

How I became New Zealand's first biodynamic wine grower

*Lars Jensen, 44, escaped the corporate world to create a Nelson vineyard that's totally tune with nature.*

"Going to Otago University in the '80s, the choice was to drink warm, flat beer, or wine. That sparked off my interest in good New Zealand wines.

"After uni I went to Wellington and worked in finance. By the time I did my two year OE I was passionate about wine and planned my trips around the wine regions of France and Italy.

"After visiting organic vineyards in Europe, I had had a dream to not only have an organic vineyard, but also one that is in harmony with nature. It seemed a natural progression to embrace biodynamics.

"Returning to Wellington in the mid '90s, I bought a property on Mt Victoria with an old grapevine where I stomped my own grapes and made a few bottles of dodgy wine. I quickly realised I was not going to make a successful wine in the city! Working as a Telecom manager reaffirmed my desire to get out of the corporate world. I preferred the outdoors. My future wife Sam was from Nelson so it was a natural move for us across Cook Straight.

"In Nelson, I first worked as Sealord's shellfish species manager where I developed the world's first organically certified mussels. Being made redundant in 2004 was the catalyst to buying Richmond Plains which had been certified organic since it began in 1991.

"Soon afterwards, we became New Zealand's first biodynamically certified vineyard. This *biodynamic system* sees the vineyard as a living ecosystem influenced by the earth's natural rhythms. We spread compost and manure during a descending moon when the lunar effects promote root growth and soil activity.

"Conversely, we apply organic *foliage* sprays and compost teas during an ascending moon when the lunar effects increase vitality and vigour of the vine shoots, fruit and leaves. It might sound a little like witchcraft but so did organics back in the '80s!

"We have more than 27 species of plants within in arm's reach at any point amongst the vineyard. Some people think they're weeds but we see them as plants which we allow to work in harmony with the vines.

"It's a complete change in mindset. A conventional vineyard has an arsenal of chemicals that isn't available to us, nor would we want to because of the negative impact on the environment. Instead we use natural products such as fish oil and seaweed to develop healthy, vibrant plants.

“We have produced New Zealand’s first sauvignon blanc and pinot noir from certified organic and biodynamic grapes. We make 40,000 bottles a year and export to 10 countries.

“We run cows for their compost and as a treat, we feed them the fermented grapes which have a slight alcoholic tinge and they love it. I got up one morning to find the cows missing and I was terrified they were in the vineyard. But bless them, they had jumped the fences and were in the winery, cleaning down the press tray, eating the skins and stalks from the grapes!

“Many people buy our organic wine because it does not give them a hangover. But a second bottle probably will!

“I think our wines give people more enjoyment as they know they’re good for them and the environment. And I get great pleasure from living in harmony with nature and enjoying its bounty.”

Rosalind Le Bas Walker

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