

# Green Matters

## ORGANIC AND BIODYNAMIC WINES

by Edward Ragg and Fongyee Walker

The popular view of the world's vineyards is of paradises on earth, row upon row of immaculately tended vines hanging with gorgeous, plump fruit. We imagine that somewhere down the line, all of this natural beauty finds its way into our favorite bottles. In reality, vines are among the most manipulated plants on earth. Left to grow wild, they climb other plants, spread horizontally and hardly produce fruit at all. In fact, growers starve vines of natural resources and deliberately trick them into thinking they will die by planting in poor soils. Talk about laboring to be beautiful!

The bigger issue, however, is the chemical treatment most vineyards undergo. Vines are prone to pests and diseases. The pests include spiders, the phylloxera bug – which ate its way through most of Europe's vines in the 19th century – and the elegantly named “glassy-winged sharp shooter,” which carries a unique vine disease. Other problems include rot and mildew, which thrive in warm, wet conditions. This was such an issue that the French invented a cure for “powdery mildew” called “Bordeaux mixture,” a blend of copper sulfate and lime. It is used so extensively in France, that some people think French wines would not taste the same without the copper residues in the soil.

So what's a genuinely “green” vineyard like? Organic wineries replace industrially processed pesticides and fungicides with natural predators and organic treatments. Ladybirds eat the red spiders that harm vines, whereas in a normal vineyard the spiders are chemically sprayed. While poor soils encourage vines to grow, organic vineyards do support local biodiversity much better than conventional vineyards.

What may confuse some is the difference between “organic” and “biodynamic” viticulture. The latter is half-science, half-faith and almost always controversial. Practitioners treat the vineyard holistically and use organic materials but only from the vineyard itself. For example, compost will come directly from the vineyard or from the animals who work the vines, such as the horses



used for plowing. Moreover, those treatments are applied according to the phases of the moon – and the essential elements of earth, water, wind and fire – thought to correspond to periods in the vine's growth.

Sounds flaky? Well, scientific research is trying to keep pace with what apparently is effective. While there's no evidence that biodynamic or even organic wines taste better *because* they are biodynamic or organic, the grapes in both cases tend to be much better looked after. And without great grapes, there's no chance of making great wine. Be wary, though, of wineries that talk more about being organic than honing genuine wine quality.

Clearly, to be biodynamic you need small-scale vineyards. In Burgundy, where vineyards are heavily subdivided, some top estates have already turned biodynamic, although it can be hard if your neighbor is spraying conventional fertilizers on a windy day near your own row of vines! What is clear is that sustainable vineyards are better for everyone and do result in some of the world's greatest wines.

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### SELECT SIPS

#### One to quaff

**2008 Miguel Torres “Tormenta” Viognier, Central Valley, Chile (RMB 144)**

Organically produced, this wine is trademark Viognier. Medium gold in color; the nose has characteristic apricot and peach fruit while the palate is full-bodied, dry and with a fat mouth-feel. Torres China also stocks the organic and biodynamic wines of M. Chapoutier. (Available from Torres China, [www.torreschina.com](http://www.torreschina.com))

#### One to drink

**2005 Gérard Bertrand “Terroir” Minervois Syrah-Carignan, France (RMB 257)**

Gérard Bertrand is another well-known organic producer. This Minervois is medium purple-red in color with a very perfumed nose of blackberry fruit and various spices. The palate has medium chewy tannins, decent fruit, lifting acidity and pleasant length. (Available from East Meets West, [www.emw-wines.com](http://www.emw-wines.com))

#### One to savor

**1999 Louis Jadot Beaune 1er Cru Theurons (Rouge), Burgundy, France (RMB 783)**

Louis Jadot is among the bigger Burgundy houses now going organic. This 1999 red Burgundy is developing nicely. Medium red-purple with a slight orange color; the nose has beautiful red cherry fruit while the palate has Pinot Noir's high acidity, chewy lowish tannins and lovely length. ASC also stocks the biodynamic Domaine Leroy. (Available from ASC, [www.asc-wines.com](http://www.asc-wines.com))