

UPFRONT

SOIL

Under the Nails

**FOR 20 YEARS, BENZIGER
FAMILY WINERY HAS LED THE
WAY IN BIODYNAMICS**

**Chris Benziger in the
vineyards with his
Labrador, Bluie.**

PHOTO: ALEXANDER RUBIN



The Benziger Home Ranch lies in an extinct volcanic caldera on Sonoma Mountain.

BY DAVID GADD

On a blustery spring day, Chris Benziger stands high on a hill overlooking Home Ranch, the 85-acre estate located in an extinct volcanic caldera on Sonoma Mountain that his family purchased in 1980.

The multitasking vintner has held multiple roles since he and his family built Benziger Family Winery, which has been synonymous with a revolutionary way of farming since becoming the first Demeter-certified Biodynamic producer in both Napa and Sonoma counties 20 years ago. Chris' current duties extend from farming and shepherding to making the precisely prescribed Biodynamic preparations used in all of the Benziger estate vineyards.

Chris loves to tell the story of how his family transitioned the estate from conventional grape monoculture to a sustainable, organic, and Biodynamic farm that is now a vibrant ecosystem, occupied not just by vines but by olive and other fruit trees, flower and vegetable gardens, sheep and cows, owls and hawks, and bees and other insects. In addition to increasing wildlife diversity, the Benzigers reduced planted acreage from 65 to just 35 acres, converting the other 30 into orchards, gardens, and pasturage. Meanwhile, careful attention to terroir allowed them to identify 29 unique grape-growing microclimates on the estate, promoting maximum potential for each variety.

Chris was still in high school when his older brother Mike and sister-in-law Mary brought him to the farm they had purchased near Glen Ellen. The family had been involved in the liquor business in New York and once owned an old-school winery in Brooklyn, but "Mike saw the potential in California and brought my dad out to see it," says Chris. "He was all over it." The entire clan of 13 eventually moved to Northern California.



Cow horns are used in Biodynamic preparations, while black obsidian rocks are scattered throughout the Benziger vineyards.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BENZIGER FAMILY WINERY

Benziger’s “woolly weeders” also till the soil with their hooves and provide natural fertilizer.

Mike and Mary’s ranch—the historic Wegener Winery, whose whites were favorites of neighbor (and vintner) Jack London in the early 20th century—had been abandoned for 50 years. The family struggled to revive it using conventional farming techniques. “We had erosion and mudslides [as well as] phylloxera and other diseases,” Chris recalls. “We were constantly fighting, fighting, fighting. I remember walking through the vineyards and the only sound I heard was the wind—not an insect, nothing. That’s what farming was back then.”

Meanwhile, Mike had become interested in an alternative way of farming developed by Austrian philosopher and social reformer Rudolf Steiner, creator of the holistic and ecological system known as Biodynamics, which involves treating a farm as a living organism. (The term is now a trademark belonging to Germany-based oversight organization Demeter International, administered in the U.S. by the nonprofit Demeter Association, Inc.) In 1993, the Benzigers brought on Biodynamics expert Alan York, known as the “Guru of Green,” from Mendocino, where he had been working with Paul Dolan. York came down to see Home Ranch, nestled in its sunny 360-degree bowl on Sonoma Mountain. “He said, ‘This would be perfect [for Biodynamics],’” Chris recounts. “We said, ‘Let’s do it!’”

It took seven long years to make the transition. “The first four years were really tough, because you’re taking all the [chemical] defenses out of the vineyard,” Chris says. “We almost gave up.” But a visit to successful Biodynamic vineyards in France encouraged the family to continue with the project. They eventually obtained sustainable certification from Stellar Certification Services, Demeter’s sister organization, and organic certification from California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF). Finally, in 2000, Benziger Family Winery was certified Biodynamic; the following year, it produced its Bordeaux-style flagship blend Tribute, the first certified Biodynamic wine from the Benzigers’ dream estate on Sonoma Mountain.

“Working with Alan York was the best education I could have had,” Chris says. (Sadly, York died in 2014 at the age of 62.) During the transition to Biodynamics, the family “went cold turkey” on conventional farming. They built insectaries, birdhouses, and owl boxes, doing everything they could to attract natural predators for vineyard pests. With the aforementioned conversion of 30 acres into gardens, orchard, and pasture, the estate became a closed ecological system—“a circle of life,” in Chris’ words—where, today, nothing is thrown away and everything is composted. A small herd of Scottish Highland cattle provides manure, while a flock of sheep (the Benzigers call them “woolly weeders”) not only eat grass and devour weeds but also till the soil with their cloven hooves and, as digestion takes its natural course, provide fertilizer as well.

“The caldera of the Home Ranch is a natural geological lasagna,” Chris explains, with multiple layers of varied soil types, among them basalt, red aggregate, welded tuff, breccia, and obsidian. Because the vines are no longer being artificially fed and watering is strictly limited, the roots now dig much deeper, delivering more minerals and in turn better expressing the vineyard. “It’s all about one word,” says Chris: “authenticity.”

Admittedly, some of the more esoteric aspects of Biodynamics can be perplexing: Take the practice by which manure is packed into cow horns, planted for six months, dug up, and stirred for one hour to create a “dynamized solution” to spray on the fields. Chris encourages those unfamiliar with Biodynamics not to be put off by the “voodoo.” “What Biodynamics is really all about is all that groundwork beforehand,” he explains. “That’s the base of the pyramid. The esoteric preparations are the tippy top of the pyramid. When people hear them explained, they say, ‘Oh, you’re making a plant probiotic. That doesn’t sound so strange.’”

Make no mistake: Biodynamic farming is labor intensive. “We have to be proactive,” Chris says, “because we can’t be reactive. We can’t go nuke the north forty like a conventional farmer can. We have to know where the hot spots are, where the wet spots are, where the hole in the fence is—all that stuff—and fix it ahead of time. We have to read the book of nature so that we can preempt any problems.”

In addition to Home Ranch, Benziger’s three other Sonoma County properties—de Coelo, Bella Luna, and Sunny Slope—are also certified Biodynamic, and the Benzigers encourage outside fruit suppliers to follow their lead toward natural, chemical-free farming. In vineyards where Biodynamics



Benziger's Sonoma Mountain estate, called Home Ranch, produced its first Biodynamic wine in 2001. Today, all of Benziger's estate wines are Biodynamic.

proves unfeasible (as at the sprawling Sangiacomo ranch in Carneros), Benziger works with the growers to achieve Stellar sustainable or CCOF organic certification. By 2007, it had the distinction of having all 50 of its growers certified as either sustainable, organic, or Biodynamic, one of the first wineries in the U.S. to achieve this goal. (That Benziger makes some wines from non-Biodynamic sources does not affect its Demeter-certified status, but for obvious reasons those wines cannot be labeled as Biodynamic.)

When describing the Benzigers' arc toward Biodynamics, Chris likes to share a pertinent quote often attributed to Mahatma Gandhi: "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win." Despite the struggle, the Benzigers know the success of their Biodynamic adventure has had a positive influence: "We were on the forefront of pushing the [American] wine industry to be more responsible in how they farm," he says.

Like his brother Mike and other family members, Chris feels that the only way to assure the quality of Benziger wines is by having the soil from the vineyard under his nails. From his high hill above Home Ranch, he concludes: "The best impression a winemaker can leave on his wines are his footprints in the vineyards." ■■

Biodiversity is a key tenet of Biodynamics. Benziger's insectary provides a habitat for bees and other beneficial insects.

Tasting Notes from Publisher Meridith May

While sheltering in place these past few months, I have been able to devote my full attention to an unusually voluminous amount of wine. I have tasted bottles two or three times more expensive than those below, and it just amazes me how some winemakers really get it. The following scores reflect my appreciation of these wines' ability to overdeliver for the price.



Benziger Family Winery 2018 Pinot Noir, Monterey County (\$20)

A perfume of wild strawberry and red cherry is equally perky and earthy.

Rose petal and cinnamon stick

are swathed in creamy red berries. The wine finishes with mocha and sweet, freshly tilled soil. **92**



Benziger Family Winery 2018 Sauvignon Blanc, North Coast (\$15)

A clean, crisp, and lively white, with a bouquet of grapefruit and freshly mowed grass that's followed by flavors

of pineapple, gardenia, and honeyed cashew as well as floral, fragrant notes of white tea leaves. High-toned acidity and a line of minerality offer a salty finish of stone fruit. **91**



Benziger Family Winery 2017 Merlot, Sonoma County (\$19)

The nose is expressively ripe, with plum, spiced heather, and a trace of new oak.

White-peppered

black cherry and a touch of cocoa line the palate. Silky tannins and fine acidity run through a brambly cranberry finish. **91**



Benziger Family Winery 2017 Chardonnay, Sonoma County (\$16)

A refreshingly modern take on Chardonnay.

The aromas are sensuous but bright, with MacIntosh apple

and lemon ice leading the way. On the palate, the wine is a floral beauty, with apricot nectar and skin defining a slightly fleshy textural experience. Jasmine and lemon pepper leave a kiss on the finish. **93**



Benziger Family Winery 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County (\$20)

A focused aroma of cinnamon and oak accents ripe plum in this approachable,

incredibly great value red, which is sumptuous, bright, and sleek on the palate. Spiced blue fruit melds with supple tannins for easy drinking; balanced acidity offers superb food-pairing abilities. **93**