

Led by matriarch Christine, the Saahs family pioneered biodynamic winemaking from their vineyard in the Wachau, ensuring that viticulture needn't clash with nature.



in respecting a harmony between all elements - mineral, vegetal and animal. Throughout the first half of the last century, the planet was scarred by two devastating world wars and emerging industrial agriculture. It's no surprise that a movement developed to revitalize bloodied and chemically stained soil and harness its energy for more positive purposes, including creating a holistically perfect *Grüner Veltliner*.

For biodynamic proponents such as Saahs and her son Nikolaus, master of the ancient chapels and courtyards that form their winery at the heart of Mautern, spraying any kind of herbicide puts "an unbelievable stress on vines" as well as on flora and fauna. "There is no life without insects!" exclaims Saahs. "All species down to the tiniest microorganisms in the soil need their space to live. Wild bees as well as every insect, bird and animal, are absolutely essential to the foundation of our life." Some of the 450 species of Austrian bees pollinate wildflowers growing among the vines, which add healthy nitrogen to the soil; those same flowers also house "good"

beetles such as ladybirds, which eat parasitic bugs that could destroy a vine.

Since 1971, the Nikolaihof has been a European pioneer in biodynamic winemaking according to the very strict international Demeter certification – a minimum 7% of land must remain uncultivated and controlled to encourage biodiversity (Nikolaihof maintains 10%). According to Waldin's 2018 organic/biodynamic audit, 4.5% of vineyards globally were certified organic or biodynamic, with the vast majority in Europe. Austria has around 70 biodynamic estates, with Austrian winemakers praised by Waldin for "creating a biodiverse vineyard as common sense rather than a hassle." The use of wild elements, such as wild yeast, creates unique terroirs and flavors.

MOTHER EARTH

Nature might have breathed a sigh of relief these past few months, with fewer belching industrial chimneys and fewer chemicals in rivers, but post-lockdown, there are already signs that things will quickly return to our pre-corona, pre-Greta state of cheerfully

wanton environmental destruction. Saahs and her four children now run various ventures related to wine, cosmetics (a regenerative skin cream from grape skins, popular across Russia) and food (a gourmet restaurant and an award-winning cookbook) while promoting her philosophy through free weekly lecture tours.

"Biodynamic winemaking is not as simple as reading from a book or studying for a few months or years. It's about developing a feel for how to work with the soil, how to understand the flows of energy, both in the earth and even from birds and insects flying overhead," Saahs laughs. "It's not an exact science – it's more like bringing up children compared to following a recipe. You have to feel it, learn it and grow with it."

Biodynamic viticulture is becoming more prevalent, an ideal means to maintain carbon storage to minimize climate change, protect vine-growing allies such as bees and ladybirds and restore exhausted soil. It's all very obvious to Saahs. "We all speak of Mother Earth. Everything springs from her, in a flow of love, light and healing." And good wine.

PHOTOS: NIKOLAIHOF WACHAU

winemaking

In Vino Spiritus

Biodynamic winemaking offers a holistic, more natural approach for a post-pandemic world

by **Andrew Standen-Raz**

In *Silent Spring*, a 1962 book that influenced the climate change movement, ecologist Rachel Carson imagined a factory-poisoned world devoid of nature: "In the mornings which had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, and wrens, and scores of other bird voices, there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields, and woods and marshes." She could never have imagined the exact opposite occurring 60 years later: A pandemic-riven world where humankind and its destructive endeavors are in quarantine, where nature flourishes in the absence of its seemingly greatest enemy – us.

The lockdown merely paused pressing environmental issues. Winemakers have squeezed the best out of nature for centuries, but sensitive vines suffer from rising temperatures and shifting climates. France's Champagne region has made radical

changes as harvests come earlier and grapes have lower acidity, while around London, growers are reveling in Pinot Noir-friendly hotter summers. "You can't beat the climate," notes Matthieu Elzinga, chief winemaker at Denbies Wine Estate, "so you have to follow it."

Of course, it helps if you're prepared. "In many ways, climate change hasn't really been a problem for us," says Christine Saahs, matriarch of the family running the biodynamic Weingut Nikolaihof, founded in a monastery in Austria's Wachau in 985. "The real issue is the quality of the soil, and the energy that the soil retains, which is then reflected in the quality of the wine." And in the health of the vines themselves: "In Austria, we have always had periods of extreme heat and extreme cold, and our vines survived over 2,000 years because of the health of the soil."

ENERGY IN A BOTTLE

With less business during lockdown, winemakers had time to cultivate and care for their wines, with more time for aging. "To stop rushing young wine out ever faster. To allow wines to mature and develop," notes Saahs, a great advocate for cellaring – their 1995 Riesling earned Austria's first 100-point score from the Wine Advocate in 2014.

Saahs's approach stems from Rudolf Steiner's theory of biodynamics, which he presented in a series of lectures in 1924. A holistic and quite mystical approach to life and agriculture, it has influenced organic farming ever since. As Monty Waldin, the foremost British biodynamic winemaker, explains, "The idea unique to biodynamics is that by creating your own source of fertility, you work towards the ideal of each farm or vineyard becoming a self-sustaining living organism."

Biodynamic farming can seem quite odd – with planting only during certain lunar cycles and burying cow horns filled with manure-based homeopathic slurry in fields – but there is both science and a deep love of our planet behind Steiner's focus on preserving biodiversity, on avoiding dependence on chemicals and mechanization and

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