

*Wine?
Certainly,
sir.*



*Red,
white
or green?*

BY ANTHONY MANIFOLD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM RETTIG



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At a recent gathering of winemakers in Barcelona, Spain, Al Gore, better known today as a global warming guru than former U.S. vice president, lauded the wine industry for trying to bring about a more eco-friendly environment. No one questions the worth of these initiatives, but do eco-conscious practices actually make for better wines?

Can burying dung-filled cow horns between the vines and spraying grapes with homeopathic solutions brewed from crushed insects improve the aroma and flavor of wine? Does the use of biofuels and solar panels enhance the wine's authenticity? And, if you are gung-ho for green, how can you identify wines genuinely made in harmony with nature in the confusing array of organic, sustainably farmed and biodynamic wine label descriptions?

To display the U.S. Department of Agriculture's "USDA Organic" seal, winemakers must meet two critical criteria. First, the grapes have to be organically grown. Typically, this means that no harmful synthetic chemicals such as pesticides, herbicides and fungicides have been applied to the land on which the grapes are grown for at least three years. Second, the grapes have to be vinified without additives such as oak chips or sulphur dioxide. To verify compliance, USDA certifying agents perform annual inspections.

All wines contain sulfites as a consequence of yeast fermenta-

tion in the winemaking process. But it's common winemaking practice to add sulphur dioxide to stabilize wine, maintain color and flavor, and reduce the risk of oxidization. Minute traces of sulfites are a byproduct of this process.

For most winemakers, eliminating sulfites is an unacceptable trade-off. Other countries have their own organic rules, but only the USDA insists on banning sulfites. Some vintners argue that eliminating sulfites has no bearing on environmental concerns such as soil erosion, water pollution, human exposure to toxins and loss of habitat. Others object to hefty certification fees especially when organic wines, unlike organic food, do not command premium prices. So most organic winemakers focus on grapes grown in eco-friendly conditions and settle for label descriptions such as "Made with Organic Grapes" or "Made with Organically Grown Grapes."

"Sustainable" is another description that frequently shows up on organic wine labels signifying the winemaker's use of a wide variety of environmentally sustaining viticulture and techniques ranging from naturally composted fertilizers to geothermal and solar powered energy.

Biodynamic viticulturists expand the concept of organic winemaking so that the whole process is in harmony with nature. They favor terroir over technology by turning their vineyards into self-sustaining habitats regulated by the cosmos and nature.

They also plan winemaking tasks according to the rhythms of nature as determined by the positions of the moon and stars. When the moon waxes, the sap in the vine rises, making it the right time for racking the

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wines and harvesting. Under the waning moon, when the vines are relatively dormant, replanting, de-suckering and thinning out foliage are on the to-do list.

Their working month is divided into different days deemed propitious for weaving their winemaking magic.

Each month has six to eight "fruit-fire" days and four to eight "flower-air" days. These are the days when they work on their vines and bottle their wines.

During the five to eight "leaf-water" days, they perform chores such as renovating trellises, removing dead vegetation from the vineyard and cleaning barrels. Taking care of the vines' roots by fertilizing and working the soil are tasks reserved for the seven to 10 "root-earth" days.

The remaining days, considered inauspicious for any of

these activities, are devoted to non-wine-related tasks.

And the dung-filled cow horns? These are interred at the autumn equinox to be dug up in the spring when the contents have reverted to rich, chocolate-hued humus. This is then dissolved in water and sprinkled in minute quantities over the surface of the vineyard to stimulate microbial activity. Other preparations concocted from yarrow, chamomile, nettles and dandelions are distributed to generate healthy plant growth. One bio zealot is even said to have burned a rabbit skin according to the alignment of the planets as a deterrent after the pesky creatures had overrun his vineyard.

Only the independent Demeter Association can certify wines as biodynamic. It publishes a 32-page manual for wannabe biodynamic winemakers. Few are able to comply with their stringent rules or afford the substantial resources of time and money needed to be biodynamically correct. Those winemakers who are successful usually limit themselves to one or two biodynamic vineyards to earn the prized "Biodynamic" registered trademark awarded by Demeter.

There can be no question that green winemakers deserve the plaudits, but what about the wine? If you ask the winemakers, they will tell you that their wines exhibit purer, more intense flavors. Not everyone agrees.

"I don't see a correlation," says Sandy Block, master of Wine and VP of Beverage Operations for Legal Sea Food in Boston. "Some of them have those characteristics, some don't."

So it's a matter of taste. But, if you enjoy wine and you're passionate about preserving the planet, green grapes are the way to go.

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A sampling of green grapes

■ Bonterra Organic Chardonnay 2006, \$12.99. Organically grown grapes. Aromas of peach, pear and green apple define this wine's wonderfully fragrant nose. On the palate, the wine is supple and long with a clean, satisfying finish. Enjoy with fried calamari, scallops in a light curry sauce, crab cakes, filet of sole with almonds or turkey panini.

■ Rovero "Baptista" Riesling Italico 2006, \$15.99. Organic certified by ICEA, a USDA-approved Italian agency. Flavors of lemon, lime, white grapefruit and flowers with a mouthwatering acidity. Refreshing and light-bodied. Pairs well with fried calamari, Caesar salad and sushi.

■ Frey Vineyards Organic Chardonnay 2006, \$16. USDA certified organic. Lightly toasted, acidic nose. Green apple and tart lemon flavors in the mouth with a touch of charred oak. Dry, extended finish.

■ Benziger Winery Organic Merlot 2004, \$19.99. Certified sustainable. Softly textured and rich in flavor, this wine is supple and full-bodied. Aromas evoke dark fruit and pepper with robust flavors of currant, anise and over-ripe plum. Excellent pairing alongside lamb risotto, pot roast or roasted eggplant.

■ Mas de Gourgonnier Organic, Les Baux de Provence 2005, \$17.99. Organic certified by French accreditation authority ECOCERT A blend of Grenache, Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. It has a bouquet of sun-baked pine forest and abundant flavors of ripe red fruit.

■ Benziger Winery "Tribute" 2004, \$80. Biodynamic certified by Demeter Benziger's flagship biodynamic "Bordeaux" blend. Aromas of blackberry,

chocolate and black pepper. Well balanced with concentrated aroma flavors on the palate and hints of cocoa and licorice. Firm finish. **W**

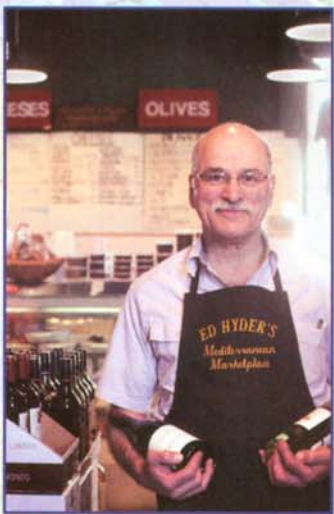
Richard Beams, wine manager of Austin Liquors in Worcester, contributed to these notes.



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