

Of Wines and Compost



I have never had a farmer or gardener approach me with a more vehement desire to produce high quality compost than was shown last March by two biodynamic winegrowers from California. I believe their enthusiasm and commitment toward improving their composting practices have something to do with the highly refined science and art of making wine itself.

My journey began in Sonoma County at the biodynamic Benziger Family Winery. Located in the Sonoma Mountain wine-growing region, the Benziger ranch is tucked into a bowl-shaped valley eight hundred feet above sea level. The area has a unique and impressive geography. What struck me most, however, was the rich biodiversity and appealing aesthetics of the vineyard, together with the owners' commitment to the health, not only of their vines, but also of their entire farm. For example, they created a special "insect garden." With its diverse plant life, the insectary hums with life as it attracts butterflies, humming birds, and numerous beneficial insects. There is also a lovely sheep flock that grazes among the vines along with Scottish Highlander cattle. The quality of the Benziger wine reflects the context and wholeness of the farm landscape.

After three days at Sonoma Mountain, I headed north to Mendocino County, home of the first organic and biodynamic certified vineyard in the country. Frey Vineyards is located on the beautiful slopes of Redwood Valley. The familiar palm trees, so present at the beginning of my trip, were now replaced by a landscape where towering redwoods grow. Warmly welcomed by Luke Frey and his

family, I was engaged in conversations and practical activities regarding the improvement of their composting practices. Luke also organized a public workshop where I spoke about the "The Art and Science of Composting and Its Inner and Outer Gesture."

The Lesser Cousin of Wine

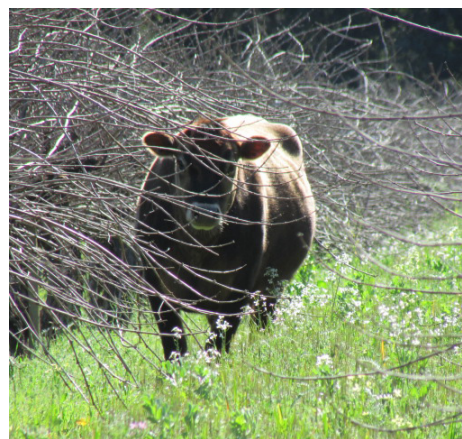
An intrinsic part of any vineyard and winemaking process is the grape pomace. After the grapes are crushed so their sweet and precious juice can be further transformed into wine, a much less romantic substance is left as a byproduct—the pomace. Hundreds of thousands of tons of skins, stems, and seeds are produced each

year. For most wine growers, this is a noxious and troublesome material. Left alone the pomace can quickly emit intense foul odors. It has a very low pH, and if it is carelessly stockpiled in wet conditions it can begin to produce acetic acid. Although its carbon/nitrogen ratio seems at first ideal for composting, it behaves as a carbonaceous material because of the high lignin content of all its stems. As a whole it is relatively rich in nitrogen, potassium, and calcium. These and other characteristics make pomace a peculiar and unusual material that is very challenging to work with.

Pomace is often approached as a burdensome waste. "Externalizing" it—transferring the burden of it to the environment—

often seems the best and easiest solution. In many places, after the grapes are crushed, the pomace is hauled out of the vineyard and dumped elsewhere. Yet, just as cow

manure is an extension of the dairy herd and belongs to the reality of the farm, so, too, pomace belongs to the vineyard and needs to find a worthwhile place as part of the wine-making process.



Redeeming the Pomace

Mike Benziger, founder of the Benziger Family Winery, has a very different perception of pomace. Always striving to foster the health of his farm as a whole, he clearly sees the pomace as an important and integral part of the nutrient cycle of the ranch. At the suggestion of Matias Baker, the farm's biodynamic consultant, he had invited me to help them improve the quality of their compost and their composting process.

Over three days we had numerous conversations envisioning the compost as an integral part of the vineyard, where one is *continuously engaged* with the compost process. We also actively worked to improve some of the current practices, and reviewed the general principles for mixing fresh material and building a new compost pile.

What resonated throughout that whole week—at both farms—was the realization and confirmation that the composting of the pomace is an integral part of any vineyard. Compost needs to be cared for throughout the whole growing season; it cannot be something that is attended to only when there is time. The farm community needs to develop a conscious and fully engaged sense of responsibility for all aspects of composting.

The art of mixing fresh decaying organic matter and guiding this living process through a de-composition and re-composition to a final composition is as much an art as the creation of wine. For folks so dedicated and committed to the quality and art of wine fermentation, the idea of giving the same care and attention to the life of the pile and its contribution to the soil does not seem foreign. Compost can contribute to the “terroir” of a wine. (The word refers to the qualities of earth, air, water, and light—

all the environmental qualities—through which a wine gains its distinctive appeal.) Pomace, instead of being a burdensome waste, can be transformed into humus—a life giving substance. Ultimately, composting should not be seen only as a way of improving the quality of the wine, but it should be seen as a free offering, given out of love for the Earth and Humanity.

Bruno Follador

