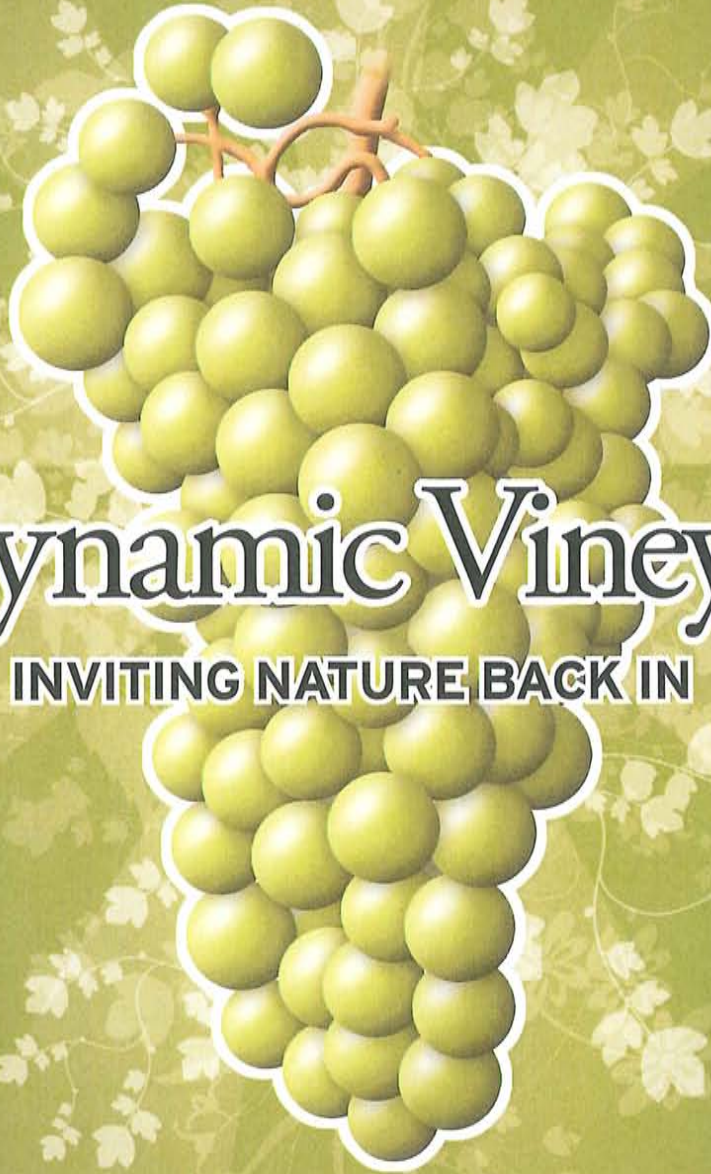


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Biodynamic Vineyards

INVITING NATURE BACK IN

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Biodynamic Vineyards — INVITING NATURE BACK IN

by Trish Riley

AS THE AUTHOR OF *THE COMPLETE IDIOT'S GUIDE TO GREENING YOUR BUSINESS* AND *THE COMPLETE IDIOT'S GUIDE TO GREEN LIVING*, TRISH RILEY RECENTLY TOURED ONE OF CALIFORNIA'S GREEN WINERIES. HERE SHE GIVES US HER IMPRESSIONS OF ITS BIODYNAMIC GROWING PRACTICES.

Kathy Benziger-Threlkeld welcomed me to her family's business with a warm greeting under an apple tree in a courtyard garden. She quickly ushered me into an electric golf cart equipped with blankets, umbrellas, and water should the fall day become uncomfortable, and we took off on the winding, hilly paths that cut through the mountainside winery.

“What we do with biodynamics is invite nature back in.”

— Kathy Benziger-Threlkeld



Photo: Benziger Family Winery

MOUNTAIN GROWN

Nestled into the edge of Sonoma Mountain in California's glorious countryside, the vineyard is situated on what was once a volcano. Wappo Indians lived on the land for more than 4,000 years, evidenced by the obsidian arrowheads they created from the lava rock.

After the volcano had burned out and become extinct, its top collapsed, creating a bowl shape. "I like to think of it as a wine goblet," Kathy said. It was layered with thick, rich volcanic soil and covered with vegetation in all hues of green sprinkled with a rainbow of spectacular colors.

We quietly rolled up to a row of vines sporting golden, red, and husky green leaves as well as gleaming clusters of deep blue grapes. She reached out and snared a few, handing them off to me for a taste. I was enchanted, and curious.

She quickly shepherded us back onto the cart, and we wheeled away from the rows of sunlit vines to a small, lush garden, multicolored with herbs, fruit trees, and tall grasses. As I surveyed the varieties in the garden, she

uncovered a cooler and pulled out a pair of crystal wine glasses, then poured a sample, explaining, "This sauvignon is made from the grapes we just tasted."

SUSTAINABLE WINERIES

Kathy's brother Mike Benziger led the family to found the winery in 1980. "We're a bunch of New Yorkers who kind of had a wild itch," said Kathy, adding that she has five brothers and a sister.

When Mike, the oldest at 57, graduated from college, he took off across the country to "find himself." He ended up working in the wine business, and, while under the owner's wing, he found his passion. Mike learned the ropes from cellar rat, and after two years he made the decision to start his own family winery.

Today, six of his siblings, a brother-in-law, and two grandkids work alongside Mike at the winery – the nine family members are among more than 50 staff members running the 85-acre compound and business, producing wines that are sold nationwide as well as exclusives available only from the winery itself.

> Sustainable Business Tips

- > The business owners drive hybrid cars, and electric golf carts are used on the property.
- > Energy is saved by the use of the human-made cave dug into the mountainside – the temperature is naturally cool for the wines, so air conditioning is not needed. Kathy said the savings covered the cost of the project.
- > The garden provides produce for staff members, and it's also sold to a few area restaurants.
- > Nearly three million gallons per year of water are saved – as is the associated cost – through the use of the recycling pond.



Photo: Benziger Family Winery

We walked through the garden, along paths dividing herb gardens flush with sage and lavender blooms, while hummingbirds hovered over the blossoms.

"I like to call Mike a chef," said Kathy. "He adds a little spice, a little tobacco, and he builds each blend with a unique flavor." The vineyard's business practices differ from many of its wine-producing competitors in the region and elsewhere thanks to Mike's commitment to creating a fully sustainable winery.

He met Jim Fetzer, a leader in the local sustainable winery movement, and hired Alan York, a biodynamic consultant, who helped transform the Sonoma mountainside into a closed-loop system that works in harmony with nature. According to Kathy: "Mike read up on sustainability, and it intrigued him. It resonated with him to the point that he realized this is the way to create our wine, to give it a sense of place and a sense of expression."

Kathy was sold on the concept when she visited the winery in 1996, just as the conversion from traditional farming to biodynamics began. More than 30 acres of

the estate are gardens, woodlands, wetlands, and riparian areas. They create a support system for life on the mountainside, including the grapevines.

We walked through the garden, along paths dividing herb gardens flush with sage and lavender blooms, while hummingbirds hovered over the blossoms. Peach, pear, and persimmon trees arched above. Kathy reached out and plucked a ripe, fuchsia pomegranate from a limb heavy with fruit, cracked it open, and offered half to me. We



> BIODYNAMIC FARMING

Developed by Austrian scientist and philosopher Rudolf Steiner in the 1920s, biodynamics is a holistic approach to farming, creating a self-sustaining ecosystem. Biodynamics differs from organic because, although it is based on natural growing practices, it goes beyond the plant to encompass the soil, the life force of plants and nature, honoring a connection to the land and recognizing the spirit of the place. Benziger was the first winery in Napa Valley and Sonoma County to achieve biodynamic certification from the Demeter® Association in 2000.

"We farm the property, not the vine. We look at everything as a whole," said Kathy Benziger-Threlkeld. "Nature farms these fields. It's nature in harmony; biodiversity at its finest. Conventional farming pushes nature out. What we do with biodynamics is invite nature back in."



Photo: Benziger Family Winery

Woodlands, wetlands, insectaries (gardens planted to attract insects to help maintain the balance of predators and prey), and fruit, vegetable, and herb gardens thrive in the natural environment, creating a sustainable ecosystem and replenishing resources. Cover crops and bug highways help promote natural diversity.

Everything on the property is recycled and used to create compost teas for natural fertilizers. Vegetative waste is recycled as compost to nourish the soil. So

synthetic fertilizers aren't needed. Native habitat for predatory bugs and animals helps control pests so pesticides aren't used. Pirate bugs are attracted to keep white flies at bay, and owls fly in when gophers are on the scene.

Water uncontaminated with synthetic petrochemicals drains from the fields into a recycling pond, where it's purified by the native plants and soil. Then it's reused for irrigation as needed.

The diversity of plants helps ensure a wide variety of nutrients in the soil, as opposed to modern monoculture growing techniques that sap resources from the ground.

Benziger Family Winery is positioned 1,000 feet high on the side of Sonoma Mountain, where the land gets 360 degrees of exposure and has different soils based on varying exposures to the elements and different temperatures. This makes the vines grown here different than anywhere else. The vineyard farms, harvests, and ages each block of vines separately, creating a "spice rack" of wines to choose from.

"When you fertilize a plant, it's like mainlining," according to Kathy. "The cells grow fast, so the cell walls are thinner. They're more susceptible to disease and bugs, and you have to fight those off. When you grow naturally, cell walls are thicker and more resistant.

"We know that flowering happens within two or three days of equinox. The healthier the garden gets, the more in line with nature it grows.

"We don't have a silver bullet to pull if there's a problem. Biodynamics is about reading the book of nature. It's not what the grower can do to the grapes while they're growing; it's what you can do with the conditions they're grown under."

Learn more about biodynamics at www.demeter-usa.org.



We pulled to a stop before an imposing castle-like arched wooden door – entrance to the human-made cave they’ve drilled into the mountainside.



Photos: Benziger Family Winery

nibbled the sweet burgundy seeds as we walked among the fragrant plants.

“What we do with biodynamics is invite nature back in,” said Kathy.

Soon we were back on the trail and stopped at a high point overlooking terraced gardens secured by a recycling pond lit by the November sky.

Next she took us past the chardonnay tanks where white wines are processed quickly to take advantage of their fresh flavors, and we pulled to a stop before an imposing castle-like arched wooden door – entrance to the human-made cave they’ve drilled into the mountainside – the barrel womb. Pulling back the heavy doors, we ventured into the cool, quiet resting place for hundreds of barrels of wines that were fermenting at various stages.

COMPLETING THE TOUR

Our final stop was the wine shop, where visitors sample wines and peruse seasonings,

olive oils from the gardens, and other culinary treasures. I strolled through the shop, selecting a few remembrances of this luscious vineyard.

As I headed out of the winery, I passed beneath an archway labeled “Education and Good Times,” and I heard Kathy’s voice echoing in my head, “That’s our mantra here.”

Trish Riley is the author of The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Greening Your Business (Alpha Books, 2009, with Heather Gadon-nix) and The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Green Living (Alpha Books 2007), as well as many travel books and articles about environmental issues.
