2002, the definition of organic hasn't fully solidified.

Biehl wrestled with this issue as King Estate recently underwent organic certification. "Words are easy," he says. "but the definition and details of how they actually mean something ... that's a lifetime's work."

For this reason, when Biehl talks about "organic," he refers to it as "the spirit of organic" to capture the more elusive values of the term: family, community, land, longevity and land stewardship. He laments the increasing exploitation of the term: "There's a lot of people who use organic as an excuse to have a very ugly vineyard infested with weeds, mildew, and fruit that doesn't taste good and does not make good wine."

Which is why, until recently, many winegrowers shied away from using the term on their label, even if they were organic; there has been a widespread impression that quality was sacrificed in favor of environmental concerns. But as large reputable operations, such as California's Fetzer winery, go organic, consumers are realizing that the term "organic" no longer means bad wine.

**DEMETER BIODYNAMIC:** The strictest and most comprehensive of all growing

methods, biodynamic farming was founded in 1924 by Austrian scientist/philosopher Dr. Rudolf Steiner and is based on the premise that the earth is a living organism corresponding to activities of the cosmos. Biodynamic methods have a reputation for being esoteric; when it comes to winegrowing, vine cuttings are planted according to the phases of the moon, herbal/silica preparations are sprayed on the grape leaves, and a manure-filled cow horn is planted in the vineyard each season to make an energy infused compost.

But Jim Folmer, executive director of the Demeter Association, is quick to demystify the practice, insisting that "99.9 percent of it is just good organic farming." Folmer sees the Demeter biodynamic label as merely representing what the organic label used to mean before the Department of Agriculture began diluting the term.

Cooper Mountain Vineyards, outside of Portland, is the only biodynamic winery in Oregon. Vineyard manager Dewey Weddington says, "People in the U.S. don't understand biodynamics. It's not very common. But in our area that is starting to change. I'm surprised by how many people say 'Oh, I've heard of that. Can you tell me more of what that is?' We try to keep our explanation very simple."

For many people, forging a personal relationship with growers and producers isn't realistic. This is where eco-labeling comes in. It's not a perfect system, but it's getting producers and consumers thinking about the effects of the food system and the choices they make. **EW**



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