



# JEAN-BAPTISTE ADAM

*Biodynamic Alsace*

*Grape Collective: Lisa Denning*

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## **MOONSTRUCK IN ALSACE: HOW BIODYNAMIC WINEMAKERS ARE CONNECTING THE DOTS BETWEEN SOIL AND SKY**

**Grape Collective**

**By Lisa Denning | February 5, 2021**

Fourth Century Chinese philosopher Zhuang Zhou once said, "Knowing that knowledge cannot know, remains the highest knowledge."

When I asked Alsace biodynamic wine producer André Ostertag how he responds to those who say that the spiritual and astrological aspects of biodynamics is pseudo-scientific nonsense, he shared Zhou's quote with me. For Ostertag, it's the understanding that lies in what it does not understand that is the finest. In other words, as mere mortals, we cannot comprehend everything around us, and just because something is not visible to the human eye doesn't mean it's not a real phenomenon. "Biodynamic farming is a wonderful mix of art and science," says Ostertag, "feeling and thinking, meditation and action."

First set forth in the 1920s by Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner during a series of lectures entitled Spiritual Foundations for the Renewal of Agriculture, biodynamics is often described as a holistic, ecological, and ethical approach to agriculture. As in organic farming, biodynamics focuses on the health of the soil by prohibiting the use of synthetic chemicals and encouraging natural means for pest and weed management. But biodynamics goes several steps further.





In biodynamic viticulture, the vineyards, as well as the entire property, are viewed as "closed living organisms," where fertility and feed come from within the farm rather than from the outside. Every component, including the earth, cosmos, plants, animals and human beings, work together with the idea of being a self-sustaining entity. As a holistic system of farming,

biodynamics nurtures the soil through the application of nine natural "preparations" that consist of natural animal, mineral and plant extracts.

Furthermore, and here's where it gets a little controversial (some would say bizarre), biodynamic philosophy believes that spiritual and cosmic elements, such as astrology and the lunar calendar, affect the soil and plants. Therefore, while not strictly required for biodynamic certification, the execution of tasks like planting, harvesting, and bottling take into account cosmic principles.

"We work as much as possible according to the lunar calendar," says Pierre Mittnacht, third generation owner at Domaine Mittnacht Frères in Alsace, France. "We try to place our plantings, biodynamic preparations, treatments, but also our rackings, filtrations and bottling in accordance with the calendar because these are key moments in the winemaking process. We notice that wines are more expressive, more balanced and have a better tension when they are made in accordance with the lunar calendar. However, some work must be carried out, even if conditions are not optimal (such as pruning), but lunar knots and unfavorable days are still avoided."

### **Nothing New**

Biodynamics is, in fact, one of mankind's oldest farming methods. For millennia humans have looked to the sky for guidance with farming, and since 1792 farmers have been referring to the Farmer's Almanac to determine things like the best dates for planting crops. Chemical fertilizers were not even an option until they were invented in the early 20th century, and today, more and more farmers are turning to their great grandfathers' way of doing things, especially as more information becomes known about the harmful impact chemicals have not only on crops, but on the workers in the fields, and the consumers who ingest them.

The increase in biodynamics, particularly in wine growing, is driven by the enthusiasm of those practitioners who are seeing positive results: healthier vineyard conditions with higher soil quality and better tasting wines. Many are certified by Demeter, the main biodynamic certifying organization, formed in Europe in 1928 shortly after Steiner's lectures on this holistic approach to agriculture.

Some of the most exciting wines in the world now come from vineyards that are worked biodynamically, and many of them can be found in Alsace.

### **A Way of Life — Alsace Leads The World in Biodynamics**

Situated in northeastern France bordering Germany and Switzerland, Alsace is one of the most beautiful wine regions in the world. Known for its distinctive, aromatic and full-bodied white wines, Alsace's main varieties are Riesling, Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, Gewürztraminer, Muscat and Sylvaner, as well as a small amount of Pinot Noir grapes. This is a region where producers are dedicated to creating wines that are expressive of their variety and delicious with food.

The area's scenic backdrop of steep mountains and quaint fairytale-like villages sets the stage for a passionate winemaking community that is considered one of the most ecologically committed in the world. Alsace's long standing respect of nature and the environment is evident by the high percentage of wineries that practice organic and biodynamic viticulture. As of 2019, 25% of Alsace's vineyards are organically farmed, up significantly from 15.1% in 2017. Furthermore, an impressive 4.5% of all Alsace vineyards are certified biodynamic. And while 4.5% may sound low, that percentage is a record high in Europe, and growing by leaps and bounds.



"Biodynamics is the closest method to nature and ecology," says Maxime Barmès, of Domaine Barmès-Buecher. "It's working harder towards an ecological approach that brings us close to nature."

### **Alsace's Grassroots Movement for Environmental Protection**

Organic and biodynamic winemaking is nothing new in Alsace. The first Demeter-certified vineyards were converted to biodynamics by grape grower Eugène Meyer in 1969 after an accident in his vineyard with a chemical spray paralyzed his optic nerve. Meyer took his doctor's suggestion to look into other, more natural ways of farming, and so began the region's foray into biodynamics.

"The green movement originated here in the 1970s," says André Ostertag of Domaine Ostertag, "when Rudolf Steiner built the Goetheanum center at the corner of Alsace, Switzerland and Germany." The Goetheanum, named after poet and scientist J.W. Goethe, is the center for Anthroposophy, a spiritual philosophy aimed at uniting man's inherent desire to unite science, art and religion.

Two decades later, the movement was in full swing. By the 1990s, more wine growers were inspired by the good results of Meyer and the many others who had converted their vineyards to biodynamics. Classes sponsored by local agricultural training centers were being offered to teach better wine growing techniques, such as feeding the vines with insects, plants and microorganisms instead of synthetic water soluble fertilizers.

"In the 90s," says Maxime Barmès of Domaine Barmès-Buecher, "there was a wave of family-owned wineries like ours who started converting to organic and biodynamic practices which helped the overall development of organic viticulture." The importance of leaving a healthy legacy to future generations is often cited as a key factor in a winery's decision to stop using chemicals and additives, and today, even among those wineries not certified biodynamic, most farm organically and many have adopted several elements of biodynamics as well.

Yet being accredited, a time-consuming and expensive process, is important to many of Alsace's wine growers as a means of providing a commitment to themselves, as well as clarity to the customer. "Certification is a proof of regularity in the vineyard and also in the cellar," says Arthur Ostertag, André's son. "People think that being biodynamic is only for the vineyards to bring the best grapes possible to the cellar. I think that it is not just a process, but a way of life. You are in 100% or you are not."

### **Biodynamics Under Scrutiny**

Skeptics assert that biodynamic's unconventional methods lack scientific evidence. One often-mocked practice involves 'Preparation 500,' the burying of manure-filled cow horns in the fall that are left to decompose over the winter. Dug up in the spring, the remaining matter inside the horn is diluted into a spray and used as fertilizer for the vines. Wine growers who follow Steiner's teachings see the spraying as a useful technique that aids in the health of the soils and vines, and leads to better tasting grapes. They notice more life in the lighter, airy-textured soils, and less disease and mildew on the vines. Critics, on the other hand, regard this rite as utter nonsense. "Everyone can believe in what they want," says Mitnacht. "You have to live it to believe it. You must practice it to see and feel the effects."

Detractors claim that biodynamic viticulture is based on mysticism and intuition, rather than scientific agricultural principles. "It's those people who aren't open-minded," says Barmès. "Especially because there is scientific proof of the effects of biodynamic agriculture; the profile of the soil, structure of the soil, the cellular density of the grape skin, and revitalization of fermentation. If the people that say this drink herbal tea, use plants as treatments, or use alternative or homeopathic medicine, they are contradicting themselves."



## **How Alsace's Weather and History With Germany Contribute to a Biodynamic Winemaking Culture**

Alsace has some of the most ideal winemaking conditions in the world. Its position at the foothills of the Vosges Mountains provides the region with a natural barrier against harsh weather. Unlike humid wine regions that grapple with grape-destroying fungal diseases, Alsace's sunny, dry climate reduces the need for vineyard treatments, thereby giving its wine growers more freedom to explore a chemical-free viticulture like biodynamics.

Along with the weather, Alsace's physical and historical relationship with Germany is another huge factor in the region's longstanding interest in organic and biodynamic viticulture. For a great deal of its history Alsace was known as Elsass and a part of the German-speaking area of central Europe. The area had frequently bounced between France and Germany — incredibly four times between 1871 and 1945.

Germany, frequently cited as the greenest nation in the world, has been the center of the movement for environmental protection for over a century. During the 1950s and '60s, the country enacted strict laws concerning nature protection and urban sanitation. Alsace's entry into the Green movement during the 1970s was strongly influenced by Germany's progressive environmental policies.

Unsurprisingly, many of the Alsace winemakers I spoke with mentioned the region's close relationship with Germany as a factor in the evolution of its own ecological movement. "The biodynamic movement comes from our neighbors," says Mittnacht, "and the philosophy has easily crossed the border."

### **But Do Biodynamic Wines Taste Better?**

While the benefits of biodynamic farming are not yet fully understood and more research is needed, observational evidence shows that it enhances the life of the soil which then extends to the improved taste of the wines. Ask any winemaker who has converted their vineyards to biodynamic practices and they will tell you their grapes have a better quality of juice and, from this, wines that reveal more depth and greater expression of place. "We think biodynamics really helps to express the terroir," says Mittnacht, "especially its minerality, with a greater verticality in the wines (an amplified acid structure), and usually the wines are more balanced and sapid."

And taste is important in a region known for a strong food culture. Alsace has more Michelin-starred restaurants than anywhere else in France, a country justly famous for its cuisine. Yet it's not just about haute cuisine. Alsace's food is grounded in a family-style cuisine, rooted in richness and rustic charm with both French and German influences. From tarte flambee (bacon and onion tart) to choucroute garnie (sauerkraut with sausages), Alsace presents an exciting and unique cuisine found nowhere else in the world, and whose fresh and bold wines make for a variety of excellent food pairings.

And clearly, the region's interest in gastronomy goes hand-in-hand with its blossoming biodynamic wine culture. "Biodynamics adds freshness, and a tangy and mineral sensation to the wine," says Barmès. "This is true even if the wine has low acidity. Since the nutritional value is improved, it's sure that the grape and therefore the resulting biodynamic wine both have more taste, and more characteristics of their terroir."

*See Next Page for 5 Producers To Know About*



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### Five Alsace Biodynamic Producers To Know About

Domaine Pierre Frick. One of the pioneers of the ecology movement in Alsace, Pierre Frick converted his vineyards to organics in 1970. His son Jean-Pierre and wife Chantal (in photo) went a step further in 1981 with Demeter biodynamic certification. Jean-Pierre was one of the original “gang of four,” a group of vigneron who set the foundations for the Salon des Vins Libres, a biannual natural wine fair held in Alsace. The winery produces 80,000 bottles each year from twelve hectares of vineyards, three of which are Grand Cru, spanning the slopes that run up to the Vosges Mountains. In the 1990s the winery’s first natural wines were produced, including several cuvées with no sulphur added.



**Jean-Baptiste Adam.** Located on the Alsace Wine Road, the estate began conversion to biodynamics in the late 1990s after Jean-Baptiste Adam, 14th generation winemaker, tasted biodynamic wines that impressed him, as he says, with their “interesting personalities and tension.” Certified in 2007, the vineyards are planted with Sylvaner, Pinot Blanc, Riesling, Muscat d'Alsace, Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir, and Gewürztraminer. Jean Baptiste Adam is also the owner, since 2004, of the Alsace’s historic Kuentz-Bas estate, which he also converted to biodynamics.

“Alsace has always been attuned to respect nature and our traditions,” says Jean-Baptiste’s daughter Laure Adam (in photo), “Our overarching winemaking philosophy is respectful of the environment and many Alsatians recognize the quality of organic and biodynamic food and wines. It was important to us philosophically, and it’s only with the Demeter label that we can prove to the consumer that we follow the principles of biodynamics, for us, it’s proof of our commitment.”



Domaine Barmès-Buecher. Francois Barmès converted his entire domain to biodynamics in 1998 as a way to, as he says, “undo the damage caused by decades of chemically dependent viticulture.” Today his son Maxime (in photo), who views biodynamics as “an ecological approach that brings us close to nature” carries on with the same commitment as his father in the making of terroir-expressive wines.

The estate farms just over 16 hectares of vines, two of which are on Grand Cru sites, extending over the communes of Wettolsheim, Wintzenheim, Turckheim and Eguisheim. The varieties planted include Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Gris, Muscat, Sylvaner Pinot Blanc, Pinot Auxerrois and Chardonnay.

Domaine Mittnacht Frères. Founded in 1958, Domaine Mittnacht is a family-run estate that converted to biodynamics in 1999, with Demeter-certification in 2013. The Mittnacht’s 23 hectares of vineyards, including several Grand Cru sites with very old vines, are situated around the town of Hunawih, Ribeauvillé and Mittelwihr.

“Biodynamics was in line with our convictions and philosophy,” says Pierre Mittnacht. “Conventional agriculture no longer suited us, previous generations were using more and more products and they had not the best health. We wanted an agriculture which is more respectful of life, cycles of nature, biodiversity, soil and which also improves the quality of life, work and the wines.”

Domaine Ostertag. André Ostertag and his son Arthur, 2nd and 3rd generations of their family-owned winery, believe that biodynamic farming is not just a process for making the best grapes, but is, as they say, “a way of life.” Certified since 2004, the estate consists of 15 hectares, which André calls ‘gardens,’ and produces 85,000 bottles annually.

Known for his innovative ideas, André was instrumental in introducing the use of barriques for Pinot Gris production, a method not priorly accepted in Alsace. Today, many winemakers in Alsace have adopted the use of barrels for their Pinot Gris, finding the wines to be of higher quality.

Famed importer Kermit Lynch, in his book *Inspiring Thirst*, quotes André as saying, “...true quality is that which succeeds in surprising and moving us. It is not locked inside a formula. Its essence is subtle (subjective) and never rational. It resides in the unique, the singular, but it is ultimately connected to something more universal. A great wine is one in which quality is contained. Such a wine will necessarily be uncommon and decidedly unique because it cannot be like any other, and because of this fact it will be atypical, or only typical of itself.” (page 279)

Read more about Biodynamics and Alsace's Biodynamic Producers on Grape Collective.

[Moonstruck in Alsace: How Biodynamic Wineries are Connecting the Dots Between Soil and Sky - Grapecollective.com](https://www.grapecollective.com/moonstruck-in-alsace-how-biodynamic-wineries-are-connecting-the-dots-between-soil-and-sky)