



Exploring Biodynamics with Clemens Lageder, Sixth Generation at Alois Lageder Estate

Erin Brooks

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The morning of my interview with Clemens Lageder, sixth-generation proprietor at Alois Lageder estate in Italy's Alto Adige, he was running a bit late.

"I needed to convince the butcher to slaughter a bull in the vineyard," he explains, as if this were perfectly natural for a Tuesday morning. "I want to keep him out of the slaughterhouse and shoot him in the vineyard, so he can be relaxed." The estate has partnered with a local cheese dairy further up the Dolomites; during the winter months, cows come down to graze in the vineyards where there is still grass. The dairy saves on feed and the winery saves on vineyard maintenance; it's a win-win for both parties. "Only the milk cows are of interest to the dairy, so bulls enter the cycle of mass production," Clemens says. "This way we get good regional, organic meat and the bulls can live a good life out in the vineyards."



Clemens, left, with his father, Alois. (Photo by Gregor Khuen Belasi.)

After living abroad for a decade, Clemens has come back to take over management of the family winery from his father, Alois. Founded in 1823, Alois Lageder is the largest biodynamic estate in Italy, with almost 140 acres of vines. The winery's portfolio, ranging from regional to site-specific bottlings, reflects the diversity of the mountainous region, where elevation, aspect and varying soil structures provide endless microclimates for an array of grapes both local and international: Pinot Grigio, Chardonnay, Müller Thurgau, Gewürztraminer and Sauvignon Blanc as well as Schiava, Lagrein, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Pinot Noir.

It's been a slow, steady changing of the guard from fifth to sixth generations but, Clemens says, a positive and smooth transition. "Taking over everything the first day would have been too complex," he says. "I needed to get to know our partners and those long-standing relationships my father began." In addition to their estate vineyards, the winery also purchases grapes from about 80 growers in the region. After learning the commercial side of the business, Clemens has now taken over responsibility of the winery and agriculture. "It should be a slow generational change," he adds. "It depends less on the new generation and more on the older generation—how much patience they have and their ability to accept mistakes. My father is very patient, and from him I've learned to be much more settled and to think twice about things."

Working with family can be a challenge, but Clemens says he and his father have found the right balance. "I can make decisions but if I need advice I can go to him. He isn't behind me, watching every single move I make. That freedom is extremely important. It's a very positive relationship, of course with its ups and downs—sometimes we have different opinions and that's important, but all the friction is positive."



(Photo: Alois Lageder.)

The key to this working relationship between father and son is a shared philosophy: nurturing the land for future generations by restoring biodiversity to the vineyards and ensuring the fertility of the soil. Alois instituted the change from conventional farming to biodynamic practices in the 1990s, achieving full Demeter certification in 2004 (he has since been named President of Demeter Italy).

“When we talk about biodynamics, it’s always about the esoteric things,” Clemens says. “But the most important aspect of biodynamics is the idea of the closed organism.” He points out that Steiner lived during a time when agriculture was becoming industrialized and monoculture was on the rise. “A good farmer had many different crops and animals. He could use manure to fertilize the crops to produce grain and cereals to feed himself and his animals,” Clemens explains. “It was this whole cycle.” Steiner’s notion of the closed organism is antithetical to the idea of modern vineyards, another form of monoculture. The Lageders are finding ways to occupy the space between as vintners running a successful winery while ensuring the health of the land for the future.

When I ask if he’s seen changes since the introduction of biodynamics at the estate, he says, “We had a huge problem with a certain grass taking over in the vineyards. We brought the cows down from the cheese dairy, where they eat a lot of different herbs and grasses at higher elevations. They brought the seeds of those plants in their manure, which increased the diversity in the vineyards and controlled the invasive grass. We got the soul back.”



The Lageders are also experimenting with new varieties, thinking ahead about the effects of climate change. In the last few decades, harvests have been pushed from October to September. A challenge they face today is decreasing acidity in their wines, especially whites like Pinot Grigio. “In Alto Adige, we can deal with climate change by playing with altitude and finding new grape varieties. A hundred years ago, we had Riesling; maybe in the future we will have Viognier and Assyrtiko. We need to think of how we can maintain the freshness, liveliness, and tension of our wines, not just now but in 10 years.” They are also experimenting with techniques in the winery, blending fractions of fresh-pressed juice with that from grapes with prolonged skin contact, to increase perceived acidity in the wines.

Marketing so many varieties might be a logistical nightmare, but logistics aren’t, in Clemens’ mind, the biggest challenge of the changes taking place at Alois Lageder. “Biodynamics is a social process,” he says pointedly. “The trouble is not the plant—it’s the farmer. They need to look at the vineyard from a new perspective, and

it takes time to learn and to change.” The Lageders have successfully convinced many of the growers they work with to change their farming methods from conventional to organic or biodynamic. “We intensify the dialogue, visit them more often, present the idea of the closed organism,” he says. “In the end, they get paid more because the grapes are better quality. The incentive shouldn’t be financial, but the consequence can be.”



Clemens believes farming biodynamically does affect the quality of the grapes, but this isn’t the only reason for farming this way. “I am convinced we can improve quality through biodynamics, but we work this way because we have a responsibility to our neighborhood,” he explains. “It isn’t a magical stick—you can make fantastic wines from conventional farming, and you can make bad wines from conventional farming. It’s the same with farming biodynamically or organically. But farming this way triggers you to experiment. You are forced to learn new things. You can’t jump on the tractor and use herbicides or bring out chemical nitrogen. You have to find new ways.”

Our interview ends with a story that illustrates the philosophy of the Lageders and how it extends beyond the vineyards. “I’m vegetarian, and I hear the argument that I can’t wear leather shoes. But just because you can’t do everything right isn’t an excuse for doing everything wrong. It’s a process; you need time. I have my cow. I have the skin of my cow, and next week I will get my own shoes made from the skin,” he says. “Be conscious of what you do and be aware of the consequences of your movements and actions. Then you can estimate if it’s right or wrong.”

Photos courtesy of Alois Lageder.