

HEARD IT ON THE GRAPEVINE

Organic and biodynamic wines — What's the difference?

BY CHRIS DENNETT

The wine industry has made much ado in recent years about organic and biodynamic practices. We are seeing shelves increasingly inhabited by bottles that advertise themselves under these two labels, but what do they actually mean, and which wineries in our local region are doing it?

Both “organic” and “biodynamic” are words that reference the methods in which grapes are grown rather than how the wine itself is made. In essence, both methods of grape production seek to minimize damage to ecosystems, and create stable, long-term agriculture.

Modern “organic” farming began in 1946, when farmer and publisher J.I. Rodale popularized the name, which refers to farming practices that promote soil health and eschew synthetic chemicals that pollute the environment and deplete nutrients and microorganisms in the soil. It is characterized by the use of natural soil amendments, manual or mechanical weed control, nontoxic pest management, and sustainable animal husbandry. The essential belief is that a healthy living soil—augmented by composting and cover-cropping—produces healthy plants that are more resistant to pests and disease, and have a higher nutritional value. While nutrition is not something specifically connected with viticulture, the idea is the same: vines grown organically produce a healthier, more natural crop than those that use synthetic pesticides and chemical treatments.

There have been several studies linking increased levels of harmful chemicals in the soil to an increase in harmful chemicals in our foods, and consequently in our bodies. The argument is that grapes grown organically will produce wine without the high levels of phosphorous, potassium, and nitrogen that one would find with conventional farming. Since many grapes are not specifically cleaned before crush, the residue of synthetic compounds will remain on the skins, and trace amounts will find their way into your wine. Since organically grown fruit is never touched by synthetic compounds, organic wine is viewed as more safe from these potential toxins.

Biodynamic farming encompasses everything organic, but takes it one step further. It is the oldest “modern” comprehensive system of organic agriculture and was started in 1924 by Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner, predating the modern organic movement by more than two decades. The goal with biodynamic farming is to create a kind of agricultural system that is a self-sustained organism within the surrounding ecosystem. A biodynamic farm is a self-sufficient agricultural entity that can stand apart from, and in unity with, the surrounding environment.

Biodynamic farmers adhere to unique philosophical principles that include adding strictly formulated plant and mineral “preparations” as compost

additives and field sprays. Steiner outlined nine different preparations that form this cornerstone of biodynamic farming. One such preparation is number 505 and used for compost. It involves cutting up oak bark into small pieces, placing it inside the skull of a domesticated animal, surrounding it

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in peat, and burying it in the ground in a place where lots of rain water runs past.

Biodynamic farmers also are unique in their attention to astronomical sowing and planting calendars, and pay particular attention to the phases of the moon. While organic farmers seek purely to operate without chemicals, biodynamic farmers seek to be one with the local environment, where even the farmer is a part of the agricultural plexus.

If a farm or vineyard in the United States advertises itself as organic, they must get official recognition from the USDA, and undergo a rigorous yearly inspection from a certified USDA inspection agency. Biodynamic farms are regulated, recognized, and certified by the worldwide Demeter Organization. Demeter standards are

typically stricter than organic standards and include a focus on the soil, plant, and compost preparations.

As people become more aware of their own carbon footprints, and as our buying trends lean more toward sustainable, local, and organic, you begin to see more wines labeled as organic and biodynamic. Already, we have farms in our region operating as organic farms. We also have farms that are essentially organic but lack the USDA certification. To date, I have not been able to find a comprehensive list of who is and who isn't operating organically, so the best way to know this is to simply ask. Any winery will be happy to tell you if they are using organically farmed grapes, or whether they are sourcing their fruit from such a place. As to biodynamic farming, there is only one local vineyard that is Demeter certified, and that is Cowhorn Vineyard in the Applegate Valley.

For more information on organic, biodynamic, and sustainably grown wine in our region and abroad you can e-mail Jeff Weisler who lives in Ashland and does sustainable agriculture and wine talks and workshops nationwide. He can be reached at jeff@consciouswine.com.

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“Men are like a fine wine. They all start out like grapes, and it's our job to stomp on them and keep them in the dark until they mature into something you'd want to have dinner with.”

— Female Author Unknown

“Women are like fine wine. They all start out fresh, fruity and intoxicating to the mind and then turn full-bodied with age until they go all sour and vinegary and give you a headache.”

— Male Author Unknown

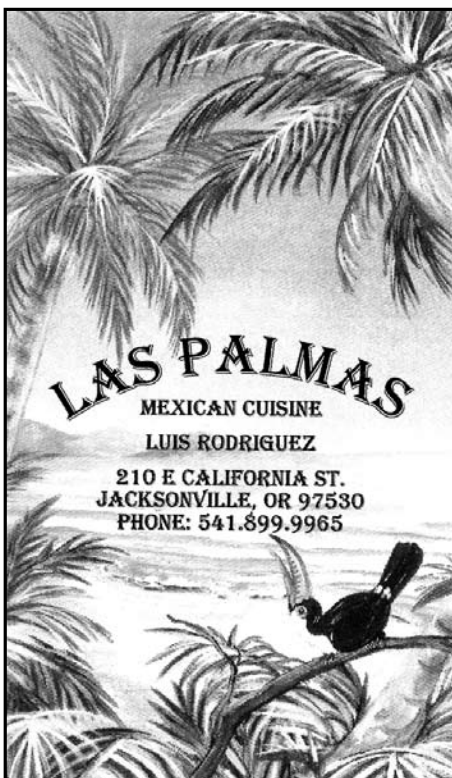
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