

To Everything, *a Season*

For biodynamic grape growers, there is a time to every purpose under heaven—even in winter.

By Erin Marie Miller

As the wine world adopts a slower pace and autumn completes its metamorphosis after another busy harvest season, grape growers across North America will likely take advantage of winter's down time this year in many of the same ways: by relaxing or exploring hobbies beyond the vineyard and cellar. But when it comes to wine, is there a deeper purpose to wintertime than meets the eye? Biodynamic viticulturalists say there is. "Oftentimes, people don't think about the winter as being that important – you know, it's time to just take a break. But for the vines, going into winter is a very critical time for a number of reasons," says Rudy Marchesi, partner at Montinore Estate in Oregon's Willamette Valley and former president and Chairman of the Board of Demeter USA, the only certifier of biodynamic farms and products in the nation.

From drawing in the soil's nutrients to storing vital energies and providing a period of rest and rejuvenation both for vines and growers, the often-invisible phenomena that take place beneath in the vineyard during the winter months are critical for the coming year's success – a fact biodynamic growers are keenly aware of when mindfully working to establish healthy, resilient vines that flourish throughout every season.

A TIME TO PLANT. A TIME TO REAP

A certified biodynamic grape grower since 2008, Marchesi has gained a solid understanding of each season's purpose in the growth cycle of vines during the time he's spent in the vineyard, including winter's quiet but significant role as a period of rest and renewal upon which the next season relies for success. "In the spring, [vines] form buds and then shoots, and there's hardly any photosynthesis going on. So where does that energy come from? It comes from what's stored from the previous year," Marchesi says. Because of that, making sure the vines are adequately prepared for winter in the summer and fall is critical. By adhering to prescribed preparation schedules and ensuring the vines' natural growth cycles are respected through careful, mindful observation – something Marchesi says is especially important within biodynamics – growers can encourage a healthier growth cycle. "We want to encourage the vines to go through their natural cycle of the year and then move into the wintertime in kind of a complete way," Marchesi says.

For biodynamic grape growers, that process includes the use of special sprays to naturally support the plant in the next stage of its growth cycle. "A very important spray is what's referred to as BD 500, which is a cow manure stuffed into a horn and buried for six months so it composts in the horn. Then we mix that, in a stirring way, and spray it on the ground," Marchesi says. That spray, which is applied right after harvest, helps stimulate the activity of the vine and microorganisms in the soil around its roots.

Likening the seasons to a "yin-yang" concept, Marchesi explains that summer represents an "outward breathing" of the earth in biodynamics, while winter represents an inward expression of life forces. Once the winter season is in full swing and the plants have begun to rest, biodynamic grape growers should be mindful of the plant's dormancy by avoiding pruning too early or disrupting the vines while at rest. "In biodynamic literature, there's a very strong emphasis on not disrupting [the plant] and being very respectful of that period around winter solstice, when it's believed that maximum inhalation is happening," Marchesi says.



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A SEASON OF PREPARATION AND RENEWAL

Beyond a time of rest and rejuvenation, winter is also an important time for reflection in biodynamics – a season during which grape growers and winemakers can contemplate the fruits of their labor while focusing on the year ahead in proactive ways. “Winter really is a time of reflection. You have all this new wine in the winery—you can really tell what kind of vintage you have. So, it’s a lot of that thought process, reflection process. What did we do? What could we do differently?” says Sarah Hedges Goedhart, head winemaker at Hedges Family Estate, a certified biodynamic vineyard and winery in Washington state’s Red Mountain Viticultural Area.

Goedhart says the decision to transition the estate’s 100 acres of vineyards to biodynamic—a process that began in 2008 and was completed last year – stemmed from a desire to preserve the land for future generations while creating a safer environment for staff, visitors and local animals. Aligned with that goal, winter has become a season for generating vibrant energy in the cellar that Goedhart believes transfers to the wine itself. “Anything you can do to kind of put that good energy into things, I hope eventually it translates into good energy for people’s dinner tables. I’m definitely a big believer in the transfer of energy, and the more good energy you put out there, hopefully it gets to reach both your table and your land,” Goedhart says.

For the staff at Hedges Family Estate, winter also involves careful planning for the challenges of the coming year while anticipating the plants’ needs throughout each of the seasons. “Biodynamic farming is a proactive farming style, versus retroactive conventional farming. So, we have to plan out what we’re going to do when we have this pest problem next year – we need to make sure we nail it at the nymph stage and we’re releasing beneficial insects and all those other things,” says vineyard manager Kayla Braich, explaining that the winter months are an especially important time in biodynamics for making decisions about the future based on the past year’s successes and challenges.

“All of that year’s work, all of that year’s nutrients, all of that year’s production is kind of folding back into the earth. That’s how I view it,” Braich says. “So, it’s a whole lot of nutrient storage that’s happening in the roots for the next year. Every single thing that we do out there right now impacts that time and impacts next spring.” Braich, who comes from a multigenerational farming family, notes that cosmic forces – an important part of the philosophy behind biodynamic farming – also play a role as the vines, and the humans that care for them, rest for the season. “There are so many parallels between agriculture and human life,” Braich says.



Jamie Fochuk with his wife Kim, and their son Ben and daughter Lily.

TURN. TURN. TURN

Jamie Fochuk, an agriculturalist with 25 years of grape growing experience and a board member of the Josephine Porter Institute for Applied Biodynamics, a nonprofit producer and distributor of biodynamic preparations that conducts biodynamic agricultural research and education, agrees that restoration and good energy are as important for grapes as they are for humans—especially during the winter months. “I would call biodynamics ‘conscious organics.’ Being a farmer, it’s really important to start a new year and have the same energy and that kind of stuff. And for the grapes, it’s the same thing,” Fochuk says.

According to Fochuk, whose biodynamic SOAHC Estate Wines earned numerous accolades over the last decade, the health and resiliency of a vineyard is built up over time, with each season building on the one before it. Like Marchesi, Fochuk stresses that consistent planning and a careful maintenance schedule can help grape growers produce higher quality vines that can withstand stress in healthier ways.

“Biodynamics is about making a healthy planet – and therefore a healthy plant, and therefore a healthy farmer,” Fochuk says. Beyond farming techniques, Fochuk, like Goedhart, notes the importance of positive energy for vines. In particular, expressions of gratitude while reflecting on the past year during the winter months can play an important role in the development of a healthy vineyard. “When you start seeing good stuff and bringing it in, it seems to add to the vineyard the next year,” Fochuk says.

For biodynamic grape growers that have applied the proper preparations to their vineyards throughout the year, the process of bringing good energy to the land in wintertime often includes the Three Kings preparation. Comprised of gold, frankincense and myrrh ground into a fine powder, the Three Kings preparation is mixed with rainwater and glycerin until a paste is formed during the midnight hour of New Year’s Eve. Six days later, on Three Kings Day, the preparation is again mixed with water and



sprayed outward around the perimeter of the estate, marking the final part of winter and representing protection and a blessing for the land at the beginning of a new year.

Although Fochuk isn’t religious, he performs the preparation – which he describes as “esoteric” due to the anthroposophical roots it shares with biodynamics—each year to honor and give thanks to the earth. “Everybody talks about the 100-year-old vines and their flavors. That’s the kind of stuff that comes from letting them regenerate. A lot of it is regeneration and, I like to say, thankfulness—actually being thankful for your seasons,” Fochuk **says**.



About the Author

Erin Marie Miller is a freelance journalist based in Metro Detroit. A lover of all things independent, she has written about small businesses, restaurants, nonprofits, the arts and more for publications in Michigan and California since 2014.

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