



Of all the approaches to winemaking, biodynamics is most on the fringe. One of South Africa's foremost proponents of this extreme form of organic farming is Stellenbosch producer Reyneke Wines. WINE's Rob Morris spoke to owner and vintner Johan Reyneke on good drinking and deep thinking.

Geese play a role in Johan Reyneke's pest control programme.

Down to earth



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ake cow shit and pack it in a bull horn. Bury it along with the rest of the horns prepared the same way, and recover them some months later. It's the horn's bacteria that stimulate microbial activity.

This is a 'prep'. Dilute the prep and splash the mixture around the vines with a paint brush.” From this sort of comment it was evident that an interview with biodynamic vintner Johan Reyneke of Reyneke Wines would not render the average take on winemaking. It was full moon, too...

Reyneke seems a maverick, but not when you consider how things were before chemical sprays of every description were employed to carpet-bomb vineyards with the advent of industrial agriculture. He has farmed on the “other side”, having practised conventional methods prior to going biodynamic in 2000.

His 20ha property in Stellenbosch's Polkadraai Hills had its share of teething problems and sceptics at the outset. In the mid-90s Reyneke approached Stellenbosch University to conduct a feasibility study on the economics of running his wine farm. He recalls, “They intimated self-sufficiency was the way to go, given our size. The first biodynamic effort was with a 0.26 hectare block of Pinotage. The bank considered us a huge risk and, as it turned out, the first vintage was a disaster. We've come a long way since then though.” The entire biodynamic conversion of the farm was only completed in 2004.

Reyneke insists that biodynamics is no quirky attempt at differentiating his product in a congested market. It requires, if anything, a keener vigil in vineyard and cellar, its principles no less scientifically applied than standard practices would be. This appeals to Reyneke from an environmental and ethical perspective, but also from an economic one with minimal outlay on disease prevention and pest control.



The bottom line advantages are evident with no or very few chemical agents, and then only certified ones, purchased for what Mother Earth cannot do herself. “Our vines are virtually disease resistant and that is due to sustainability. That every living organism from microbe to man co-exists to treat the causes and not to mask the symptoms of disease, is our aim. If our expenses are lower for doing the right thing, so be it.”

Reyneke, a philosophy graduate, has the quiet confidence of a man who knows he holds the moral high ground. His encounter with a 15-year-old bottle of Nicolas Joly's biodynamic Loire Chenin Blanc, Coulée de Serrant of Savennières, was the watershed, and after tasting it, he resolved never to return to traditional farming techniques. “I was in Copenhagen with my agent at the time. This wine was something different, something spiritual – from that moment there was no other way for me.”

In the tiny outbuilding that functions as both farm office and tasting room, there are reams of literature on the works of Rudolph Steiner and fellows in the field of biodynamic research. Reyneke's reasoning is lucid and his case convincing as he produces a sketch on the three underlying notions that govern the biodynamic process. Firstly, the farm as an individual entity – the sustainability concept. He poses a question: “How does one get mealy bug off vines? It prefers clover – so we planted it.”

Preparations, or “preps” in biodynamic parlance, are the second pillar. The cow patty and bull horn is but one variation on the theme. Equate these to stem-cell cultures whose function is to activate vitality in the soils.

Top and centre: Biodynamic vines and their opulent soils. Bottom (right): Reyneke demonstrates the compact, lifeless character of non-organic soils.



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Centre: Reyneke's office resembles an organic laboratory. Left: Prep samples are the elemental constituents in biodynamic soils.

tidal influence on the oceans, for instance.”

Whilst few of Reyneke's industry peers will publicly endorse these methods, it hasn't dissuaded distinguished company from buying his fruit. Reyneke supplies the likes of Boekenhoutskloof with Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz, Tokara with Sauvignon Blanc and DGB with grapes for their premium Maverick range. His Shiraz fruit is particularly sought-after. Adjacent property De Toren's 2003 maiden vintage of the DDS Shiraz (Den Dulk & Siddle) was entirely Reyneke's fruit and he is currently consulting for Spier Wines, overseeing a project to convert 9ha to biodynamic vineyards for their label.

“Ethics aside, we're producing better wine with no arsenal of chemicals at our disposal. We don't compromise quality for the sake of blindly applying biodynamic principles. We achieve quality because of them.”

This uncompromising attitude plays out in the Reyneke Reserve, currently a single-vineyard Shiraz from the 2005 vintage with a price tag of R90 from the property. Without reference to varietal on the front label (this is revealed on the back), it allows for the bottling of any superior wine, varietal or blend depending on what performs best in a particular vintage. The 2003, for example, contained a portion of Merlot. In 2002 the wine was not released on quality grounds – a serious cash-flow setback for any producer with small volumes.

In total, the 20ha of certified biodynamic vineyards

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currently yield around 2 500 (12x750ml) cases annually, of which 90% is exported to Scandinavia, the Benelux countries and the United States. Locally, the balance is sold out within weeks of release. The range includes the flagship Reserve (Shiraz), Pinotage, Sauvignon Blanc and the Cornerstone Bordeaux-style red blend.

Of the current releases Reyneke got a kick out of making the Sauvignon Blanc 2006. “It was still fermenting after 11 months, which is virtually unheard of! It was great sitting it out, focusing on life and letting the wine just do its thing. I love the minerality... really understated.” All wines in the range are wild-yeast fermented, with the Blanc Fumé-style Sauvignon having spent time in second-fill French oak. At an approachable 13.5% alcohol by volume, it sells for R75 ex-cellar.

Growing Pinotage here has its drawbacks: “By far my most challenging variety in the vineyard, being particularly susceptible to downy mildew. It's my difficult child but one that never ceases to amaze.” Reyneke regards his Reserve as the farm's flagship despite the Pinotage being the top-dollar wine in the range, selling for R108 ex-cellar and with production limited to 250 (12x750ml) cases per annum.

Aptly dubbed is the Cornerstone blend of equal parts Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot for the current 2005 vintage (R68 ex-cellar). All the proceeds from this wine go towards financing bonds on worker's houses.

Reyneke is the lobbyist one might have encountered 40 years ago, cautioning against materialism and what he describes as “spiritual poverty”. He surfs any opportunity he gets. “If I was just one of hundreds of producers applying these principles in this country, I would sell less wine, for sure. I could spend my days on the beach. Crusades aren't half-day jobs. I welcome competition for the common good.”

He admits to his label being relatively obscure at home, something he attributes to a scepticism on the part of local consumers for a process considered “mumbo jumbo” and, in part, to him being “no marketer”.

Enter Tim Rands, CEO of wholesale wine merchant Vinimark, whose significant operational investment in the Reyneke brand gives new meaning to the term sustainable. Rands' outlay will potentially see a ten-fold increase in overall production, reaching 25 000 cases within the next three years. His arrival is the marketing shot-in-the-arm that aims to up the brand's profile, the wines being virtually non-existent in the South African on-trade.

Until now Reyneke has steered clear of competitions and shows. “My market knew what they were drinking while panellists and convenors didn't. We are more confident to take on shows now with Tim on board.” Rands' buy-in also provides for a cellar upgrade and expansion as well as a dedicated tasting room.

For Reyneke the partnership clearly has financial advantages but is far from one-sided. The decision to team up was based, above all, on shared social and environmental concerns. “What we do here is labour intensive. Optimising the quality of life on the farm for everyone involved means being socially responsible. We are working with Tim on a number of community initiatives.”

What the future holds for this enclave of virtue is certain: the green/health conscious market is unlikely to peter out and Reyneke Wines have a tremendous USP in biodynamic production. Even if the “quality versus convictions” debate continues to rage, the need for those like Reyneke is more than merely sentimental.



Above: Flagship wine in the range, Reyneke Reserve – a varietal Shiraz for the 2005 vintage.

WHAT'S WHAT

Biodynamic agriculture

An approach to sustainable farming founded on the principles of Rudolph Steiner as detailed in a series of lectures to European farmers in the early 20th century. A methodology based on the study of plant and animal functions, soil fertility, long established peasant knowledge and spiritual awareness. Specific to wine production, the code forbids the use of enzymes, protein- and cold-stabilizations as well as artificial yeast cultures.

Other SA biodynamic producers

The issue of biodynamic certification is a contentious one. Whilst many producers are organically certified, few are officially biodynamic endorsed. Why? Given their convictions, some producers regard even official recognition of their techniques by designated authorities with a degree of suspicion – anti-establishment, if you will. It could also be that obtaining certification doesn't come cheap, at tens of thousands of Rands annually. The two biodynamic certification standards are Demeter of the United States and, locally, the Biodynamic and Organic Certification Authority. Of the three local producers regarded as biodynamic practitioners, Reyneke are BDOCA approved. Neither Sadie Family Wines nor Rozendal of Stellenbosch have sought any official certification.

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