

REGION OF THE MONTH



WINERY from cover

press and doing pour-overs on the fermentation tanks and getting their fingers purple.”

Many wineries have gone on the block in the last five years, and Pete Kight could have acquired any one of them. But he chose Henry Wendt's organic and biodynamic farm in Sonoma County's Dry Creek Valley and continues to develop it further. What interests Pete about this new farming capivates an increasing number of devotees among high-profile California vintners, including Benziger, Grgich Hills, Cain Vineyards, Grace Family, Phelps Vineyards, and Hess Collection, among many others in California. But the movement is world wide, and is based on a series of lectures that Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner gave in the 1920s. In Australia alone, two million acres have been converted to biodynamic farming. With a huge increase in wineries in California and throughout the United States together with competition abroad, the search for excellence has never been more intense. Winemakers have always said that wine is made in the vineyards. In other words, wine is only as good as the fruit from which it is produced. And an increasing number of vintners are thinking that they can obtain the best fruit by farming biodynamically.

Pete says, “You hear people talk about it all the time, the characteristics that a vine draws from the earth that it's in. Quite frankly, it defies logic in an industry that understands that so well and in one breath talks about the importance of *terroir* that these vines are in and the characteristics that they draw from the ground and then turns around and puts 50 tons of chemicals per year on six blocks of vineyard. It doesn't make any sense.”

Biodynamic farming changes that input and instead of dousing the soil and plants with extraneous elements, whether to fertilize the ground or to fight mold or insect infestations, the system addresses the health of the entire estate and promotes balance between soil, plants, and insect populations so that plant disease is unlikely to occur. Demeter USA, which certifies biodynamic farms, requires that farms first obtain organic certification as a base for biodynamic practice, because organic methods eliminate the use of all toxic substances for any purpose and instead promote natural methods to fertilize soils, such as planting cover crops to sup-

ply needed nutrients. Organic farming keeps insect populations in check by providing habitat for insect predators, and treats plant diseases with non-toxic elements such as sulfur. But the emphasis in large part remains on remedial action.

Biodynamic agriculture goes further and emphasizes the health and balance of the entire property, cooperating with and replicating nature as much as possible in an activity that is after all inclined to be unnatural. Big mono-culture tracts, where a single crop dominates the land over hundreds of acres, sometimes thousands, where plants are harnessed to produce the maximum of their genetic capability, is entirely unnatural. Even most smaller farms imitate that model. Like organic farming, biodynamic practice employs cover crops and compost to maintain soil fertility, but biodynamic farms return the entire winery residue, such as pumice and lees, back into the soil from which it originally came. Soil is a living entity and should be teaming with macrobiotic life that breaks down minerals in the soil that plant roots then absorb. Biodynamic farming methods foster that macrobiotic vitality, so roots penetrate deeply into the soil, which in turn transmits its qualities to the plant and ultimately the fruit. Conventional farming dumps nutrients on top of the ground, so roots remain superficial, finding their sustenance there. Biodynamic practice uses only small amounts of a few preparations on top of the soil such as silica, cow horn dung, and various teas made from specific plants.

To promote the overall balance of the farm environment, the Demeter certification requires that at least ten percent of the farm is devoted to other crops. At this point, the Quivira estate devotes one acre to a vegetable garden planted in 120 raised beds that include bright red amaranth stalks, purple basil, red and orange tomatoes, eggplant, and a profusion of herbs and dark, leafy green vegetables. Twenty-five different types of organic chickens and several roosters with color variation from auburn to black and white dart around their habitat, furnishing fresh eggs. Other farm animals make their contribution, the goats working for a living by eating weeds. Special insectary areas attract birds and insects. Bat and bluebird houses welcome dwell-

ers and share space with hawks, owls, and osprey. Honey bees pollinate the orchards and vegetables, and because of diverse plant life, the bees prosper instead of being subjected to a single crop diet, which is threatening the specie throughout the U.S. Other farm animals make their contribution, especially the goats, who work for a living eating weeds and producing fertilizer. And not incidentally, Quivira has installed a 55 kilowatt solar electric system that supplies 100% of its energy needs, saving the atmosphere from hundreds of pounds of carbon dioxide, and its steam cleaning machine for barrels uses 98% less water than older machinery.

So at the end of the day, should Quivira expect to produce the best and most expensive wines in Sonoma County's Dry Creek Valley? Pete Kight answers, “A lot of people who've made money in other industries come into the wine business, and their major focus is to get a 96 or a 99 in somebody's rating book and have a \$100 or \$200 price on their bottle. It's their money, and that's how they're spending it. More power to them. But I can tell you very definitively, what I want to do is make wine that people can afford to drink. ... The most expensive wines by definition get drunk a lot less. The majority of what they call cult wines get put on shelves for people to look at. What we're growing is wine that people can drink. My point is that I have every intention of creating a \$100 wine. I just don't want to sell it for \$100. I want to sell it for a price that people can afford to pay, so they can drink it. And I wouldn't say that I'm trying to make the best wine in the Dry Creek, because that's hard to define. We are absolutely committed to making the very best, highest quality wine that can be made in our location, and I think we have a fabulous location. If I have a neighbor who's going to make wine differently, I'm not in the business of claiming how one is better than the other. My immediate neighbor is Dave Rafanelli. I think Dave and his daughter make marvelous Zinfandel. But I'm not trying to make the same Zinfandel that they make. I'm trying to make our Zinfandel. I think we've got land every bit as good, and I think we can make an exceptional Zinfandel. I think we're making some pretty exceptional wines already, and we're just getting started.”



YOUR ACCESS TO OUTSTANDING WINES FROM CALIFORNIA AND ITALY

California Winery of the Month



Biodynamic Farming in the Dry Creek Valley Quivira Vineyards & Winery

Deciding to farm biodynamically is not like falling in love at first sight. Most farmers don't suddenly become enchanted with the system and decide to go for it. Dedication to biodynamic methods is usually a slow process that develops over time and ends with extraordinary loyalty to its principles and results. Henry Wendt, who first established Quivira winery in 1981, was the founder of Smith-Kline Beecham, a world-wide health care company. If medications could benefit humans, despite their negative side effects, agricultural chemicals were certainly a benefit to plants, despite the toxic substances that those chemicals include. Ten years later, after seeing how agricultural chemicals poisoned plants, insects, and fish in Wine Creek, which ran through his property, he began to feel that he needed to pay closer attention to what he was using in the vineyards. By 1999, he was practicing what he called “minimalist agriculture” and had eliminated herbicides but was still using conventional fertilizers and pesticides when needed. By 2006, when Henry Wendt sold the property to Peter Kight, who developed CheckFree technology for electronic bill paying, Henry Wendt had fully committed not only to organic farming but also to more difficult biodynamic methods.

When Business Week interviewed Pete Kight in February 2006 for its “Voices of Innovation” feature, he told the interviewer that he had majored in philosophy at California State University at Bakersfield because it was an “opportunity to think as opposed to memorizing and repeating

rote information.” He also joked that the major kept him eligible for the track team. He may have left his studies before graduation, but he definitely continued to think. While managing several health clubs in Texas in the late 1970s, he devised a plan for local banks to deduct monthly dues from bank accounts to solve the common problem that health clubs faced, collecting from their members. Over time, he parlayed that idea into CheckFree, which handles nearly 800 million transactions a year, more than 50% of the online bill-paying market, a result that employed a lot of original thinking along the way.

On the Quivira website, Pete Kight eloquently gives the reason that may have motivated his acquisition of the winery. “As a technology-based entrepreneur, in that role at the end of the day, I don't have anything I can hold in my hands to feel, taste, or even really see. With an estate winery, I literally have the chance to sink my hands into the soil from the wine's conception.” And he wanted the experience not only for himself but also for his 15-year old daughter and 13 year-old son. “Every summer, they work in the vineyards with the crew. ... What I really care about is that I want their sweat down in the soil. I don't want them to think that this is all done by somebody else, but that it's done through work and sweat, and that their sweat is in there with everybody else's. They were out for crush this year. They were working on the conveyer belt, picking out grapes and leaves, and they were shoveling grapes into the basket

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