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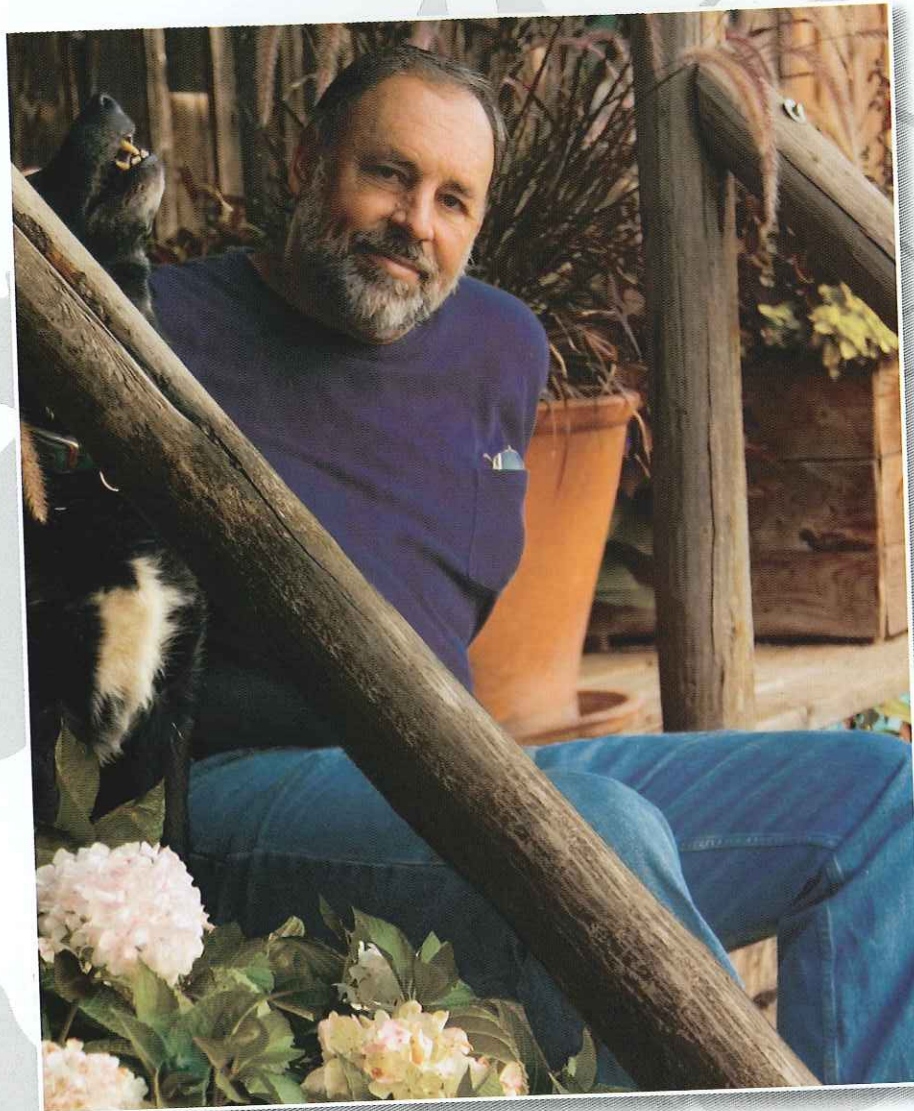
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Oregon on Biodynamics

BRICK HOUSE MAKES THE COMMITMENT

BY KENJI HODGSON WITH DOUG TUNNELL

Biodynamics – the eco-friendly, horticulturally holistic approach to wine growing – splits the wine community into two camps: we either buy into it or we don't. The farming philosophy, laid out by Rudolf Steiner in the early 20th century, has its share of nay-sayers too eager to knock the spiritual slant. But lunar calendars and cow horns aside, even the pragmatic have to admit that a nutritive, hands-on practice bestows the most love a vineyard could ask for.

Doug Tunnell, proprietor of Brick House Vineyards in the Chehalem AVA, grew into biodynamics in 2002 and has not looked back. "There's a saying that, 'the best fertilizer in a vineyard is the footprint of the owner,'" says Tunnell. "If you believe nothing else about biodynamics, that principle alone is what biodynamics brings." How did Brick House begin biodynamics? Doug readily replies: "I had been farming organic for a number of years, and it's really a logical outcome of farming organic and working with the vine organically. Once you develop that sensitivity, it comes upon you that there may be more that you can do; there may be ways that humans can more positively influence the growing of our vines, of our food, of anything. That's really where biodynamics steps in."

In terms of biodynamics, there is in fact a system, specific principles that must be applied. Doug notes that, "Steiner gave us the ability to modify and grow, first of all by saying, 'these teachings are indications, these are not a finished work.' You need to take these rough indications, apply them, and see what happens. My favourite quote from Steiner: at one point he was asked about how much fertilizer was required, and his response to this was, 'Look, we need to study how much fertilizer works in our field, but there's no recipe. We need a cow horn to do this work, but we shouldn't be bullheaded about it.'" How has it changed the vineyards at Brick House? Doug pauses, but only for a moment, before answering.

"In a nutshell, the vineyard looks more healthy. It performs in a more healthy way, it is more productive in a healthy way, and you can see it and feel it really in the mid-season, where you have full growth of the canopy and the leaves are fully formed and really photosynthesizing. It's not any one thing that I can isolate, like my cluster weight has gone up by ten ounces per cluster. It's really the whole look of the plant and mostly, the look of the soil. You really develop a live soil, you can put that soil to your nose and it smells like a rich forest floor. It's really a different sensation than if

"You really develop a live soil, you can put that soil to your nose and it smells like a rich, forest floor."

you picked up dirt from the side of the road that isn't alive."

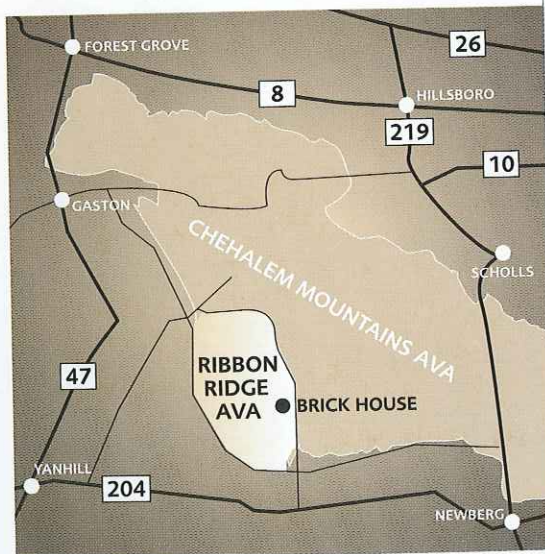
Wine is, after all, a business, too. So cost is always a factor in vineyard decisions, though it can

generally be said that biodynamics is cost-effective in the long run. Doug concurs: "What biodynamics does cost is more time. From the farmer, from the viticulturalist. I don't think you can dial it in—you need to be on it. You need to stir the stuff. You need to go out and spray it. You need to be in touch in a way that many people who grow grapes these days aren't because they're leaving it up to a management company, and [the company] may visit the vineyard once a month, occasionally, at critical times, and then at harvest. I don't think you can do biodynamics that way. You've got to be present."

Then there is the ultimate question, of how all of this affects the wine. Doug is cautious, and clearly does not want to overstate the case, but there are some fundamentals, in his mind. "These things don't happen right away. I'm really happy with the length of the wines we are producing, and there are certain blocks that were receiving treatment earlier... and I'm seeing in those blocks real improvements in terms of length of finish. Also, I believe, the fundamental complexity; we're able to produce more complex wines. In the chardonnay, one of the things I really hope to accomplish, and I think we're making progress on, is to make chardonnays that aren't just tropical fruit, but have earthy complexity to them, that have mineral notes, that have stony notes. And I think we're making headway on this."

Can you distinguish a biodynamic wine from other wines? That is in some ways an unfair question, but worth pondering, nonetheless. In a sense, all good winemaking has a healthy portion of faith in the ultimate result, and we could say this is even more true for biodynamic wines, where the methods are about sustainability, and long term health, for the vines, for the consumer, for the planet for that matter. "If someone put six wines in front of me and I was blindfolded, I'm not sure I could say, 'these are the bio wines.' But, I've had almost that experience: I was invited to an informal dinner party with some other winemakers and their wives, and there was

a very casual blind tasting, the hosts just put bags over the wines, and we were tasting and talking, and slowly revealing them for fun. They were all pinot noirs, and sure enough, out of all of them, the one that blew my socks off, was the Leroy. Not a fancy Leroy, it was a Leroy village wine, Bourgogne, very common in its pedigree, but absolutely a stunner, and a biodynamic product. I couldn't pick them out of a crowd, but it just seems to happen that they're good wines." With producers all over the globe putting biodynamics into play, or at the very least investigating it, one thing seems safe to say: the wine world is, in an important way, greener than ever. 🍷



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