

# Moonshine



JOHN CLARK FOR TIME

## Timing is everything in biodynamic wine growing

By ALICE FEIRING

**WHEN A WINEMAKER** counsels others to bury dung-filled cow horns on the autumnal equinox and takes cues from the lunar calendar for everything from vineyard treatments to bottling, it's easy to dismiss his advice as hocus-pocus.

Yet an increasing number of American winemakers are calling on Frenchman Philippe Armenier for tutoring in the theories

of biodynamics, an early 20th century method of farming and maintaining vineyards. Some of the world's greatest winemakers (such as France's Nicolas Joly and Lalou Leroy) firmly believe that using biodynamic methods healed their soil and vines after years of chemical mistreatment. But the bottom line is that they think the methods provide tastier wines.

The theory was born out of the teachings of Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). Though he wasn't a grape grower or even a gardener, Steiner set forth guidelines for farming timed to the season as well as the zodiac. Close to homeopathy, biodynamics is hyper-organic stuff. The technique includes eight different steps, using materials from cow dung to chamomile flowers, and is difficult to learn without someone like Armenier

**FINE WINE:**  
Armenier advises clients on ways to reinvigorate their vineyard soil

coaching. The vineyard worker must watch the calendar and the sun and moonrise for the precise times to add various supplements to the soil.

Despite the hassles, winemakers in the U.S. are warming to biodynamic methods, in part because of the growing popularity of organic farming and also, aficionados say, because the wines produced simply taste better. And Armenier is capitalizing on the trend. After leaving his family's winery—Domaine Marcoux in Châteauneuf-du-Pape—Armenier moved three years ago to Santa Rosa, Calif. He had one client. Now he has 20 and will add more to his roster in 2005. Armenier advises some impressive names: Archery Summit, Joseph Phelps, Cayuse, Grace Family Vineyards.

Another client is Steve Beckmen, who uses the techniques in his Santa Barbara vineyard. "Biodynamics emphasizes balance," he says. "Ideally, vines naturally become resistant to pests and disease."

Though biodynamics flies in the face of conventional agriculture, Beckmen is a believer. "My 100%-biodynamic vineyards are doing great. I immediately saw better vine development, fewer pests and need less irrigation. The grapes made some of our best wines yet." The proof comes in the glass. ■



## BEST OF BOTTLED BIODYNAMICS

- **ONA, MAIPO, CHILE** A plummy wine made from the Carmenère grape. Less than **\$12**
- **LA COULEE DE SERRANT, LOIRE, FRANCE** Made by Nicolas Joly, who started the biodynamic movement. Ageworthy, dry whites from chenin blanc. From **\$30**
- **CASCINA DEGLI ULIVI, GAVI, ITALY** A nutty white wine from northern Italy. Less than **\$20**
- **MICHEL CHAPOUTIER, RHONE, FRANCE** Red wines made from the Syrah grape. From **\$15**
- **CAYUSE, WASHINGTON, U.S.** Bold, chewy, impressive reds. More than **\$50**
- **BECKMEN VINEYARDS, SANTA BARBARA, U.S.** Not fully biodynamic but headed there. From **\$12**

