

# BIODYNAMICS IS A WAY OF LIFE AT "KILTYNANE ESTATE" IN THE YARRA VALLEY

by Kate Kirkhope, 'Kiltynane Estate'.

*I first became interested in biodynamics in 1996 while studying grape growing for winemaking. I wanted to make the best Pinot Noir in the Yarra Valley – a challenging mission that would require skill beyond the norm.*

In Burgundy, France, many of the top producers had and were turning to biodynamics to assist in the production of better quality wine. Also, with laws becoming more stringent with regard to the use of chemicals in agriculture, European farmers had discovered that by using biodynamics they could produce better quality produce with few or no chemical inputs, while improving their soil and with less expense.

Some of the most expensive French Burgundies are grown and produced biodynamically.

This was to be my calling.



*Kate Kirkhope turned to biodynamics to fulfill her dream of producing the best Pinot Noir in the Yarra Valley.*



Here at Tarrawarra, I am surrounded by some of the biggest guns in wine production – Yering Station, De Bortolli, Tarrawarra Estate, Domaine Chandon, Coldstream Hills, Yeringberg and Mount Mary to name a few. I knew my own niche was to be the pursuit of absolute quality and a highly value added product.

The first block of Pinot Noir was planted in 2000 on five acres of gently sloping loam over clay, which had been heavily farmed in the past. The second block of five acres was planted in 2001.

My greatest obstacle was, and still is 'water'. With only a small dam and limited catchment, I knew I would need my soil to create miracles to avoid needing large amounts of water (that I didn't have).

Before we planted, I started applying the (500) preparation. The soil itself needed a lot of work to improve its moisture balancing so that it wouldn't water log in winter and it could hold more



*Jarna flow forms are used to energise the preparations before they are put out.*

moisture in summer. This was the first priority and where the (500) came in.

We repeated the spraying monthly from August to February and then again in autumn.

When the vines were in full leaf and fruit, we also used the Biodynamic Preparation (508), originally the equisetum form. Now we use the dried leaves of Casuarina, made into a tea and used either fermented for the soil or fresh brewed for the canopy. The high levels of silica in (508) build up leaf tissue strength and help prevent fungus attack.

From time to time the (500) would be followed up by Horn Silica Preparation (501) the following morning – this wonderful crushed quartz sprayed into the atmosphere, assists in photosynthesis and helps to balance the plants development.

It has taken two years of work to really get the soil in top condition and for our miracle to happen.

Last season, we were able to have beautifully balanced vines with fruit that the local experts claimed was enviable with only 2-3 litres of water per vine per week – that’s all there was! The surrounding vineyards use up to 30 litres per vine per week.

The vines show incredibly strength and health with no deficiencies. I use no pesticides, instead encouraging a daunting population of predatory insects through

careful companion planting around the vineyards.

Right from the start, we followed the planting and activity calendar provided by the Biodynamic Association. This outlines for the year, the day by day lunar, solar and constellation activity in their relationship to daily farming practices.

I had known that for centuries, farmers, printers, wine makers and others had discovered the benefits of planning activities to coincide with the heavens. This has made our planning easier. We can now set down our planning calendar in the shed, exactly when we plant, spray Horn Manure Preparation (500) and put the other preps out. I can then schedule the other work around these times to minimise labour and equipment changeover.

In reality, the entire season can be planned out to minimise labour, fuel, vehicle, equipment and vine maintenance costs.

We now make a lot of our biodynamic preparations here on site – they are so simple to produce. The rest we buy from Biodynamic AgriCulture Australia.

We also use a Jarna flow form to ‘energise’ the preparations before putting them out.

The ‘Jarna’ is a series of stepped concrete bowls that the (Biodynamic) preparations in their 200 litres of water flow down for one hour before spraying out.

The flow form is an empowering experience and my workers love to just hang around while the bowls are flowing – their rhythmical flow creates a great sense of well being in even the most reluctant worker.

This season will be the third season for the old block and we will repeat the Biodynamic Preparations (500), (501), (508) with additional Biodynamic fish emulsion, seaweed tea, and manure concentrate.

The old block continues to improve with the soil turning a

deep chocolate brown, showing excellent friability when dug and with enviable worm and micro biotic populations.

The new block is obviously one year behind and still cracks in summer. Another year of biodynamic balancing will make all the difference.

The rest of the property, which is still grazing land, is treated two to three times a year with (500), manure concentrate, seaweed tea and Biodynamic fish emulsion.

My experience with biodynamics has driven me to a passionate belief in the benefits of this way of life for the pursuit of excellence. The first vintage is in the barrel, and quote “is an excellent award winning wine”.

The inputs of bringing the vineyard to this level have been minimal. The wine will attract a premium price in a market that cannot be fulfilled at present. I already have an order for multiple cases from the UK, sight unseen, at premium price and bottling is still 14 months away!

I have to tell you, biodynamics becomes a way of life – you start to realise how our lives follow rhythms and patterns.

If we can work with nature and these rhythms, while still using our knowledge of commerce and the consumer society – then nature and man can come to a win win outcome. ■



*Kate stirring biodynamic seaweed brew.*