

# Balancing act

Sue White considers the interesting quirks and benefits of biodynamics, an holistic agricultural philosophy.

Visitors to Hahndorf Hill Winery in the Adelaide Hills could be forgiven for thinking its farmers have been a bit lax, admits biodynamic winemaker Larry Jacobs.

"Our vines are untidy," he says happily.

Although Jacobs is busy managing the farm, cellar door and distribution of his wines, he hasn't forgotten his grapes. But as a biodynamic winemaker he's more likely to be found consulting a moon chart than out mowing the property.

"Most vineyards eliminate the grass and weeds under the vines with chemicals. It's quite a shift to let it be messy, but there's life under there," he says.

Biodynamics was developed by philosopher and educator Rudolf Steiner in the 1920s, to help European farmers improve their soil quality. It's now practiced in around 50 countries, including Australia, where 1,400 members of the Biodynamic Farming Association produce everything from olives to dairy products.

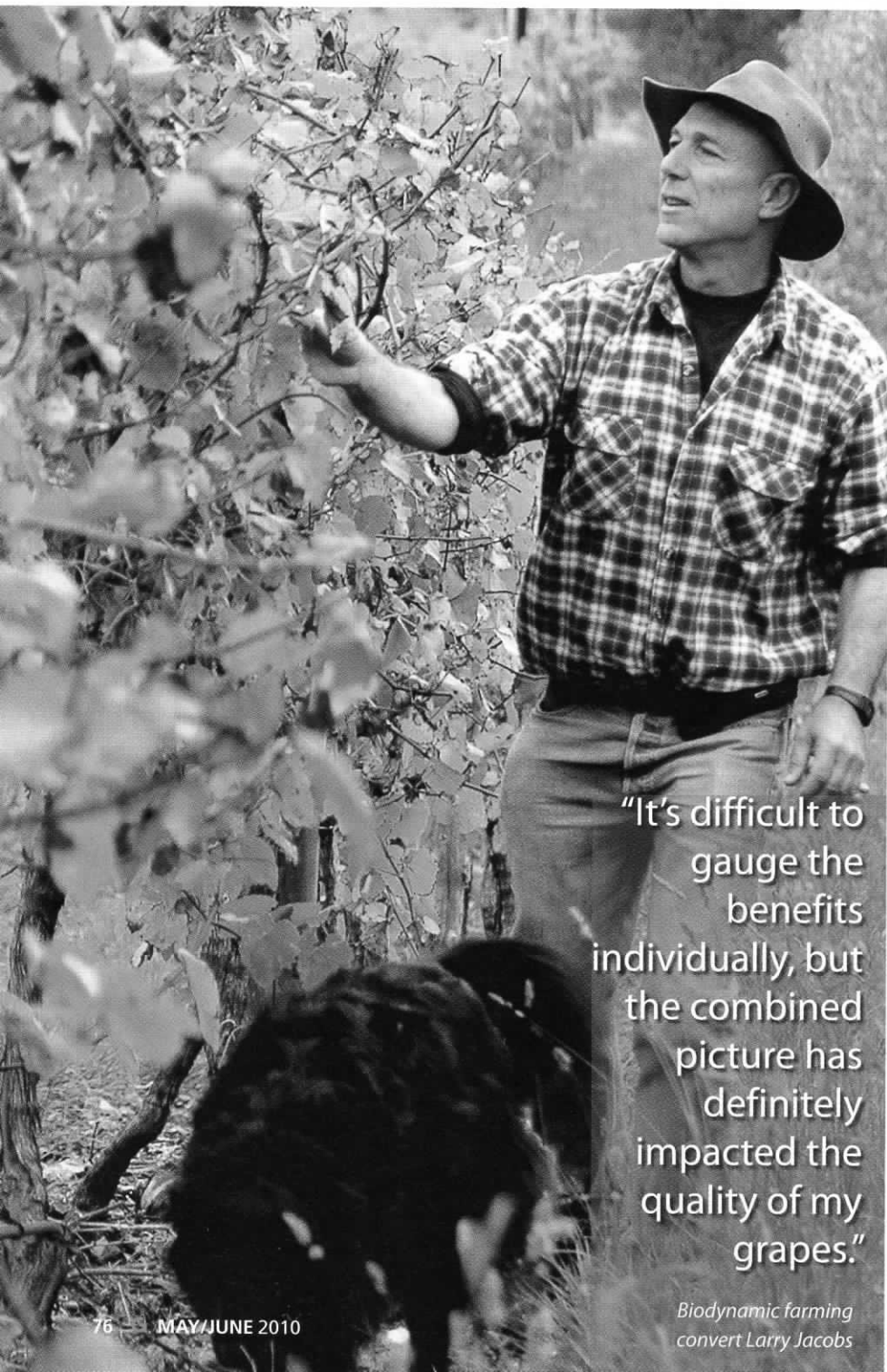
For Jacobs, it's been a gradual shift towards actively using the forces of nature integral to biodynamic farming. His first interest as a winemaker was conserving water. He then moved into organics, before his partner, an astrologer, nudged him towards biodynamics. "Intuitively, it made sense," he says.

Quite a statement given that biodynamics is best known in Australia for strange practices like burying compost in a cow horn or spraying the soil with organic matter on a waning moon.

## Organics plus

Biodynamics is often confused with the divergent principles of organics, a trend that has resulted in some improvisation from producers. "Until recently, biodynamic producers might add the word 'organic' to their product as well to broaden their market," says Anne Tillett of Biodynamic Agriculture Australia.

So what is the difference? Both avoid chemicals and fertilisers (by their very nature, biodynamic products are always



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*Biodynamic farming convert Larry Jacobs*

organic), but biodynamics takes the connection to the Earth a step further, says Jurlique's managing director, Sam McKay.

"Farm activities are planned in harmony with the cycles of nature such as the seasons, the biodynamic calendar and the lunar cycle to increase plant growth, resilience and yield," he says.

At Hahndorf Hill Winery, Jacobs views biodynamics as a process of "organics plus". He improves his soils with tea sprays containing nettle or chamomile in a seaweed brew, mulches all prunings and plants buckwheat between the vines to encourage beneficial insects. It all adds up to a feeling of *terroir* – a French term originally applied to wine, denoting the special characteristics that geography lends to a variety.

"A lot of people think it's esoteric, but it makes you look at farming in a more spiritual sense, because you're doing things to re-energise this special place," Jacobs says.

## Hippie trip or holistic wisdom?

According to peak body, Biodynamic Agriculture Australia, the key to farming biodynamically lies in the health of the soil. As no artificial fertilisers are used, the soil structure is improved through eight biodynamic 'preparations' (numbered 500-507), along with companion planting, composting and crop rotation.

Although the preparations are just part of the picture, it's easy to see why ones like #500 are fascinating: "It's created from cow manure that was buried in the horn of a cow," explains Jacobs, noting this natural receptacle has calving rings that reflect and concentrate the living forces and energy of the cosmos.

"The manure has been buried in the ground for six months from autumn through winter and when [the time's] up, the manure has transformed. It's like a jelly – it doesn't look or smell like manure," he says.

The resulting goo is then heavily diluted (about one teaspoon per 40-60 litres of water) and stirred constantly for an hour. Every minute the stirring must change direction, mimicking the flow of water through a stream. "It draws in your intent and invigorates the water through your spiritual connection with the earth," Jacob says, all the while recognising the obscurity of the practices.



Beauty company Jurlique's biodynamic fields in South Australia's Adelaide Hills.

Finally, the preparation is sprayed over the soil when the moon is opposite Saturn. "It's difficult to gauge the benefits individually, but the combined picture has definitely impacted the quality of my grapes. Our shiraz is getting greater depth and nuances. I believe that's because the whole vineyard is in balance," he says.

Of course, even if plants may thrive with all the TLC, pests can still be keen to come to the party. Because the farm is viewed as a total organism, though, pests found on biodynamic farms are sprayed with formulas made from the dead insects and weeds themselves – a bit of a taste of their own medicine.

While Tillett says pests shouldn't be a problem once a system is in balance, in biodynamics solutions come from the land itself. "The idea is that as much as possible the inputs for the farm come from the farm. So you look at what you have in front of you, in the landscape, the water resources and other physical aspects," she says.

Although the mainstream has yet to embrace biodynamics to the same extent as organics, Martin Boetz, executive chef of Sydney and Melbourne's Longrain restaurant is far from fazed about practices that seem unconventional in a world of mass production. "Following a strict lunar cycle is how farming was done for thousands of years. These practices aim to give back to the land they take from."

While it may lead to better quality products, Steiner's philosophy could never be mistaken for a quick fix. "The ingredients grown on our farm are hand-tended and hand-picked," says Jurlique's McKay, admitting the gentle harvesting process is time-intensive.

"Our...flowers and herbs require constant harvesting, up to three times a week. But it results in the highest quality herbs and flowers and potent, nutrient-packed plants rich in living energy."

For ethical chef Jared Ingersoll, from Sydney's Danks Street Depot, the passion and patience of biodynamic converts ultimately pays off. "Biodynamic and organic both seem commonsense ways to produce food. But in my experience, biodynamic food tends to be produced by people with a much more holistic view. They aren't hoping for a fourteenth house; they are producing something by putting their heart and soul into it. I've never been let down by passion." **G**

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SUE WHITE is a freelance journalist who resigned herself to the hardships of touring biodynamic wineries in the name of this story.

## More info

- Biological Farmers Australia has a plethora of information on biodynamics and organics on their website. [www.bfa.com.au](http://www.bfa.com.au)
- Biodynamic Agriculture Australia runs events, workshops and sells reading materials. [www.biodynamics.net.au](http://www.biodynamics.net.au)
- The National Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce was developed through collaboration between the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) and the organic and biodynamic industries. [www.daff.gov.au/aqis/export/organic-bio-dynamic](http://www.daff.gov.au/aqis/export/organic-bio-dynamic)
- See how it's done at the Rosnay vineyard and olive grove in Canowindra, NSW. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=JT3UGQG6YCg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JT3UGQG6YCg)