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FOCUS / DOSSIER

# COSMIC VINTAGE

by ANDY ISAACSON

USING COW HORNS AND CELESTIAL CUES, SONOMA'S  
**DELOACH VINEYARDS** MAKES WINE THE BIODYNAMIC WAY

It is a foggy morning in the middle of May, when the moon is in Taurus and also happens to be waxing — an auspicious occasion. At DeLoach Vineyards in Sonoma, ground quartz water is finely sprayed on Pinot Noir vines. Had the moon been waning, the choice would obviously have been ground cow poop. “It helps enhance the cosmic activity,” says DeLoach’s vineyard manager, Eric Pooler, vigorously stirring the quartz preparation in a barrel using circular motions to create a literal and cosmic vortex. In his hand, Pooler carries a biodynamic planting calendar — with colored charts and Zodiac symbols, it resembles something of a horoscope reading for grapevines. “This is a pretty esoteric philosophy,” he says.

More and more, biodynamic wine seems to be finding its way onto restaurant menus. Biodynamic — the name itself speaks to something vaguely earthy, and indeed esoteric, like macrobiotic. But is it different than organic?

DeLoach is one of a growing handful of wineries in Northern California making wines biodynamically, a holistic approach to grape-growing that views the vineyard as its own ecosystem influenced by the biodiversity within it. Including soil, water, sun, and the birds and the bees, beyond that, even the celestial positions and the consciousness of the farmer can affect how plants grow. So, when Pooler stirs the quartz mixture, he thinks good thoughts.

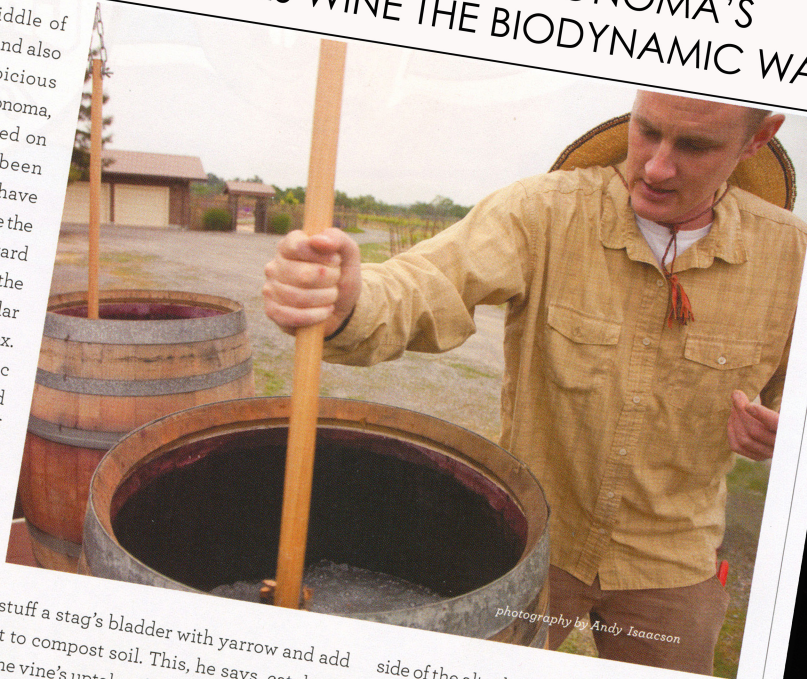
Pooler then pours the mixture into a four-gallon backpack sprayer and heads into the vineyards. The vapor leaves prisms on the vines that help with photosynthesis, he explains, adding that it also “draws cosmic warmth.” At other opportune times, he might

stuff a stag’s bladder with yarrow and add it to compost soil. This, he says, catalyzes the vine’s uptake of nutrients. Pooler might also grind valerian root and oak bark into a cow’s skull, or make a “chamomile sausage” — stuffing the plant into cow’s intestines, drying it out, and adding it to the compost. For six months over fall and winter, cow dung is packed into a female horn and buried, then ground and sprayed onto the vineyard. The philosophy even extends into the cellar: “You never want to bottle the wine when the moon is waxing,” Pooler says. “You want the wine to be at ease.”

Some biodynamic methods have a scientific basis; others appear more woo-woo requiring a bit more faith. They are phenomenally detailed, almost sounding like Biblical dictates (“He must offer a male without defect, and slaughter it on the north

side of the altar before the Lord”), and based on a series of lectures given in the 1920s by the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner (the same man who introduced Waldorf schools to the world). Before growing grapes without using pesticides, Pooler was actually a chemical salesman, and worked as a pest manager for Kendall-Jackson. “Growing biodynamic requires more observation and constant attention to the vineyard,” he says. “It makes sense that the more aware you are, the better fruit you’re going to produce.”

In a way, it does all makes sense. Winemakers talk about *terroir*, the idea that a particular geography affects a wine’s personality. Is this not the truest expression of it?



photography by Andy Isaacson

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