
THE EXTREME VITICULTURIST OF MANTON

BY EARL BLOOR

John Alger and his wife Linda engage in animated conversation with two visiting wine samplers on an overcast Sunday afternoon in May. “We’re green. It’s the way we feel, and it’s the way we want to be. Growing grapes and producing wine the way I want—that’s what it’s all about.”

John and Linda acquired their vineyard in 1992. John’s family have been practicing agriculturists in the Central Valley for over a century. To return to the land, John abandoned his career as an engineer responsible for designing automatic control systems, but he brought his scientific ways along with him into the vineyard. “John is very analytical. He maintains records on everything he does. He’s very scientific,” says Dick Hoenisch, a plant pathologist at UC Davis, whom John regularly consults for guidance and advice.

Although the land had been farmed *traditionally* using chemical weed and pest control, John and Linda took the decision to grow their Petite Sirah and Syrah grapes organically. The chemicals that had been used to protect the vines from nature’s predators had wreaked deep damage upon the eco-system. About the only thing growing on the gentle slopes of the Alger Vineyard were the grape vines. The chemically synthesized fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, hormones, antibiotics, and growth regulators had leached most of the naturally occurring vitality from the soil, leaving the grape vines susceptible to disease and dependent upon chemical synthetics. 1992 marked the beginning of the detoxification of the vineyard.

Adjacent to the house and tasting room is a large pond, fed by Digger Creek, planted with trout. The emulsion of waste products created by the 3000 pounds of fish that inhabit the pond is a vital constituent of the water drawn from the pond to irrigate the vineyards. Whereas animal wastes (manure) introduce harmful bacteria to the soil, fish waste rich in phosphorus and nitrogen promotes the growth of ben-



eficial microbes and bacteria in the soil.

So the slow, steady reclamation of the land previously sterilized by manufactured chemicals began. The pond’s trout population nourish the fragile eco-system, which supports the old vine grapes, which, under the expert guidance of winemaker Bob Marr of Woodland, produce a wine described on its label as possessing “pungent aromas of dense, ripe plums and cherries, with a touch of mocha mixed in. The palate features pomegranate, with nuances of dense berries, followed by peppery spices and lingering tannins.”

For the Algers, the transition from organic to biodynamic was natural. Revitalizing the eco-system loosed the forces of nature—the “good guys” engaged the “bad guys” in mortal combat. (John characterizes everything that promotes/ supports the growth of grapes as “good guys.” And the “bad guys,” well . . .)

John’s approach to biodynamics is top-down: don’t disturb the top of the soil. Alger Vineyard has a 60-70 foot layer of Rockland Tough soil. Between the vines and the rows, cover crops of rye, vetch, crimson clover, peas, beans, and yar-

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Alger Vineyard is located in Tehama County, on the western slopes of Mount Lassen, near Manton, California. This vineyard was planted to Petite Sirah and Syrah in the mid 1970s. Recently, additional blocks have been planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, Petite Verdot, Zinfandel, and Viognier. Alger Vineyard sits at about 2500 feet, on the western reaches of Mount Lassen, and is one of the highest vineyards in California. The altitude, along with the natural volcanic soils and cool evening temperatures, give the grapes their distinctive characteristics.

row grow, supporting bacterial growth and fixing nitrogen and phosphorus. Tread lightly is the Alger motto. Allow the matter—and critters—their space. Allow, for example, the ant colonies to go about their business, which enriches and aerates the sandy loam soil. Worms, or night crawlers, grow up to 8 inches in length as they go about their business, enriching the soil as they do it. Ants and worms are therefore “good guys.” But gophers and moles are “bad guys” that eat through roots of mature plants, and the Alger do not discourage foxes from populating the area. Some insects are good guys, others bad. Spiders eat eggs of mites, leaf hoppers, and grasshoppers. “Black widow spiders aren’t so bad,” says John. A large bat population keeps flying insects with large mandibles under control. And colonies of blackbirds are encouraged to occupy the trees that surround the vineyards. Although not 100 percent efficient, John estimates that these birds consume about 60-70 percent of the grasshopper population. (He must have used an algorithm from his engineering

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past to determine this statistic.) John reminisces: “Five years ago when we harvested, hundreds of dragon flies hovered above us all day to feed on the leaf hoppers shaken out as we picked the grapes. As the swarm

of dragon flies moved with us up and down the rows, it was a sure sign that we were forming a self-contained eco-system, integrating the vineyard with the surrounding environment.” And this year’s hatch-out of dragon flies is the largest ever, an optimistic sign for this year’s harvest.

According to John, the burgeoning praying mantis population is also a harbinger of the rebirth of the vineyard’s eco-system. When these grasshopper-like insects appeared on their own, attracted to the over-cropping, John took their arrival as another sign of the vineyard’s health. Different from the grasshopper, the praying mantis is truly among the “good guys,” eating the eggs of mites and leaf hoppers.

Unlike the naturally appearing praying mantids, ladybug beetles needed to be imported to deal with rapacious aphids.



BIODYNAMICS IN A NUTSHELL

Biodynamics is considered the highest form of organic farming. It is a holistic approach eliminating the use of all non-naturally occurring chemicals and requiring growers to pay attention to the forces of nature. The foundations of biodynamic farming were laid in the 1920s by Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian scientist-philosopher, who also founded the Waldorf system of education. The Demeter Association is the world's only biodynamic certifier.

Digger Creek creates a hospitable habitat that keeps the migrant ladybugs at Alger Vineyard.

So far, so good. The threads weave a credible tapestry. Eco-system renewal is based upon judicious selection of plants, which support insects and animals, which, in turn, control the enemies of the grape vines. A vital eco-system attracts and retains more of the good guys. But those who have read about it know there is an element of the *Twilight Zone* woven into Rudolf Steiner's theories of biodynamics.

John has found that music promotes growth, and the evidence for his conclusion comes from comparing vines on the slopes close to the vineyard's buildings and electrical sources. For vines on these slopes, FM light rock, jazz, and golden oldies stations provide music, and the vines show more growth.

Further, a key tenet of biodynamics is the need to work within the cycles of nature, since all plants evolve with an

intimate connection to their environment, including the movement of the sun, seasons, and lunar cycles. Although he professes no understanding of the rationale, John gets 80 percent better germination of his plants during a full moon cycle versus a dark moon cycle.

"John Alger is the consummate grower, always looking for ways to improve his product," says winemaker Bob Marr. Alger maintains close contacts with his fellow members of the Shasta-Cascade Viticulture Society, recently hosting a meeting of the group at his tasting room. The plant pathologist Hoenisch refers to John Alger as "the extreme viticulturist—he lives in a tough area subject to early and late frosts and fires."

In the tasting room that Sunday afternoon, wine club members and other tasters recounted the peril that engulfed the Manton community on August 26, 2005. An overheated truck parked in dry grass, lighting it afire. The flames ultimately burned through 1,830 acres—six or seven of those acres part of the Alger Vineyard. Six thousand vines were destroyed.

John: "We were hosting a wine club dinner as the fire came up the hillside. As it swept through the vineyards, the grapes overheated, and their contents boiled. They exploded in purple bursts of juice and steam." The greater tragedy of the fire was the destruction of 29 homes in its path.

Burned-out forests border the Alger Vineyard. Across the road, inside a gate with a sign "Visitors are welcome, deer are not," are newly planted vines, nourished by trout pond wastes, seeking the abundant Shasta-Cascade sunshine, and rockin' to golden oldies. 🍷

HOW TO GET TO ALGER VINEYARDS

31636 Forward Road
Manton, CA 96059



From Chico: Highway 99 N, travel 38.2 miles. Turn right at Highway 36, travel 11.3 miles. Turn left at Road A6/Manton Rd, go 15.5 miles. Turn right at Forward Road, and the vineyard is 0.1 mile on your left. Total distance/time: 65 miles/about 1 hour and 20 minutes.

From Redding: Highway 44 E/Lassen Peak Highway, travel 27.7 miles. Turn right at Wilson Hill Road, go 5.5 miles. Turn left to stay on Wilson Hill Road for 1.2 miles. Turn left to stay on Wilson Hill Road, 0.6 mile. Continue on Rock Creek Road for 0.7 mile. Continue on Manton Road, 0.2 mile. Manton Road turns slightly left and becomes Forward Road, and the vineyard is 0.1 mile on your left. Total distance/time: 35 miles/about 50 minutes.