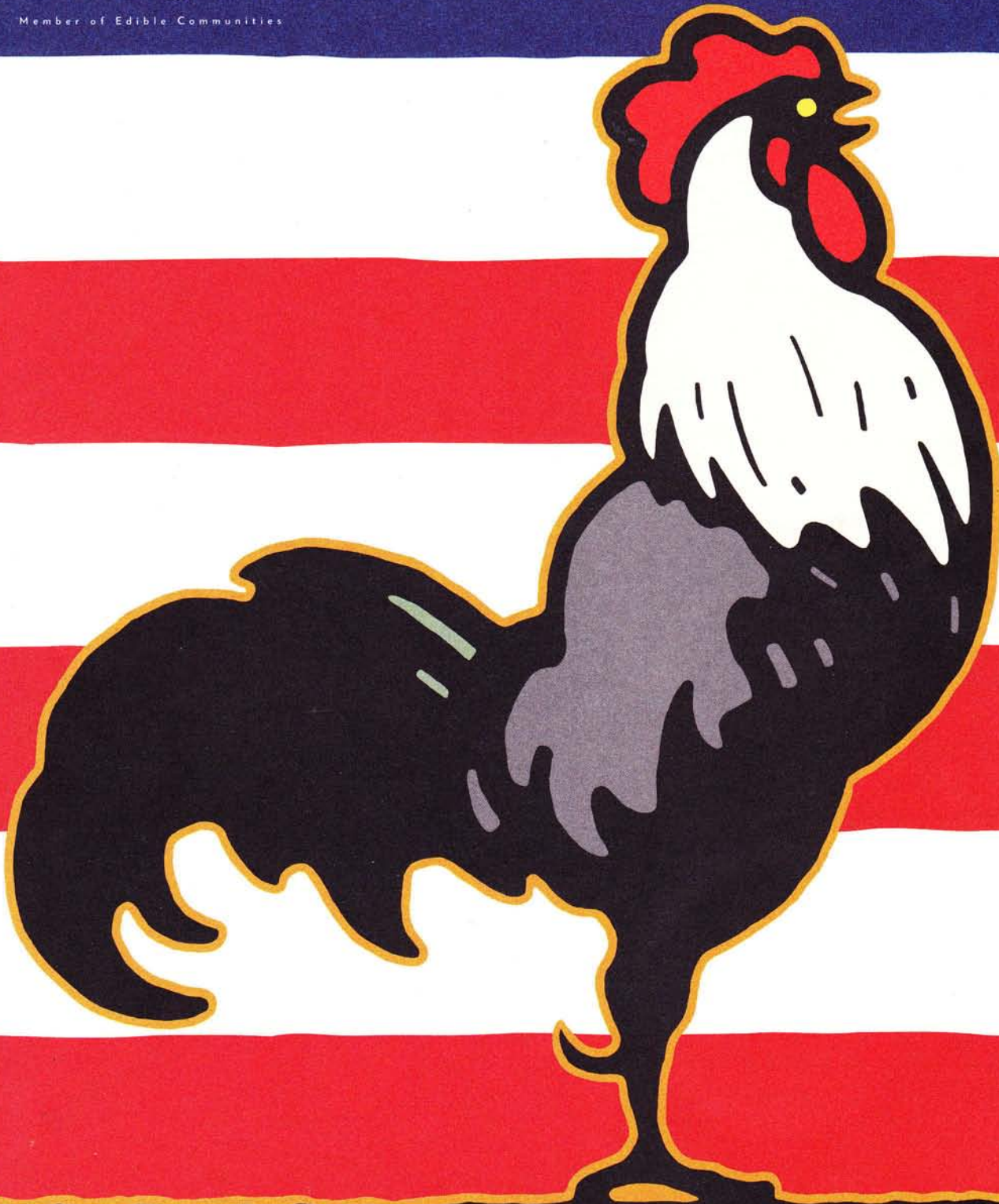


edible MARIN & WINE COUNTRY

Issue Five
Summer 2010

Celebrating the harvest of Marin, Napa and Sonoma counties, season by season

Member of Edible Communities



SCHWAB

FIRST ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

RETURN of the BACKYARD CHICKEN

FARM-TO-TABLE RESTAURANTS

BEST of the BURGERS

BIODYNAMIC WINEMAKING. PART II

LOCAL GOAT CHEESES



Aquarius

Capricorn

Scorpio

Sagittarius

BIODYNAMIC WINEMAKERS REACH FOR THE STARS

Part II. Napa

STORY BY CHRISTY MCGILL • ILLUSTRATIONS BY BAMBI EDLUND

We are terrestrial beings. Our feet pad around on the ground, rooted to the “terra” whether we like it or not; earthly creatures subject to the one universal law that transcends all the others—gravity. And what, you might be wondering at this moment, does any of this have to do with wine? Well, everything.

Biodynamics, a set of ideas applied to viticulture derived from the teachings of early 20th century Austrian philosopher, Rudolf Steiner, is steadily making its way into the farming practices of some of the greatest winemakers of Napa Valley. A system that promotes the highest standard of organic biodiversity, another central tenet to Biodynamics is the power of the cosmos—the interrelatedness of a farm with the astral calendar and its zodiac system. Like one big 70s’ flashback, these ideas, in addition to the set of cowhorn-requiring field preparations mandated by the Biodynamic certification body (see Part I of this story in the spring 2010 issue), have tested the comfort zones of many.

Once I got over my initial reaction to the Biodynamic field preps that require the use of deer bladders stuffed with yarrow blossom and cow intestines, and cow horns packed with manure and quartz, and stopped conjuring passages of the witch scenes of *Macbeth*—“*eye of newt, and toe of frog, wool of bat, and tongue of dog*”—it was time to take on the astral element. And speaking of the Scottish play, a few of the Biodynamic vineyard managers I met in Napa might likely turn to it for inspiration in their daily rounds: “*If you can look into the seeds of time, And say which grain will grow, and which will not, Speak.*”

PLANETARY FORCES AND THE SEED

Timing the planting, pruning and harvesting calendar by the phases of the moon is a practice that reaches back over centuries. Steiner was convinced that the European peasant’s relationship to the earth, built from generations of living and working the land using the stars and the moon as guides, was essential to the health of the farm. He called it “breathing the earth” and believed the old knowledge was becoming lost, obliterated by the industrial age and that the imposition of mechanization upon agriculture was killing the rich soil of old farms.

Cultivating root, leaf, flowering and fruiting crops using astronomical calendars guides the farmer on the best days to make use of moisture patterns in the field. Just as lunar cycles affect the tides, gravitational pull influences the movement of water in plants and soil. For some, talk about celestial energy forces and astral configuration is too much pseudo-science. But the ancient mariners knew better, as do today’s surfers who fully understand how the movement of the moon literally pulls the tides that shape their waves.

HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE MARIA...

It wasn’t until the German gardener Maria Thun pulled together her Biodynamic Sowing and Planting Calendar in 1963 that any dependable guide existed to codify Steiner’s ideas of farming in harmony with the cosmos. Thun, who with her son Matthias continues to update the calendar each year, carried out a series of experiments in four separate but adjacent plots growing radishes using different days for sowing, pruning and harvesting to examine the effects of

Libra

Virgo

Leo

Scorpio

the calendar on plant growth and health. The results were tangible and undeniable. Each of the plots showed discernible growth differentiation—one plot exhibited larger roots, another produced larger leaves, the third went more quickly to seed, and the fourth flowered more readily. Thun's calendar quickly caught on and has become the handbook for the Biodynamic wine farmer who cultivates and harvests grapes according to her very specific charts.

NAPA'S TRANSFORMATION

When wine aficionados wax poetic about 'terroir' they laud the particular set of qualities of a piece of land that gives forth an exclusive sense of place in the wine produced from the grapes grown upon it. Driving through Napa's chateaus and the fabled, sparkling vineyard blocks of Rutherford, St. Helena and Calistoga, it's easy to imagine the linkage of great European wine dynasties to this "new world." Unlike Sonoma, which gives off a more low-key and often Bohemian look and feel to its vineyards and tasting facilities, Napa has less of a problem showcasing its glamorous side. And why not? The two main roads that run up and down the valley are lined with famous names and big chateaus and cross-hatched with roads dotted with more celebrated wineries and showy architecture. It's a blockbuster wine valley, and it knows it. So do the people in the stretch Hummer I saw pulling up to Opus One.

Set out of sight near the top of the Silverado Trail lie some of the most hallowed vines in the valley and the home of the Araujo Estate Wines. Araujo, owned and run by Bart and Daphne Araujo, encompasses the historic Eisele Vineyard set on an alluvial fan and tucked between the Chalk Hill Gap and the Palisades Mountains. It's cultish, blockbuster stuff and people fall all over themselves to get their hands on the top-rated wines that carry the Araujo label. The owners and winemakers fully respect the intrinsic value of the enormous asset they possess—their land.

The Eisele vineyards have been continuously under vine since the 1880s, and when the Araujos hired consultant Jeff Dawson to work with them in developing the vineyards in the late 1990s, Dawson lobbied that a Biodynamic conversion would be worth the time and investment. The Araujos were already more open to the idea than he knew. Bart and Daphne say they had their "aha" moment when they realized most of the wines in their personal cellar from France were made using Biodynamic methods. Using the sugges-

tions for a planetary planting calendar didn't seem far-fetched either. "When you consider the incredible amount of power that the moon exerts upon our ocean tides," Bart explains, "imagine the effect on little vines."

Matt Taylor, Araujo's winemaker and winegrower, is a big believer in the power of Biodynamic farming. One stormy day in April, Taylor took me on a tour of the Eisele blocks. Biodiversity is the name of the game, and wildlife a big part of the vineyards. Rattlesnakes, Canada geese, owls, wild turkeys, black bears and coyotes have been calling the area home for centuries, and Taylor embraces their presence (if not literally). In addition to raising bees and chickens on the site, the Araujos and Taylor have added olive and an array of fruit trees along with native flowers, grasses and bushes that promote beneficial insects. The Araujos have been nothing but pleased with the results, saying their wine has been "shockingly" consistent over the 10 years since they've made the commitment. You can see it in the field—the leaves have a different color, a more vibrant green, and a certain vigor. Heat is the biggest stressor in their climate—temperatures can soar in the long summer days and spike well over 100 degrees. Since changing to Biodynamic practices, though, their vines' resilience to heat or stress of any kind has been "incredibly" amplified, says Taylor.

I had a chance to barrel taste the 2009 Araujo wines and was blown away by the vibrance, nuance and exuberance of the young wine straight out of the siphon. The flavors, at once complex and highly aromatic, were just bouncing forth on the palate. Taylor swirled his and, after spitting, showed a broad smile and a little sense of surprise at how alive the wine already was—the expression of a man who knows something great is on its way.

HIPPY PRINCIPLES, HOLISTIC VINEYARD MANAGEMENT

On a different sunny afternoon down off the Silverado Trail I had the opportunity to sit down with Robert Sinskey, owner of the eponymous winery that produces outstanding pinot noirs and other varietals using Biodynamically farmed grapes. Sinskey is a pioneer in Napa, having adopted Biodynamic methods early on. He believes that a kind of organic farming 'by neglect' that sometimes happens in the U.S. doesn't work with wine, and that raising healthy, productive and rich grapes requires a very high set of farming standards that embrace a deep practice of biodiversity and farm health.

Cancer

Gemini

Taurus

"I come from the hippy era, and believe in more holistic approaches" he explains, adding also that "Biodynamics is a process, not a religion, and a healthy dose of skepticism is appropriate as well." Echoing an ethos from that earlier time, he cautions, "don't get so caught up in the dogma that you miss the message." Caring for the vineyard and the management of the farm and the winery should be an interpretive process. "The spirit is the key connection," Sinskey says, and "although some of the Biodynamic rituals may be unnecessary, when we do them it brings the team together." A different mentality is in order because the nature of coaxing a wine is in itself so incremental and market forces so overwhelming that it's easy to lose focus on the most important attribute of bringing a wine together—authenticity.

And this is the battle—the pursuit of authenticity over the pressure to satisfy a market force. What's most important to Sinskey is to create wine of great character and distinctiveness, not to push for a certain flavor profile that may be in vogue. That means no heavy manipulation in the winemaking process. Sinskey sees change afoot and a new generation of wine consumers who appreciate artisanal products and don't want to "feed the corporate monster." He believes these up and coming "millennials" practice social activism and value environmental awareness and they will begin to dictate what kind of wine will be made.

CONVERSION IN PROCESS

The Ehlers Estate Winery sits on an historic site in St. Helena where wine grapes have been grown since the mid-1800s. In 2005, Winemaker and General Manager Kevin Morrissey began the process of converting the vineyards to Biodynamic, enlisting the help of renowned Biodynamic consultant, Philippe Armenier.

Morrissey is a big believer in the essential philosophies of Rudolf Steiner—from his family to his business. "I practice what I preach," he says, sending his kids to a Waldorf School and embracing Steiner's ideas about farming. Steiner, Morrissey emphasizes, "wrote and spoke constantly of unlocking the astral effects" in all beings and matter. Planting, cultivating and harvesting in line with the phases of the moon really works. At Ehlers, for example, they've devised weed treatments that block the influence of the full moon, making weeds infertile. All of the Ehlers crew is on board for this often painstaking work. Grapes are often picked at

night, with the crew using headlamps to harvest while the leaf hopper bugs are asleep. All the canopy work is done by hand, and some of the vines can receive as much as six passes at pruning and thinning to ensure the yield limits are managed.

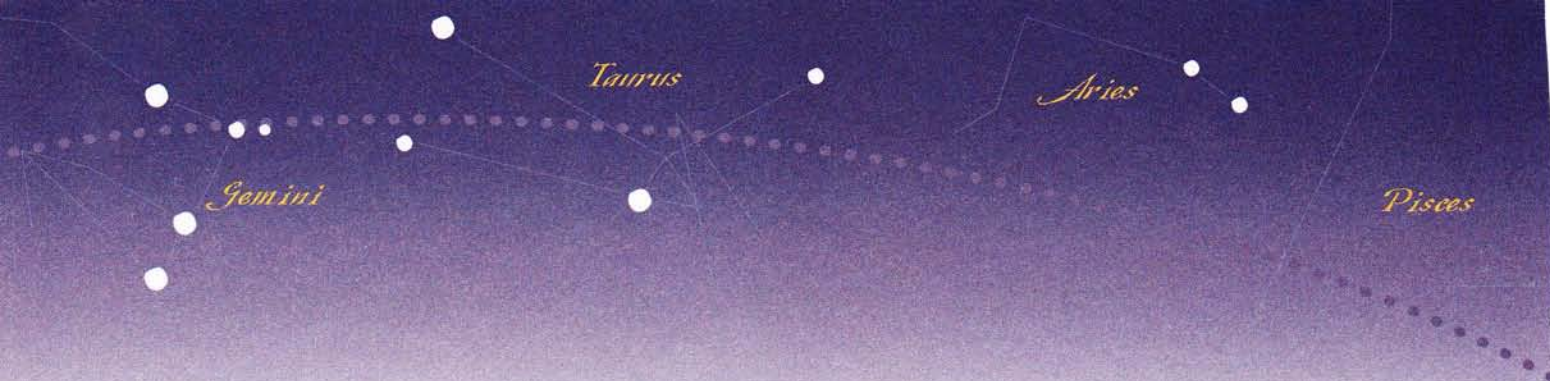
"It's a total commitment," Morrissey explains. "No one has an excuse for not being totally organic. Nature provides it." Morrissey takes me through one of his vineyards where he's planted fava beans between the vine rows. I got a peek at the product of his cow horn preps, the exceptionally rich microbial material—a sort of "dirt gold"—and it smelled clean and almost sweet. Morrissey knows what an opportunity he has to continue to advance the standards of this special place that grows Bordeaux varieties. "It's just the beginning" he says.

A FIRST FAMILY OF NAPA

The history of Grgich Hills Estate winery is a rich one. Founder Miljenko "Mike" Grgich is famous for the recognition he earned in the Paris Tasting of 1976, when his 1973 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay won a blind tasting, defeating the French and shocking the judges themselves. Today, Grgich Hills has forged another first—it is the only vintner in Napa Valley at the time of this publishing to have the Demeter Biodynamic certification stamped on its label, indicating that both its grapes and winemaking process have met the full spectrum of standards.

THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT

Fairfax's Good Earth Natural Foods is a mecca of a market for all things healthy and organic. It also has Marin's largest selection of fine wines made from organic and Biodynamic grapes. Good Earth partner, Al Baylacq, has been watching the evolution of the market's wine customers over the years, noting an initial reluctance on the part of consumers who confuse the Biodynamic mark on wines with "organic" and "sustainable" products. "Ten years back the customer didn't have any trust with the quality of the wine. But they wanted to support the farming component of it." Organic certification for wine prohibits the use of sulphur, and the first generation or so of organic wines were tough to warm to—they tasted green and tight, hugely wound-up and needed time to cellar. "They turned a lot of people off." But about five years ago, that stigma started to erode. "People appreciate the level of stability that has been built into the word 'organic' and anything else that enters the conversation can confuse. We describe Biodynamic wine as 'beyond organic' and that seems to work." Baylacq says demand for Biodynamic wine is increasing, but notes that the process of educating needs to continue. www.goodearthnaturalfoods.net



I met up with Grgich's Vineyard Manager, David Bos, at the winery's American Canyon property, a large operation encompassing 99 acres of Chardonnay, 50 acres of Sauvignon Blanc and 11 acres of Merlot. To Bos, Biodynamic farming is an essential part of the entire enterprise of putting out the kind of wines that the White House has served at State Dinners. Again, these vineyards are lively with biodiversity—golden eagles, chickens, bunnies, barn cats, owls, honeybees, pheasants and gophers—they're all part of the equation. So is the presence of the moon. Bos believes fervently in working with lunar rhythms. Whether it's pruning during a descending moon cycle (to get a better bud break) or being careful to observe the root, fruit, flower and leaf days of the planting calendar, he sticks to the program and continuously upgrades it. "Biodynamics offers the best foundation for a vineyard," he says, "the four legs to that table are biodiversity, observation, compost and cover crops, and the field and compost preparations." A tour of the property reveals rose bushes, yarrow, lavender, olive trees and mobile chicken coops. I take in the view of two enormous rows of compost mounds. We stop and give them the proper respect—more dirt gold.

Both David Bos and Araujo's Matt Taylor talk about experiencing a profound "shift" in thinking, and a new obsession over achieving higher levels of nutrient rich grapes. Davis believes that if Rudolf Steiner were alive today he would be vigorously advancing his ideas and practices—and they are, as well. There is a community of like-minded Biodynamic farmers in Napa sharing ideas and experiments and dedicated to moving Napa winemaking forward.

A GROWING MOVEMENT

Biodynamic viticulture is on the rise and practiced in over 50 countries at the moment. The leading expert in the field, Alan York, is consulting on the creation of the largest Biodynamic vineyard in the world for Napa vintner, Donald Hess, set within a staggering 96,000 acres in Chile. That which was once "kooky" has now become cool. No lesser arbiters of eco-forward trends, Sting and his wife, Trudie Styler, are currently converting their vineyard in Tuscany for the cultivation of Biodynamic wine.

As Robert Sinskey puts it, California winemaking is young and suffers from a "lack of tradition." Technology has greatly influenced the business, but these Biodynamic adherents are changing the conversation, influencing a new generation of winemakers and consumers with indisputably fine wine.

Healthier vineyards, a truer expression of terroir, outstanding wine—it's all working. Or better put by the words of The Bard himself, "*Come, come, good wine is a good familiar creature if it be well used; exclaim no more against it.*"

Christy McGill is a screenwriter and freelance journalist who makes Marin county her home.

MARIA THUN'S EXPERIMENTS ON CONSTELLATION EFFECTS, RADISHES REDUX:

Root Days (Earth Constellation Days)

The radish plots that produced the largest roots and yields were sown when the ascending moon was in the constellation of Virgo, Capricorn, or Taurus.

Leaf Days (Water Constellation Days)

The sowing dates that produced the leafiest radish plants were when the ascending moon was in Pisces, Scorpio or Cancer.

Flower Days (Air/Light Constellation Days)

The best time for sowing flowering plants is when the ascending moon is in Libra, Gemini or Aquarius.

Fruit Days (Fire/Warmth Constellation Days)

For plants that are grown for their seed or fruit, the best yields will be had by planting when the ascending moon is in Leo, Sagittarius or Aries.

THINKING ABOUT A LITTLE DO-IT-YOURSELF BIODYNAMIC GARDENING?

The Josephine Porter Institute for Applied Biodynamics

www.jpibiodynamics.org

JPI is a non-profit Biodynamic research organization that sells ready-made Biodynamic preparations online, both composts and sprays, in sizes that can suit the home garden. JPI also provides advice and workshops in Biodynamic farm conversion.

Soil Fertility, Renewal and Preservation, by Ehrenfried Pfeiffer

Pfeiffer was a Steiner disciple and a pioneer in Biodynamic composting. This classic, reprinted in 2008, is a bible for soil fertility with attention to market gardening, farm conversion and forestry.

Among the titles by the inimitable Maria Thun:

The Biodynamic Year: Increasing Yield, Quality and Flavour

100 Helpful Tips for the Gardener or Smallholder

Gardening for Life: The Biodynamic Way

The North American Biodynamic Sowing and Planting Calendar 2010

When Wine Tastes Best 2010: A Biodynamic Calendar for Wine Drinkers