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WESTERN CAPE DEMETER PGS MEMBERS LIGHT THE BD FIRE WITHIN

BDAASA's most recent workshop at Reyneke Farm in the Western Cape was a resounding success despite a torrential downpour that necessitated a few changes to the programme.



BIO DYNAMIGHT SOUTH AFRICA

Originally planned as a compost-making workshop with a stretch tent set up next to the compost heaps, the event had to be relocated to the tasting room. There it took on a different flavour as various members of the Demeter PGS group spoke from their hearts about their personal experiences using biodynamic compost and field sprays.

Later the group separated as some went off to learn about stirring and spraying BD 500 while others stayed to learn about soil analysis.

After lunch, when the rain had eased, Ishaan Lilje took those who were interested in learning about BD 500 off in a bus to witness the stirring and spraying of this prep which is used to enhance soil fertility.



LEARNING AND SHARING EXPERIENCES

Gundela Deutschlander of Babylonstoren and Jo Fuller of Sillery Farm (which was certified Demeter PGS a year ago) passed around the plants used in the various preps for people to examine. They described how each prep was made and the role each played in enlivening the compost.

Alix Clark from Swee Farm (also now Demeter PGS-certified) which grows the best tasting mangos (in an area where mangos are not expected to grow as it is not tropical) reported on her experiments and experiences using Prep 501. Made from Silica, Prep 501 is sprayed on the trees in the early morning and works on the fruiting and ripening process.



BD SOIL ANALYSIS

Marile van Niekerk (from Waterkloof Farm, another Demeter PGS certified farm, producing herbs for the pharmaceutical industry) spoke about the difference between commercial soil analysis, which is analytical and quantitative, versus biodynamic soil analysis using Goethean observation.

Here the observer aims to form a connection with the subject, using his/her senses and intuition to perceive patterns, relationships and qualities, rather than relying solely on quantitative measurements. In biodynamic farming, Goethean observation helps BD farmers gain a deeper appreciation of soil, plants, and ecological interactions by engaging with them thoughtfully and empathetically i.e. the farmer puts his/her hands in the soil, feels it, connects with it and develops sensitivity and an innate understanding from this interaction.



SOIL/COMPOST CHROMATOGRAPHY

Marile's talk was a useful introduction to a presentation by Wendy Lilje on Soil Chromatography as a tool for assessing soil quality. This method developed during Steiner's time and which is still used by biodynamic farmers today, produces a picture of the soil, compost or food that is being analysed, rather than a list of quantified ingredients.

In this technique, liquids travel through filter papers soaked with a diluted solution of silver nitrate which is sensitive to light. The components that are being separated by the filter paper create specific patterns and some develop vibrant colours when they react with the silver nitrate.

Wendy explained that Interpreting the chromatograms is an art that is refined through practice, much like meditation. It comes with doing a lot of comparisons of chromatograms of soils taken from different areas. It also considers observations made during the soil chromatography experience.

THERE ARE TWO WAYS OF READING A CHROMATOGRAM:

1. You identify the different circular zones. For example in a soil sample, each zone represents something different, such as mineral content, enzyme or bacterial activity, humus content, etc.
2. You Interpret using your head, heart and gut during your observation of the chromatogram.



Here things like beauty become important, such as colours that are almost luminous, as well as order, form and balance, which is so important in biodynamics. You also look at the way the chromatogram develops during the process. You can have a fiery result where the colours develop quickly and colours are harsh – or you can have a slow process where colours quietly develop into strong colours.

Wendy said that although chromatography is exciting to use, it requires a lot of hard work, consistency and making sure your feelings don't overwhelm your head and your gut. She added that it was important to apply the method correctly.

Feedback

Having heard first-hand accounts of the effects of using BD compost and field sprays from enthusiastic farmers, a number of members who had been sitting on the fence, committed themselves to making BD compost and have since ordered the preps. People have also enquired about the materials required for soil chromatography, affirming the importance of these get-togethers where we are able to share learnings and experiences.

A special thank you to Tanja Erasmus for organising a coffee cart and a wonderful lunch, and to Mandy Butler, a member of this PGS group, who baked the most amazing pastries, adding warmth and comfort on this freezing cold day.

MEET ROZY GUNN

WHO APPROACHES FARMING AS LIVE ART

MEMBERS OF THE DEMETER PGS WINE GROUP VISITED BROCHA FARM, OWNED BY ROZY GUNN, DURING SEPTEMBER.



Here we find out more about Rozy, an artist whose farm has become her artwork.

What inspired you to start practising biodynamic farming?

In 2003 I attended a seminar by Nicolas Joly at Oude Libertas. Most people in the wine industry thought it was a bit far-fetched but I was intrigued and despite understanding very little I had a gut feeling that this was the way to go.

When did you start farming this way?

I started my farming career in 2002 and followed conventional advice because I knew nothing, but after the Joly talk, I started making compost,

stopped using metal wire in the vineyards, got some cattle and latched onto a few BD practices that I could remember. However, I continued farming conventionally until 2007 when I applied for Organic Certification.

This failed dismally and I deregistered two years later. I had a farm full of competitive grasses and my vineyards were barely growing and bearing almost no crops. A kind consultant suggested I keep all the organic practices in place but do one herbicide per year until I could afford to buy a mechanical weeder. Despite my annual “fix” of glyphosate I continued to explore BD practices and even made my own preps one year, much to the horror of our poor housekeeper who helped with cleaning two cow skulls on the kitchen table and some organ stuffing and horn filling.



Brocha Farm



Demeter PGS wine group

My BD practices were sporadic and interwoven with some dodgy conventional methods but the real point is that the BDAASA never judged or shamed – they simply encouraged me to take it further and continue using the preps. In 2018 I finally shed the last conventional practices.

What changes did you have to make to achieve Demeter PGS certification?

At this point it was simply a matter of committing – for good. No more falling off the wagon!!! My PGS wine group really made this possible. I also re embarked on applying for a 3rd party Organic certification because EcoCert is well recognised in the wine industry and familiar to consumers. This brought a certain discipline to my farming in terms of record keeping which I think dovetails nicely with the PGS system which is a bit more casual.

What challenges have you had to overcome?

- I had to jack up my animal situation. I donated my Hereford cattle (no horns) to my husband and got crazy Ngunis, which truth be told are not as happy here as the Herefords were. Animals mean weekend staff, establishing pastures and ensuring year-round food from a BD or organic source if you don't have enough grazing. Ducks periodically get scooped by a resident Rooikat and need to be replenished. But we love the animals and they are worth the chore factor.
- Planting a screening hedge around the whole farm seems well-nigh impossible but I am doing it anyway. Seven hundred trees last year and the same amount due for this year... They are just little saplings and the cattle and buck periodically annihilate them, but perseverance is key here and we find a slurry of cow manure and chilli pepper flicked on the young trees with a whitewash brush really helps.
- Weed control remains my biggest expense. I understand that formal agriculture by its nature requires human intervention. You cannot farm organically or BD by neglect. The vine thrives with less competition around it and for us this means weeding by hand an average of four hectares three times in a season. The older vineyards are able to cope with the mechanical weeder which is not as gentle.



Farm animals are worth the chore.

What improvements have you seen since starting on your certification journey?

- The farm looks more “alive” despite less vigour in the vineyards.
- Record keeping, which I have a low tolerance for, has been useful. Until you actually write things down you tend to think you are far more “BD” than you probably are.
- I enjoy the emphasis on social responsibility and love this community aspect of BD and I think my team really do feel much more part of the farm. The workshops organised by BDAASA are much anticipated outings for my staff and have proved to be invaluable socially and educationally. The way my team and I engage with each other is just different – despite the huge diversity in education levels, economic and demographic circumstances. The thing I am most proud of is the dignity, work ethic and confidence we have cultivated on this little farm.
- And the wine is changing..... more vibrant, textured and expressive.

But there is still lots more to do - I often tell people I’m just starting out!



Rozy with her team.

As an artist, what role does beauty play in your philosophy of farming and living?

As a trained artist, I think the longing to transcend and enter a mysterious realm that is not always explained by data and scientific thinking will always motivate what I do - be it farming or bringing up children or making art. The things which we believe carry huge energy, whether they can be proven or not. The world is so full of distracting fluff in the form of information and imagery that to cultivate a deep connection with nature helps both the artist and the farmer “see” more clearly. Rick Rubin describes this well. “When we take notice of the cycles of the planet, and choose to live in accordance with its seasons, something remarkable happens - we become connected. We begin to see ourselves as part of a greater whole that is constantly regenerating itself. And we may then tap into this all-powerful propagating force and ride its creative wave.”

I may have cooked up my own interpretation of spirituality, but this dimension of BD farming is very important to me. I became very bored farming conventionally. It was a hollow recipe.

Can you describe some of the ways you have incorporated art into the design and daily life of your farm and homestead?

Beauty or aesthetics is very important to me. If you’re going to plant a vineyard, does it really have to look like a rugby field? I love the observational aspect of BD farming and these days I try to be really mindful of everything we do on the farm, from building a cow shelter to designing a vineyard. Our new Eshelas blocks are beautiful serpentine curves which honour the hillside’s natural geography. But more important than beauty is care. I farm on a relative shoestring and to simply do everything with care is a good substitute for flashy perfection.



Eshelas blocks follow the contour of the valley.

How does the Western Cape environment influence both your farming and your art?

Since beginning farming I don't make art anymore. My farm has become my "artwork". The Western Cape can be challenging as a farmer because the soils are poor and most agriculture here is practised conventionally so there is not much to glean from. But I love the fynbos and have kept a 17-hectare conservancy area for beauty and diversity.

What is your favourite subject matter and medium for your art?

I love working reductively – starting with a solid and revealing the form within – so carving out of wood is my preferred medium. I am deeply fascinated by the human condition and draw a lot from mythology which boasts fantastic exploits of ambition, disaster, greed, folly, bravery and countless other cautionary tales.



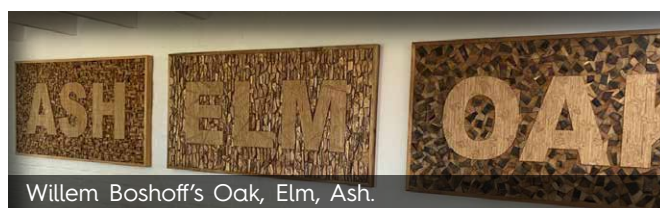
Blowing Your Own Trumpet by Rozy Gunn.

What impact do your farm and homestead have on visitors?

My farm is a private place but I like to believe that when you come here it just feels different. I like to present people with a different yardstick for



Berni Searle's On Foot.



Willem Boshoff's Oak, Elm, Ash.

measuring success. My team are especially proud that we farm organically in a sea of conventional farmers and call the wine "honest wine".

Our homestead is full of art which always inspires comment if not exactly admiration!!! Each piece tells a story and hopefully leaves people thinking a little differently to when they arrived.

Each work resonates deeply with me. Berni Searle's "ON FOOT" is not only about migration for me. I enjoy the reference to BD farming – a return to basics and the human physical endeavour in an age of industrialised agriculture. Willem Boshoff's "OAK, ASH, ELM" is a piece referencing the three ancient Trees favoured by druids and their spiritual relevance. I think Steiner would have approved!

Photographs courtesy of Christine Lundy, Rozy Gunn and Jos van Wyk.



STOP PRESS

Khotso Thatso and Liezl Haasbroek recently attended the 3rd International BioDynamic Research Conference in London. Watch out for feedback on their experiences, emerging trends and how they plan to share/use the learnings in the next edition of Bio Dynamight.