

## More questions than answers? A patient, even-handed approach to biodynamics

**Antoine Lepetit de la Bigne**  
*What's So Special About Biodynamic Wine? 35 Questions & Answers for Wine Lovers*

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REVIEWED BY  
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The debate about biodynamics is rarely conducted in a spirit of tolerance. The participants' world views may well be incommensurate, but there is a special quality of fingers-in-the-ears willed ignorance and childish mud- (or cow dung-) slinging on both sides, an intransigence and a desire to misrepresent the opposing camp that is reminiscent of the recent, interminable battles between hardline atheists and the religious right. As Antoine Lepetit de la Bigne puts it in his calm, concise attempt to take some of the heat out of the argument, *What's So Special About Biodynamic Wine*, "When talking with some scientists, professors, or researchers about biodynamics, there is often a quasi-epidemic reaction of more or less aggressive rejection. Having said that, certain biodynamists sometimes react with at least as much hostility to scientific discourse."

Lepetit de la Bigne would appear to be better placed than most to offer a more balanced view. Having graduated in Science from the École Polytechnique, and then specialized in agronomy, initially as a graduate student and then for the first few years of his career in conventional agriculture, he has spent

the past six years working as an assistant director in the committed biodynamic environment of Domaine Leflaive. His intention with *What's So Special...* is not, he says, to expound at length on the life and thoughts of Rudolf Steiner or offer an in-depth "grower's handbook," but rather to put the two sides of his experience to use and provide a kind of biodynamic primer for wine enthusiasts, a "brief [132 pages] user-friendly" guide to biodynamics that cuts through the "confusion" and, as he sees it, "false" ideas that surround this "fashionable" but divisive form of viticulture.

### Winningly simple

As the book's subtitle suggests, the method he settles on is winningly simple, succinct, and Socratic: a series of 35 short essays, each attempting to answer a single question about the methodology, practice, and philosophy of biodynamics. As someone who fits right in the center of Lepetit de la Bigne's Venn diagram of target readers—which is to say, I am a "wine lover" who can't quite square my tasting of high-quality biodynamic wines, my experience of thriving biodynamic vineyards, and my sympathy for the movement's environmental credentials, with my skepticism about methods that sometimes come across, in de la Bigne's words, "as rather obscure, trite, downright confusing, and not really respectful of all the scientific advances of the last two centuries"—I found the 35 chapters anticipated most of the questions that I have asked myself over the years. He covers the practical ("Is pollution from neighboring vineyards a problem?" "Is copper toxic?" "What is the planting calendar and what purpose does it serve?"), but he doesn't shy away from addressing the movement's critics ("Is biodynamics scientific?" "Are biodynamists a sect?"), or the broader social, philosophical, and historical context ("What was the state of European

agriculture when biodynamics was established?" "What is anthroposophy?")

If his framing of the debate is admirably rigorous and pertinent, then so, too, is his prose. From an explanation of the steps and rationale behind the hitherto-baffling (to me at least) process of dynamization (where, for example, a few grams of an "informed substance" such as horn silica are dissolved in water, to produce an "information-" or "energy"-bearing spray), to the distinction drawn between "scientific reasoning" ("which only recognizes truth that can be proven by scientific logic") and the "intuition, analogical, and symbolic reasoning" required by biodynamics ("which is usually used by artists and poets"), there's a clarity and, in its own terms, logic to his exposition which, however you feel about the ideas expressed (I'm still not sold on the silica), makes the book one of the best available if you want to know what biodynamists get up to exactly, and why.

### Unconverted harrumphing

Whether all that clarity, that reasonable and patient tone, will help win over the skeptics in the classical scientific community is another question entirely. As presented by Lepetit de la Bigne, there are elements of the biodynamic worldview that are perfectly compatible with the current scientific paradigm. The biodynamic critique of the way conventional and organic farming copes with diseases and pests, for example—essentially calling for a more holistic approach based on balancing their presence in the vineyard environment rather than trying to suppress or eliminate them—is to a large extent based on observable phenomena and testable propositions that at the very least, I think, meet Sir Karl Popper's demand for potential falsifiability.

But there are inevitably times, for the unconverted reader of this book, when the impatient harrumphing of the inner



Richard Dawkins takes over. The problem stems from the central tenet of biodynamics—the contention that, as Lepetit de la Bigne puts it, "the laws of physics alone do not explain all the subtleties of living things. Other forces exist which are not directly accessible to our five senses and are, therefore, immeasurable."

With that casual but deeply contentious "immeasurable," we step into the realm of a closed system of belief, or, given Lepetit de la Bigne's use of terms such as "forces," "energy," and "spiritual," perhaps a better word would be "faith." From there, all manner of unprovable anecdotal assertions flow, not least from Lepetit de la Bigne: that happy harvesters will "transmit" their good mood to the grapes, that biodynamic wines are uniquely soothing to the suffering throat of the cancer patient, that human thought, in the process of dynamization, is "absorbed into the water."

And yet, and yet ... all those great biodynamic wines. All those intelligent and committed growers who, as Lepetit de la Bigne stresses, have signed up and, after conducting more or less rigorous comparative trials comparing their own wines produced both biodynamically and conventionally (and, even more

pertinently, organically), have noticed the difference in quality of soil, vine, and wine, and of terroir-reflection, to the extent they would never go back. What do we do with that (admittedly anecdotal) information? Do we discount it entirely?

### Agnostic cop-out

The fall-back position for those who acknowledge the quality of many biodynamic wines but who cannot swallow the biodynamists' faith-based explanation is to say that any grower prepared to work biodynamically is by definition committed to their vines—it's their devotion, their fastidiousness, that makes the difference, not the cosmic dogma, or even the specific practices. This is how I've explained it away to myself in the past. The more I've come to think about it, however, the more this position feels like an agnostic's cop-out. It doesn't explain the perceptible differences that biodynamic growers attribute to the practice versus organic agriculture. It's fundamentally incurious.

But then incuriosity is an accusation you could level at many biodynamists, too. For while, to any sentient taster, there seems to be something about specifically biodynamic (as opposed to merely organic) methods that "works"

(in the sense of helping the best growers produce even more expressive and textured wines), the explanation as to what that "something" might be, and how and why it does work, is very poorly served by Steiner's hypothesis. With its talk of the invisible and unmeasurable, it circumscribes our understanding; we can go no further, it says; the fundamentals are effectively unknowable.

Lepetit de la Bigne would no doubt counter that I'm missing the point, that to "understand" biodynamics I need to pay more attention to a different kind of "logic," one more in tune with the "intuition, sensitivity, and imagination" of the right hemisphere of the brain, that I have too much "faith" in the "analysis, quantification, and organization" of the "left-brain" scientific method, or maybe even that I just need to get my hands a little dirty. On finishing his thought-provoking and very worthwhile little book, however, the materialist in me hankers more than ever for a theory that attempts to explain the success of biodynamic wine without invoking specious spiritual speculations. And I can't help wondering if, somewhere in the back of his evidently intelligent and open mind, Lepetit de la Bigne might not feel the same way.