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Voodoo Vintners: Oregon's Astonishing Biodynamic Winegrowers, by Katherine Cole, Oregon State Press, 2011, 192 pp., \$18.95 (pb), ISBN 978-0-87071-605-8

In August 2010, a fundraising event, Discover McMinnville AVA (American Viticultural Area), commenced with a seminar exploring “The Difference Between Organic, Sustainable and Biodynamic Farming with Insight into the Geology & Terroir of the McMinnville AVA”. Scott Neal of Coeur de Terre Vineyard, Robert Brittan of Brittan Vineyards, and our host, Moe Momtazi of Momtazi Vineyard and Maysara Winery, respectively, represented each of the three approaches. The first of 12 chapters of Katherine Cole’s marvelous and accessible read recounts the story of Momtazi’s rapid departure from Iran with the suspense of an exciting page-turner. Moe and his family eventually settled in McMinnville, Oregon, established his eponymous vineyard and began to farm it organically. As Cole relates, he came under the influence of Andrew Lorand, an acolyte of Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), the founder of biodynamics in the 1920s, and has since become one of Oregon’s leading practitioners and true believers. At the seminar, Moe passed around a cow’s horn he had stuffed with manure and buried underground over the winter. When exhumed in the spring, the contents, which Cole notes “looks like finely pulverized coffee grounds and smells and feels like soft, rich earth”, are added to water in tiny quantities to create Preparation 500, one of nine that distinguish the biodynamic approach. While the odor was certainly inoffensive after its hibernation, Moe allowed that even after washing his hands 32 times after packing the horn, he could not get rid of the smell of the manure.

In her well researched narrative, Cole explores biodynamics with thoroughness, wit, intelligence, sympathy, objectivity and healthy skepticism reflecting the wisdom obtained over nearly 10 years chronicling the Oregon wine scene for *The Oregonian* and *MIX* magazine. We are given enough details about the biodynamic approach to make up our own minds about its merits without having to endure its seminal text, the transcription of Steiner’s 1924 lectures entitled *Spiritual Foundations for the Renewal of Agriculture*. “[T]hey waiver from the general to the specific, from the tangible to the otherworldly and weird, as in ‘gnomes, undines, sylphs and fire spirits are actively involved in plant growth’” she observes. True believers, naysayers, and those in between are given full voice in her pages.

So why is such weirdness taking hold in Oregon in the twenty-first century? Well, one reason is that biodynamics is practiced by many of the best producers in Burgundy, the wines which represent the gold standard for pinot noir and chardonnay. This clearly resonates in the New World’s best response to that region. As Cole reminds us: “For Willamette Valley winemakers, the pinnacles of achievement are the grand pinot noirs of Burgundy. And for

Burgundians, the pinnacles of achievement are those grand cru vineyards that are farmed biodynamically.”

Cole also argues that going biodynamic can resonate with the Oregonian personality. In 1999, Cooper Mountain Vineyards in Beaverton, Oregon became the first to be certified by Demeter USA in the Beaver State. Since then, 14 additional vineyards in Oregon have followed suit with approximately an equal number which are not certified but claim to practice biodynamical farming. Cole concludes: “Dr. Robert Gross [founder of Cooper Mountain] may not be the most notable of the Oregon biodynamic vintners, but he was the first. In a time when ‘biodynamic’ was an unfamiliar term for American wine consumers, Gross made a move that showed reckless disregard for the bottom line. In his determination to stubbornly slog down an unbeaten path, he was acting the role of the quintessential Oregonian”.

It is, in fact, harder to imagine a soul greener than that of an Oregonian. Many of the elements of biodynamic farming are consistent with those of other approaches under the general heading of sustainable agriculture, something many wine makers especially in Oregon are embracing in one manifestation or other. “Even among the many Oregon vineyards that aren't officially certified, sustainability is both a priority and a lifestyle” proclaims the oregonwine.org website. The site goes on to cite six organizations, certifications and programs that advocate sustainable agriculture. These are Oregon Certified Sustainable Wine[®], Demeter Certified Biodynamic[®], Low Input Viticulture & Enology (LIVE), Oregon Tilth Certified Organic, Salmon-Safe, and Vinea, The Winegrowers’ Sustainable Trust. The term Carbon Neutral has recently entered the vocabulary of many Oregon wineries as well. Cole reports that “[a]pproximately 30 percent of Oregon vineyards are certified by one of the state wine industry’s many sustainable-winegrowing initiatives...with countless others practicing eco-friendly farming without certification paper”. The definition of sustainable not only encompasses the treatment of the soil, flora and fauna of a site but can also include the workers and the business. When one practices sustainable agriculture, one’s “eco”-system comprises much more than it had in the past since both the ecology and the economics of the farm are considered. Demeter, the certifying authority for biodynamics founded in Europe in 1928, defines “Biodynamic farming... [as] a holistic and regenerative farming system that is focused on soil health, the integration of plants and animals, and biodiversity”. No mention is made of the welfare of the workers or the viability of the farm as a business. In contrast, the LIVE program, for example, embraces these elements as well.

I particularly resonated with Cole’s skepticism of the mystical aspect of biodynamic farming and appreciate her citation of credible academic authority to debunk some of its more extreme claims. “No one argues that the ‘bio’ components of biodynamic agriculture...are not good, sound farming practices. It’s the ‘dynamic’ part that loses people”, she stresses. “There is some real research being conducted on biodynamic agriculture, and it’s important to separate this from the random bits of pseudoscience culled from other areas of, um, academia”. There seems to be no question that with its emphasis on regenerative farming, biodynamics is sufficient, but

not necessary, for good stewardship of the land. I was once asked by a skeptical colleague what “gourmet” means. I responded, “Care is taken”. Certainly, this is the case with biodynamics. What has turned many off, however, is the manifestly anti-scientific aspects, defense of which necessarily moves into the irrational. At the McMinnville AVA seminar in 2010, it was disorienting for me, having been trained in astronomy and physics, to listen to Moe, who despite a technical background of his own, talk about the influence on the vineyard of the positions of the stars and their use to decide when to pick. Cooper Mountain’s website offers this: “We all know that the moon has an effect on the force of gravity. If the moon plays this role, it becomes logical that the solar system plays a role as well”. Really?

So how do wines from biodynamic vineyards taste? Cole’s response: “biodynamically farmed grapes make fascinating wines. They also make banal wines. The same is true of conventionally farmed grapes, organically farmed grapes, and everything in between”. I agree with her. Of those produced from biodynamically farmed grapes, I find most fascinating the wines originating in the Brick House Vineyards in the Ribbon Ridge AVA, which was Demeter certified in 2005. They are amongst the most Burgundian, offering purity and understated complexity. I also especially enjoy the elegant wines from Maysara, the Momtazi family winery. On the other hand, I have been underwhelmed by the offerings of Cooper Mountain.

After sampling wines from dozens of producers in the Willamette Valley AVA and each of its sub AVAs, I believe that factors other than biodynamics, such as terroir, determine the quality of the final product. But can we even tell whether a wine was made from biodynamically farmed grapes or, as Cole wonders, is “biodynamic agriculture...the key to unlocking *terroir*”? An interesting but difficult to replicate experiment was conducted on 8 July 2010 and reported in the *Oregon Wine Press* the following month

(<http://oregonwinepress.com/article?articleTitle=holistic+taste+test--1280776145--493-->).

Twelve tasters representing a range of experience participated in a “triangular blind tasting” of two wines, one made from biodynamically farmed grapes and the other followed the LIVE program. All other variables including region, soils, vineyard orientation, grape variety and winemaking techniques were the same. Each taster was presented with three flights of three glasses of wine two of which contained the same wine. “Although tasters disagreed upon the description, they agreed on which wine was different. Overall, there is no doubt that the tasting panel detected differences between Biodynamic- and LIVE-sourced wines”.

Despite my strong doubts about any unique merits of biodynamic farming and my aversion to its bizarre antirational practices or, as Cole labels them, “extraneous spiritual baggage”, I admit unblushingly that I loved this book which gave me detailed information on both the theory and actual application of this controversial approach. Having recently settled in McMinnville and immersed myself in its wondrous world of wine, I have come to know personally many of the characters mentioned, and have even met and briefly corresponded with Cole. Undeniably, this added to my enjoyment. The vast majority of the wine makers mentioned produce pinot noirs that invariably transport me to new levels of pleasure, regardless

of how the grapes were farmed. To gain the fullest appreciation of biodynamics for yourself, I recommend a superb wine and food-for-thought pairing, a glass of Brick House or Maysara pinot noir and Cole's monograph.

Neal D. Hulkower
McMinnville, OR USA
e-mail: nhulkower@yahoo.com