



Biodynamics Defined by Inkarrí Biodynamic Wine Producer Juan Pelizzatti



Biodynamics leader Juan Pelizzatti

The renowned Argentinian journalist Diego Bigongiari ([The Austral Spectator](#)) interviews the founder of Chakana (producers of our [Demeter Certified Biodynamic](#) wines [Inkarri](#)), Juan Pelizzatti about biodynamics, our relationship with nature, the problems of industrial wine and its “natural” alternative.

When interviewing someone about topics such as astrology or homeopathy, I should have/ self-control so that my skepticism does not contaminate the conversation, transforming it into a discussion. Something like that happens with the anthroposophical biodynamics created almost a century ago by Rudolf Steiner. That is why it was very interesting for me to talk for an hour and a half with Juan Pelizzatti, who is an electronic engineer, who worked in the business world and founded Chakana in 2002.

What was your first contact with biodynamics?

It was in the middle of 2000 on a trip to Chile. I met Alvaro Espinoza, I went to his house, I saw his vineyard full of flowers and the little room where he made the wines, which we would drink later and they were fantastic. He told me about the movements of the moon and the different moments to do the operations. I left with a great impact and curiosity for what this man was doing. But I thought it was a path I was not able to travel, far from my capabilities and possibilities.

However, throughout these years, we went through moments of reflection so I have changed a lot and so the aims of the winery. In 2006, we started working with Alberto Antonini (who also had a personal transformation regarding the quality and handling of the wine) and by 2010 he began to insist on making wines that were more denuded, more representative of the place. We incorporate Pedro Parra to the team and studied the soil profiles. In our Agrelo farm we found compaction problems and Parra suggested this other form of agriculture. Therefore, we hired the American consultant Alan York who died in 2014 and was an adorable person, a hippie from the 70s, who had been a gardener and ended up associated with one of the promoters of anthroposophy in the United States and became the president of the US biodynamic association. York worked in Chile with La Emiliana, Lapostolle and Matetic, nobody in Argentina. We started with him in 2011 but only two years until he got sick. Beyond the technical aspects and the things we did with him, York left us with a very different and exciting vision of agriculture.

So, the next milestone was to have brought him to Jonathan Nossiter last year: he finished closing many things that were spinning in my head, he left us a vision of the industry and the wine that I have much clearer today.

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What does that mean?

We have a non-dogmatic interpretation of biodynamics. Demeter is the only recognized certification in the world of wine that conveys a non-commercial message of the agricultural gesture, of the mere speculation of agricultural income and it has a much broader cultural objective, which requires an understanding not always aligned with market mechanisms. I do not want to sound a little Marxist but I recover Marxist criticism phenomena of current society, which I think are completely dysfunctional to human life. You have to understand agriculture not as a way to enrich yourself but as a way to feed people.



Biodynamics is more than a set of agricultural practices, it is a cultural model for agriculture inspired by an anthroposophical vision, that can be debatable and with which I do not adhere to its more esoteric details. The biodynamic movement is leaving the recommended practices in the background and putting cultural and social aspects in the foreground.



What differentiates them from organic agriculture?

The difference is substantial. Biodynamic agriculture is not limited to replacing chemical substances by organic ones. The organic movement, which was born in England in the 1940s and 50s, in recent years became a seal that ensures people who are concerned about their health that producers do not use chemicals. It is a reductionist vision: biodynamics takes those concepts and expands them in a series of fundamental assumptions. For example, that the agricultural unit is self-sustaining, produce its own fertility and provide what you get with the grapes. Examine the relationship of the agricultural unit with the near or microenvironment, at the macro or regional level and at the cosmic level, in the interactions of the planets with the Earth. I understand that it is suspicious as an affirmation but the Moon has an effect on the liquids and the development of the plants follows the lunar phases.

Then, are the cosmic forces integrated into biodynamics?

Biodynamics speaks of cosmic forces: I try not to think in those terms because I cannot believe what I cannot prove. Nevertheless, I do believe that there are gravitational effects of the Moon in liquids.

The main thing is to examine in depth the relationship between man and nature in that very particular interface which is agriculture, where man manipulates nature to obtain food. The way you make wine is as or more important than the wine you make. I think it is a mistake to renounce the most natural and spontaneous aspects of wine and transform it into a product reproducible by chemistry.

The main winery in Argentina is flooding the market with a number of wines without identity or false identities, created by filling people with advertising and plugging sugar into wine. Even their terroir wines are from grapes that they buy from producers chosen among the thousands they have and use them for three years. It is the opposite of terroir, which is construction of knowledge over hundreds of years.

They embody the capitalist vision, in the negative sense, of the wine culture. What they are looking for is marketing and celebrity culture, two things that wine does not need. The industrial wine goes in the wrong direction, denying the origin and hiding the whole process. The only thing that exists is that famous alchemist who is the winemaker, who transformed himself into an element of worship and gives you a bottled product that you do not know what it has inside. Moreover, with the help of critics, a wine is evaluated for its vanilla aromas or its sweetness, which is the most boring and repeatable part of wine.

Is biodynamics, like organic agriculture, a transportable practice without more of the Old World to the New World, where the natural conditions are completely different? I do not think it is the same to practice that philosophy in Tuscany or Mendoza.

I agree. Steiner's agriculture, his vision and the plants he uses are of traditional European agriculture. So, the question we ask to ourselves is if the biodynamic agricultural method is implementable in ecosystems with other native plants and animals. Those of us who adopt the method but maintain a critical and not fundamentalist position understand it that way. There are scientific approaches that explain the usefulness of the method. In general, everything has to do with microbiology, which is one of the most unknown sciences and difficult to know



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because the soil has an extremely high zonal variability and it is very difficult to repeat tests. Much of Steiner's vision has to do with that microbiology that works positively in the soil, nourishes it and structures it.

I value biodynamics as an approach to agriculture, not as a method to earn more money or to make better wines. Eventually we will make better wines but not for the biodynamic preparations but because our relationship with the vineyard and the land is profoundly different from that of an industrial winery.



Is making biodynamic wine more expensive?

Practice organic or biodynamic agriculture is more expensive but this is not the fundamental problem. To combat weeds in chemical agriculture, they spray herbicide with the tractor. In a biodynamic vineyard, you use the tractor to remove weeds mechanically and that has a higher cost and lower productivity than the herbicide. The cost of preparation and application of biodynamic preparations is very low. In addition to the compost, we must incorporate biodiversity and avoid monoculture, have trees and animals, generate other productions to build a circular ecosystem. We grow alfalfa to incorporate nitrogen into the compost. We plan to introduce cows to use the dung on the compost and ducks and chickens that control weeds and fertilize the soil. We want to transform the Agrelo farm into a model of agro-ecological agriculture.

What happens with the yields?

Yields tend to go down. The cost of producing biodynamic can be 20% higher but more important is the drop in yield. Because you stop putting fuel in the grape. You look for a balance with the potential of the vineyard.

In which ways biodynamics is transferred to the cellar?

Essentially, in separating the wine produced by biodynamic vines from the rest, you cannot mix anything. As winemaker Gabriel Bloise is curious, we make observations about the influence of the movements of the Moon. For example, with full moon, there is more turbidity and it is not the best moment for racking but that is not a requirement of Demeter. There are things in the biodynamic theory that are impractical outside of a small vineyard. With 80 hectares we might be pruning over two months, we could not follow the lunar phases and do it in four days.

So is there a contradiction between some postulates of biodynamics and the size of the vineyard?

There is a practical contradiction between some observations of biodynamics and the possibility of carrying them out efficiently.

In the soils, in the six years they have been doing biodynamics, do you notice a difference?

We began to understand that the soils are profoundly different and decisive in the quality of the wines. The quality of a soil is given by its ability to aerate and get wet and retain water, and its microbiological activity. The construction of a floor takes decades. The changes are not perceived from one year to the next. There are soils with natural aptitudes to be better structured, others like calcareous and sandy ones have no structure but have better aeration and infiltration.

Ants are big problem in Mendoza. How do you deal with them?

Ants are a problem but they have an ecological function. They are not present in all places or have the same activity. In many cases, you can live with them: in Agrelo we do it and in Altamira on the side of the old vineyard too. There we have two vineyards. Well: At 700 meters away, the behavior of the ants in the two vineyards is totally different. The northern farm is organically certificated and has minor problems where we have excess fertility. We certified the other farm in the southern part of Altamira organic and we had to abandon de certification because we could not make it with the ants, we just kept 3 hectares organic where there was less activity of ants and where we produce the Ayni Gravas. The rest of the farm has organic management but with the use of chemical ants-killer. We suspect that the problem with ants is the lack of fertility of the soil and that to get rid of them we have to create fertility faster than they do with their mushroom crops. There are also suspicions that bees compete with ants, so we will put some hives. You can take the ant to a coexistence instead of combating it.

Is there a difference in the soil under the microscope or the eye?

An Oregon scientist named Elaine Ingham whom we contacted because she is one of the people who knows the most about soil microbiology although she has nothing but sympathy for biodynamics. Her method to analyze the microbiology of soils is to take samples that dissolve in water to observe three subgroups: the harmful organisms, the good bacteria and the fungi that are the organisms that form the



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most structure and are generally related to woody pluriannual plants. It is a long process: the elements and life attack the rock and generate sand and silt (which are inert, do not deliver nutrients to the plant) and clays, which is the first component that gives fertility due to its electric charge that allows the exchange of cations with the roots. In other words, nutrients and especially micronutrients, which give complexity and beauty to wine. Then, there is the humus, the fourth component, the one that ties everything.

The aromatic compounds and those that form the structure of the wine are molecules produced based on the mineralogy of the soil. In the terroir, there is a physiological aspect that is the dynamics with air and water and another chemical aspect, the presence of cations and anions suitable substances to be produced. From there comes the geosensorial tasting technique that allows to establish what kind of soil a wine comes from due to its aromatic profile and texture. Lidia Bourguignon does it with her husband Claude, who is a microbiologist: we worked with them two or three times.

In Altamira, we had sandy soils with no organic matter and when you planted a vine, the nematodes were feasting. As we added compost and the soil got richer, they stopped being a problem. Biodynamics has no recipes against pests: it is an agriculture that seeks to create health conditions and prevent pests. In addition to copper sulfate today, there are new methods that use benign fungi against malignant fungi.

I left the interview (and lunch) with some words of Juan Pelizzatti in my head: "we are a society that is confused and the problem is to reconnect the consumer with production, we live in the country of meat and we can't distinguish nor where to buy meat from feedlot or from natural pasture, some people do not want transparency in production methods, industrial viticulture, which manipulates aromas much more easily than textures, created a vision of wine based in the aroma that is nonsense: wine is the sensation of texture".

Beyond my personal opinions, I left with the benign impression caused by people who do something innovative and passionate. From my blind tastings, I get that Chakana wines are always high in quality and complex. A winery that sails in the opposite direction to what the majority does awakens my sympathy and interest.

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