

A biodynamic business environment



For Frédéric Grappe at Dynamic Vines, biodynamic wines are the only option, on a taste basis as well as on ethical grounds, writes Jane Parkinson

BY ITS founder's very own admission, Dynamic Vines is the definition of a "one-man band". That man is Frédéric Grappe, a Frenchman based in London and former sommelier at Quo Vadis, Orrery and Michelin-starred Roussillon, who set up a biodynamic-exclusive wine supply business four years ago.

Grappe didn't start the company just because he perceived there to be a gap in the market for an ethically and quality-strict supplier, but also because, "As a [restaurant] buyer, I was starting to see that all wines were tasting the same, unless they were biodynamic. So, as I worked through my tastings in France and I met different biodynamic producers, I realised there was something that could be done about it."

Despite Grappe's cool, calm and unassuming manner, his inner passion for, and belief in, biodynamics is plain to see. Equally obvious is his company's commitment to quality and taste, eschewing certain wine categories (that some might deem critical for a full supplier portfolio) such as Champagne, until it finds a producer that meets Grappe's standards. "I haven't found a Champagne that meets my criteria," he says, "the difficulty is, in Champagne, there's not much of it and it's expensive to produce because of the yields and climate."

However, in pursuing his dream of being a biodynamic-exclusive supplier, Grappe has discovered a threat hanging over this niche section of wine production that could taint its quality image. The concern stems from Grappe's, and some of his agencies' belief that certain producers are starting to practice biodynamic production for the wrong reasons. He remarks: "Biodynamics is just a matter of experience but bigger companies are now promoting this method in an extremist or elitist way. This has led to people selling biodynamic

wine for commercial reasons, meaning the message about the wine itself has been lost in communication.

"Basically, larger producers are trying to buy themselves an image because it's in fashion and in this economic climate, biodynamics has become a hook. But the truth is that some of these places will only have a small biodynamic plot of land under their name, but they will promote that aspect of their production, when really, it's only 1% of the production."

Grappe fears that this will lead the quality of biodynamic production to be called into question, saying: "Even though generally, biodynamic wines will be of superior quality, there are good and bad biodynamic wines. Just because it's biodynamic, it doesn't mean it's good. It's a concern for the smaller producers – as more biodynamic wines are made, it's going to become increasingly difficult to differentiate between them [comprehensive and partial biodynamic producers]."

Dynamic Vines' commitment to quality has been further endorsed in recent months thanks to it securing the exclusive UK agency of biodynamic royalty – Nicolas Joly, bringing an extra gravitas to the firm's 40-producer list, all of whom, incidentally, are exclusive agencies in the UK.

To date, most of these are French, which Grappe apportions to the proximity of the producers and the advancement of biodynamics in the country. However, even though Grappe would like to diversify into other countries "in the New World, biodynamic wines come in very small quantities. Even though places like California and Australia are starting, the volumes are so small it doesn't get as far this country. But

you can try to get them together and ship together”, he comments.

The benefits of representing a household name like Joly are obvious, nevertheless, Grappe also sees the role of Dynamic Vines as one of unearthing new biodynamic talent too. “Rather than going to the usual suspects, I think it’s also my job to find the ones that are not so well known. I’m looking at the long term rather than look at one or two bigger names.”

Focus on taste

For Dynamic Vines, where quality, taste and biodynamics all seem to be of equal importance, what is the main hook that Grappe uses to sell to clients? “In the first two years [of Dynamic Vines], I was trying to explain the principles the producers went through to make the wine. But now, as biodynamics has become more recognised, I can focus more on the wine itself.

“These days, I tend to not necessarily go for the biodynamic message. What makes sense to customers is when they taste the wine and they like it. The conclusion on what they think about the taste.” And even though he recognises that restaurants are highlighting sections that are biodynamic (as though this is still the “sell”), he also understands it’s “good to raise awareness, but ultimately, I want the wines to sell for what they are and not because they are biodynamic”.

To date, the majority of Dynamic Vines’ business comes through supplying the on-trade, “We supply 80 restaurants, about 70% of which are in London, but we also supply places in the West Country and in the north of England,” and all seem to have one thing in common, as Grappe advises: “They’re usually one to three Michelin-starred restaurants, and in some cases, we supply as much as 70% of some wine lists.”

Despite the clear success of supplying restaurants, Dynamic Vines is also eager to expand its retail arm, which will become infinitely easier once the website launches (www.dynamicvines.co.uk should be live by April). However, part of the problem that Grappe faces, for both the on- and off-trade, is the higher prices that biodynamic wines normally command. “Our range goes from £10 to £60 (retail prices) but not everyone can afford wines at this price so we need to work extra hard to promote the wines in good way,” he says.

Grappe is also an advocate of selling wine at its optimum drinking time, “There’s no point in them doing what they do in the vineyard if they’re selling it too early and a lot of producers have this in mind when they’re selling the wine.” Grappe uses his Languedoc agency Chabanon as an example, “It’s released when it’s ready to drink and he keeps it until it’s ready,” he comments. But Grappe recognises selling at optimum drinking time is a double-edged sword. “On the good side, there’s always wine to sell, but the bad side is that it’s financially hard to have a high stock holding, because it costs the producer both in storage and tax. Some of these producers could be driving a Porsche if they wanted to, but they would rather hold onto the wine and have a less nice car that’s six to seven years old!”

Grappe isn’t driving any flashy car himself either, and yet, with the number of biodynamic producers as well as biodynamic-conscious sommeliers and drinkers significantly increasing, it’s safe to predict that he could have one if he wanted to in the very near future. **db**

ACONCAGUA VALLEY: SUBLIME WINES FROM A GENEROUS TERROIR

The Aconcagua Valley is located 100 km north of Santiago and it is a transversal valley, surrounded by hills that follow the Aconcagua river course. This area offers exceptional conditions for wine production, because it has a semi-arid climate, with rainfalls concentrated on winter time and with springs free of frost and rain. With sun between 240 and 300 days of the year and the ocean influence that comes into the valley reducing the temperature, Aconcagua turns into an ideal place to produce red varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah.

Agustinos Winery has focused its production of red varieties in this premium valley, first of all because

Agustinos is the name of a rural area in the Aconcagua Valley, the original home of the Ibáñez family, who baptised their first vineyard with the same name, and the second reason is mainly because of the excellent characteristics for the development of organic vineyards this place has. The low humidity of the region helps to keep the vine free of plagues and diseases, avoiding the use of pesticides and herbicides. All the vineyard processes in this valley are natural, we don’t use artificial irrigation because the natural underground water source makes this work.

The Aconcagua Valley is the ideal place to develop organic sustainable wines, which is one of the main concerns of Agustinos, where we seek to produce high-quality wines respecting nature and using natural sources. The combination of an exceptional terroir and our careful processes in the vineyards had led to us producing premium wines whose main characteristics are unique identity, fine aromas, and delicate flavours which have been recognised worldwide. It was just during the last International Wine and Spirit Competition where we got the Best in Class Quality Award Medal for a red wine from Aconcagua. The recognition went to the Agustinos Syrah Gran Reserva 2007, a wine with unique characteristics, typical from the Aconcagua Valley: aromas of red fruits, flowers and herbs, also mixed with some spicy notes.

On one hand the final purpose of Agustinos is to make terroir wines that express the characteristics from each valley, like what we are doing in Bio Bio and Aconcagua, because the wines from these places have good typicity and character from where they come from. And on the other hand, Agustinos is beginning an ecologic mission, which we have promised to carry out, and in future this will result in more environmental initiatives.



Jorge Goles, CEO
VC Family Estates
www.cw.cl