



Biodynamic Bordeaux

Holistic farming methods are catching on in the conservative wine region. BY ELIN McCOY

► IN CHATEAU PONTET-CANET'S VINEYARDS in Bordeaux, shaggy-maned Breton horses pull carts that spray teas made from stinging nettles and horsetail plants. Flowers and grass grow between the rows of grapes. And during this fall's harvest, technical director Jean-Michel Comme will check the phase of the moon before sending out pickers. "These biodynamic methods help us improve quality," he says. "The wines are deeper. They have more aromas. They're wines of emotion."

As we look out over the vines from the tasting room above the cellar, Comme splashes a 2010 barrel sample in my glass. This red is a stunner: smooth, elegant and complex. Fifth-growth

Pontet-Canet has been punching above its weight for the past five years. Comme and owner Alfred Tesseron say that's because of their conversion to biodynamics in 2004.

The handsome 18th-century chateau, a neighbor of first-growth Mouton Rothschild, doesn't seem like a place to start an agricultural revolution, but it was the first *grand cru classe* to gain biodynamic certification, starting with the 2010 vintage. The region has always been regarded as too conservative to embrace this ultraorganic farming philosophy that's become almost mainstream in Burgundy and the Loire Valley. Yet during a two-week visit in the spring, I found a surprising number of Bordeaux



A horse-drawn cart, top, is used to spray beneficial tea in the vineyards of [Chateau Pontet-Canet](#), above.



Left to right, **dynamizers**, where the teas are mixed; technical director **Jean-Michel Comme**; and **plants** that are used in different teas.



estates that follow the holistic system put forth by Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner in 1924.

Biodynamics is like organic in that it shuns pesticides, weedkillers and artificial fertilizers, but it goes further. Plant teas are used to build up the soil and help vines resist disease naturally, so no toxic residues end up in the wine. A key tenet is the idea that a vineyard is influenced by cosmic energy from the moon and the planets. Biodynamic *vignerons* align pruning, planting and other tasks with an elaborate natural calendar.

Before he began his own experimenting, Comme talked to several Bordeaux winemakers who were following the biodynamic path, including Alain Moueix at Chateau Fonroque in St.-Emilion. “To produce wines with personality, with

balance, you have to get more from the soil,” Moueix tells me when I stop by on a rainy day. “Chemicals kill it. Biodynamics restores life. Vine roots go deeper.” He says he’s convinced that being in harmony with nature’s rhythms has helped his wines show more freshness, purer fruit flavors and silkier textures.

Over dinner at his home among the vines, Comme says that in Bordeaux’s humid Atlantic climate, the big risks to grapes grown biodynamically are rot and mildew. In rainy 2007, they hit Pontet-Canet’s 200 acres (80 hectares). Worried about losing the entire crop, Comme and Tesseron ultimately sprayed with chemicals, a decision both now regret. They lost their certification and had to repeat the three-year process to get it back. “I was devastated, but we learned,” Comme says. “Biodynamics is about understanding your vines. You have to be committed and see disease as an announcement of a problem. The biggest challenge is to change your mentality.”

Comme and his wife, Corinne, run Chateau du Champ des Treilles, their own tiny property in southern Bordeaux’s Sainte-Foy-Bordeaux appellation, on the same principles, and both now consult on several other estates.

A day later, I’m with Xavier Planty, co-owner of Chateau Guiraud, a Sauternes estate known for its luscious sweet whites that was newly certified organic—a first step for those chateaux that want

to become certified biodynamic. I spot insects emerging from one of Planty’s artistically designed wooden “bug hotels.” Hedges planted on the edge of the vineyard house more buzzing insects. “Instead of spraying chemicals, organic and biodynamics rely partly on encouraging biodiversity,” Planty says. “The good bugs eat bad bugs that attack the vines.”

Planty turned to organic viticulture after his technical director died of cancer two months before retirement. “This is the right direction for the soil, for the workers,” he says.

Planty has now added some biodynamic techniques, convinced they improve quality and result in very individual wines that better reflect their *terroir*. Among the seven vintages I sample in Guiraud’s loftlike tasting room, the most recent do have more-complex flavors and more-expansive floral aromas.

So why do winemakers at many top chateaux continue to insist biodynamics is too difficult to pursue in Bordeaux’s climate? “When you’re a director of a great-name chateau and prices for your wine are very high, your job is in balance if you lose any of the crop,” Comme says. “It’s safer to spray.”

That’s why the majority of Bordeaux’s biodynamic producers are small Right Bank estates where the winemaker is also the owner. Surprisingly, many of their delicious wines are bargains.

In the underrated appellation of Fronsac, I catch up with perhaps the most passionate of these winemakers: Paul Barre, who produced his first biodynamic wine 21 years ago. He puts bottles from his two chateaux, La Fleur Cailleau and La Grave, on an upended barrel. “People used to call me crazy,” he says. “Now, they call for advice.”

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STEPHANE KLEIN

GREEN SELECTIONS

- ▶ **2009 Chateau Pontet-Canet** (\$160 as futures) Elegant and velvety, with intense energy
- ▶ **2009 Chateau Guiraud** (\$50) A sweet, apricot- and-honey-flavored white with lemony acidity
- ▶ **2009 Chateau la Grolet Tete de Cuvee** (\$17) Concentrated and serious, with classic cassis and mineral flavors
- ▶ **2006 Chateau Falfas** (\$20) Packed with savory fruit—and quite big for this vintage
- ▶ **2009 Chateau Fonroque** (\$33) Spicy, powerful and balanced, with the taste of very pure fruit
- ▶ **2006 Chateau La Fleur Cailleau** (\$35) Intense and vibrant, with very fine tannins
- ▶ **2008 Chateau Clos Puy Arnaud** (\$30) Very plummy and bright, with lavender notes and a long finish **E.Mc.**