



A Virtual Tour Of A Certified Biodynamic Winery

In our wine education programs we often get asked about sulfites and whether they are to blame for your wine-induced headaches. As winemakers navigate their way through a byzantine network of biodynamic farming methods, the ugly word “sulfites” hangs over their heads like the Sword of Damocles.



*1982 The families of Bob, Joe, Jerry and Patsy Benziger
move to California*

We brought it up during a virtual tasting we enjoyed with Chris Benziger, whose family created a certified biodynamic winery in Sonoma County from the ground up – literally. In 1978 Chris’ brother Mike stumbled

upon an abandoned ranch once planted to grapes and even marijuana. Up on Sonoma Mountain in the town of Glen Ellen, the rehabilitation of the property would fall to the entire family, Chris included.

The vineyards were literally ravaged by the heavy use of weed killers and chemical fertilizers. To restore it, the Benzigers had no choice but to rid the land of chemicals



Benziger Ranch

and initiate green farming. It wasn't long before the roots of the existing vineyard were diving deeper for the valuable nutrients that feed healthy vines and create delicious wines.

The family had to be resourceful. They were desperate for fermentation tanks and turned to a colorful junk dealer who re-appropriated an old milk truck from a non-paying customer.

"Milk was literally dripping out of it when it arrived," Chris recalled.

They thoroughly rinsed it and fermented their first sauvignon blanc in that tank within hours of its delivery. It won the Harvest Sweepstakes at the 1982 Sonoma County Harvest Fair.



Insectary

Today, the hard scrabble the Benzigers bought is alive with plant life, pollinating bees, wildlife and healthy vines. Valerian, chamomile and other herbs grow between the vines. Scottish Highlander cattle and sheep roam the vineyards, eat the vegetation and drop fertilizer. Owls, wild turkeys and humming birds have all returned.

While some wine producers have made biodynamic farming a philosophical decision, the Benzigers turned to green farming to make better wine. Given what they inherited in the land, they didn't have a choice, Chris admitted, although he said there was some resistance to taking some vineyards temporarily out of production. Instead of farming 65 acres, they now farm 35 just to give the overtaxed land a break.



*2000, the Estate is officially certified as a Biodynamic Farm
by the Demeter Association.*

The terms - biodynamic, organic, sustainable - are confusing to consumers and Chris admitted government definition is needed. Only "organic wine" is defined by regulation and it excludes the use of supplemental sulfites. "Made from organic grapes," however, allows for the use of sulfites.

"I couldn't sleep at night if I didn't add sulfites," Chris said.

Sulfites are natural to grapes, just as they are to raisins, nuts, coconut, pickles, soy sauce and more. Most

producers add sulfites – sulfur dioxide – to preserve the wine. It has antioxidants and anti-bacterial properties. Without it, your wine could be oxidized by the time it reaches store shelves.

Despite its practical application, the government forced wine producers to put the dreaded “contains sulfites” on the label in 1985 because severe asthmatics were threatened. If you aren’t in this group, sulfites should have no impact on you. If you have headaches from drinking wine, most likely you drank too much and dehydrated. The natural histamines in wine are also a likely culprit – red wine has more histamines than white wine.

Consumers have become more attuned to what they eat and drink. Not only are sustainable vineyards and biodynamic farming good for the environment, but these practices are also good for the wine.



*2016 de Coelo Quintus Pinot
Noir*

We loved **Benziger’s 2016 de Coelo Quintus Pinot Noir** (\$55), a lovely wine with red berry flavors, an earthy character and a hint of mineral. The vineyard is perched on a rugged hilltop on the Sonoma Coast. Morning fog from the Bodega Bay hovers over the vineyard and cools down the grapes – the best circumstance for pinot noir. The grapes are picked at night to preserve their freshness.

Chris called the 2016 vintage their best.

The **2017 Benziger Family Winery Reserve Chardonnay** (\$24) has great purity of fruit – a common characteristic of the producer’s biodynamic practices. The chardonnay, made from grapes chosen from a block of the organically certified Sangiacomo Vineyard, has fresh pear and apple flavors.



*2016 Signaterra Cabernet
Sauvignon from the Sunny
Slope Vineyard*

Another good deal is the **2016 Benziger Family Winery Sonoma County Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$16). Medium bodied, it has juicy flavors with a hint of spice and round tannins.

The estate’s **2016 Signaterra Cabernet Sauvignon from the Sunny Slope Vineyard** (\$47) is more full-bodied with concentrated dark cherry and plum flavors and hints of chocolate and spice.

Chris lost his home to the fires that tore through California last year. He had little notice to flee.

“My house burned down in 10 minutes,” he recalled. “And we have full-time generators because of the frequent black outs. Now it’s the pandemic. It makes you appreciate when things go right. Appreciate every day you have.”

Virtual Benziger

We're planning a virtual tour and live interview with Chris Benziger soon. If you would like a Zoom invitation to participate, send an email to Tom at marq1948@gmail.com.

Wine picks



*Coppola Director's
Cabernet Sauvignon
Sonoma County 2016*

Coppola Director's Cabernet Sauvignon Sonoma County 2016 (\$23). This is a delightful mouth-filling cabernet sauvignon exhibiting delicious cherry, cassis, and a bit of refined oak. Good structure in a great package.

- **Chateau St. Jean Pinot Noir California 2016** (\$12-15). You get a lot of bang for a few dollars with this terrific pinot noir offering from Chateau St. Jean. Unabashedly Californian in style with bold ripe cherry and raspberry elements, this pinot noir will match up with most meat dishes, including barbecued meats. If you want an easy drinking, under-priced red wine for summer gatherings, buy this by the case for as low as \$10 a bottle with case discounts.
- **Supery Elu Estate Red Blend Napa Valley 2015** (\$75). This is amazingly deep and rich blend made from all five red Bordeaux varietals. Cabernet sauvignon dominates with 74 percent of the total. Intense cassis nose with cassis and cherry flavors in an elegant French oak robe. Although on the expensive side this delicious wine is worth the money

Tom Marquardt and Patrick Darr, MoreAboutWine, posted on SouthFloridaReporter.com, May 11, 2020

Tom Marquardt and Patrick Darr have been writing a weekly wine column for more than 30 years. Additional Wine reviews on MoreAboutWine

All photos are randomly selected and do not indicate any preferred wine

You can send questions to Tom Marquardt <mailto:marq1948@gmail.com>