

Katherine Cole

‘Steiner’s biodynamic viticulture thrives, despite outrageous statements that have come to light’



A century ago, in the summer of 1924, Rudolf Steiner delivered a series of eight lectures on farming. Drawn from his scholarship, observations of old-world bucolic customs and conversations with a traditional herb gatherer, they served as the basis for the agricultural practice known as biodynamics.

The first anti-industrial, anti-chemical farming movement, predating organics by a couple of decades, biodynamics was a timely reaction to the agrarian population’s recent abandonment of cover crops, rotation and composting in favour of chemical fertilisers made from ammonia – the same substance that had just contributed to unprecedented death and suffering in the trenches of World War I.

A century later, biodynamic viticulture is equated with quality, and young enthusiasts continue to find Steiner’s ecologically motivated messaging compelling. Claire Jarreau, head winemaker at Brooks in Oregon’s Willamette Valley, recalls that she decided at the age of 27 to devote her career to biodynamic wine because ‘it felt very progressive’. Certification by the international biodynamic federation Demeter fits, she adds, with the concepts of ‘health, wellness and transparency that are important to the younger generations’.

Steiner was remarkably forward-looking in his holistic view of farming and his concern for the planet. He foresaw, for example, the development of mad cow disease (BSE), and predicted the negative impacts of ‘conventional’ farming.

But his expertise didn’t stop at agriculture. He was a noted philosopher who wrote on Goethe and Nietzsche. He was a spiritual leader with an enormous following. As an educator, he started up the still-popular Waldorf School system, and as a healer he developed anthroposophic medicine in the wake of the 1918 flu pandemic. He co-founded the Weleda skincare line and was a noted architect (not professional) and choreographer. A century after the birth of biodynamics, the volume of Steiner’s body of work remains staggering. Among many other things, he authored 28 books and delivered more

than 6,000 lectures over the course of his lifetime. It strikes me that Steiner, in his ability to churn out intelligent content on any number of subjects, seemingly on demand, was the OG generative AI. And, as with generative AI search results, one must keep a sharp eye out for Steinerian detours into nonsense. One moment, you’re reading sensible farming advice, and the next, Steiner has lapsed into the language of the occult – gnomes, undines, sylphs, fire spirits and our, er, Aryan forefathers from the sunken civilisation of Atlantis.

This brings us to the hard truth that, tucked in among Steiner’s lectures, is a collection of idiotic, preposterous and truly repugnant statements about race. Spend a little time in the Rudolf Steiner Archive at rsarchive.org, and you’ll find some search results worthy of a rogue AI chatbot.

Lauren Johnson-Wünscher, a 38-year-old American-born wine writer and International Wine Business MBA living in Berlin, has written about trying to reconcile Steiner’s more abhorrent beliefs with her admiration for many biodynamic wines. ‘I’ve come to terms with what it means to drink biodynamic wine and be a Black woman,’ she confides. ‘I’m able to separate Steiner’s racist beliefs from his biodynamic teachings, but I find pleasure in ensuring that his legacy receives fair and complete exposure.’ Biodynamic growers, she adds, should be vocal in denouncing racism.

Kenzie Bindrup, the 28-year-old project manager at Oregon’s Winery Lane Collective, puts Steiner’s work in the same category as Michael Jackson’s music, saying: ‘I respect the art but not the artist.’ A Korean-American, Bindrup grew up Mormon and says she is comfortable picking and choosing ‘what fills up my cup’.

‘I’ve been reading his lectures on butterflies and bees this past month,’ Bindrup adds. ‘For me, it’s about intentionality and mindfulness – about the earth, insects or humans. I’ll leave the woo-woo and problematic stuff and take the parts that feel right in my heart and gut.’ **D**

Katherine Cole is the author of five books on wine, as well as host and executive producer of James Beard Award-winning podcast *The Four Top*

IN MY GLASS THIS MONTH

Rudolf Steiner was born in Međimurje, a pastoral sub-zone of the Croatian Uplands. On a recent visit there, I fell for Pušipel: Furmint in Hungary. A favourite example was **Dvanajščak-Kozol’s Prestige Mohokos Pušipel 2021**, a minerally white with notes of lychee, white peach, spice and white pepper. Mohokos is one of the region’s top vineyards – in both repute and elevation – with unusually calcium-rich soils.

