



Australia a leader in

biodynamic agriculture

The abundant vegetable garden at Mulloon Creek Natural Farms. All photographs by Jesse Blackadder.

By Jesse Blackadder

Australia has 800,000 hectares or more than two million acres of land that is farmed biodynamically – more than the rest of the world put together.

Biodynamic farmers must meet the same stringent certification guidelines as organic farmers – and in addition they must use the special biodynamic preparations which form the basis of this approach to agriculture.

The proof of the method is coming out in a range of studies – the most famous being the *Fineprint* magazine blind taste test of international wine experts comparing biodynamic wines with conventional ones.

The birth of biodynamics

In 1924 Rudolph Steiner gave a series of eight lectures known as the Agriculture Course that discussed how the health of the soil, plants and animals depended on re-connecting nature with the creative forces of the cosmos.

Steiner outlined practical methods for

rehabilitating natural forces, including the use of special preparations in homeopathic doses. The lectures laid the foundations of the biodynamic farming method.

Under biodynamic principles, a farm is treated as a single vital entity. The farmer works to create balance and harmony between the different elements, while nurturing the soil's micro-activity.

One man who has taken on the task of convincing Australian farmers that biodynamics is a worthwhile alternative is Hannah Mackay, chief executive of Biodynamic Agriculture Australia, a not-for-profit

association which promotes the practice and understanding of biodynamic agriculture.

It runs workshops to teach farmers how to convert to biodynamic agriculture.

"The conventional chemical approach to agriculture is based on adding minerals such as nitrogen, potassium, phosphorus and so on," Mackay says.

"In biodynamic agriculture, we bring those things in through living processes rather than adding measured quantities.

"We run two day workshops to introduce biodynamics to existing farmers and show them what it can contribute to their enterprises. We include a mix of theory and practical activities.

"We air biodynamic preparations, make liquid brews and make a compost heap. Basically we do at a micro level the things that they'll have to do to be biodynamic farmers."

How Mulloon Creek became biodynamic

The 2300 hectare holding of Mulloon Creek Natural Farms (comprising two farms) straddles the Great Dividing Range just east of Canberra. The property's owner, Antony Coote, says it is probably the largest

multi-enterprise biodynamic farm in Australia.

It is certified biodynamic by Australian Certified Organic (ACO), one of three organisations that carry out biodynamic certification.

Coote first came across biodynamics in the 1980s, when he and his farm manager at the time were concerned about acidity.

"The country was getting more and more acid and it seemed we were just abusing it," he says.

"We had a look at a biodynamic farm nearby and there was clover with very deep roots. I was sceptical, but I could see something was working.

"We got in touch with Alex Podolinsky, the great leader in biodynamics, and we started using the preparations. We did everything wrong and made lots of mistakes, but at least it was a start."

Coote's start 20 years ago has resulted in Mulloon Creek Natural Farms growing into a major enterprise.

It now produces cattle for beef and veal, sheep for wool and meat, free ranging poultry for meat and eggs, pigs on pasture and vegetables.

Dairy cows produce milk, butter, cream, yoghurt and cheese for the families on the

farm and there are plans to expand into other commercial-scale enterprises.

Coote also works with biodynamic agriculture trainer Lynette West to run courses on the property.

"We see our role as not being just farmers in the traditional sense of growing food, but as food and fibre providers – we grow food and we add value to it," he says. "In this way we can employ four or five families on the farm – where many farms are struggling to just support one family. We are multicultural, not mono-cultural."

Biodynamic feed is better for animals

According to an in-depth study of research into the health benefits of biodynamics, carried out by Virginia Worthington and published by the US Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association (*Biodynamics* 224, July/August, 1999), the health benefits of organic and biodynamic food stand out from conventional produce, but biodynamic food has a clear advantage in animal feeding.

Tony Coote, owner of Mulloon Creek Natural Farms, and Lynette West, biodynamic agriculture trainer.





The farm incorporates 727.2 hectares (1800 acres) of native forest.

Worthington says that there are too few studies comparing biodynamic and organic crops in terms of nutrient levels to draw firm conclusions.

However, when she looked at 14 animal feed studies, comparing animals fed on organic and conventional feed, the results were clearly in favour of biodynamics.

"Of the strongly positive studies, the majority used biodynamic feed, and all of the biodynamically fed animals performed well compared to conventionally fed animals," she says.

"All of the biodynamic studies were clearly positive. Non-biodynamic studies, on the other hand, showed more mixed results, with some studies being extremely

positive and others showing a less clear cut benefit.

"Altogether, these results suggest that while a number of organic systems may be capable of producing positive results, biodynamics at the very least provides a model for a healthy agricultural system."

Biodynamic wine blitzes the taste test nine times out of 10

According to Hamish Mackay in the wine industry, where taste is the ultimate criteria, biodynamic wines are increasingly winning prizes around the world.

In August 2009, the US magazine *Fortune* sponsored a blind taste test comparing biodynamic and conventional wines, carried out by a panel of seven sommeliers and wine writers.

Out of 10 pairs of wines, matched by proximity of the vineyards, vintage and price, only one of the conventionally made wines was judged superior to its biodynamic counterpart.

The article reported the comments of one of the tasters, Ray Isle, managing editor of *Wine & Spirit* magazine. "If you buy wines from producers who are biodynamic, then you're getting wines made (a) without pesticides and other trical chemical whatevers, (b) with meticulous attention to detail in the vineyard, and (c) by growers who really believe that a vineyard's character should be expressed in the wine," he said.

"So what if they also think burying cow horns full of manure will help them channel new life forces from the cosmos?"

Take up the cow horn

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is increasing interest from farmers wanting to change to biodynamic agriculture.

This is supported by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC), which supports a research and development fund focusing on organic agriculture.

According to RIRDC's report into organic farming, there is rising support for organic agriculture (of which biodynamic is a part) from the community, the government, and the marketplace.

It believes governments should pay close attention to the growth of the sector because it is an important development in moves towards sustainability.

Antony Coote agrees that there has been a recent upsurge of interest and he believes there's room for different approaches to work together.

"Conventional agriculture has given us some wonderful tools along the way, in spite of its problems," he says.

"What we're doing here is taking the best out of both and putting them together so that we farm naturally, with respect for everything we have, and we do it dynamically with energy and we also make a profit. We're putting the culture back in agriculture."

Find out more:

Biodynamic Agriculture Australia

web <www.biodynamics.net.au>

Biodynamic Education Centre with information about course running at Mulloon Creek Natural Farms.

web <www.biodynamiceducation.com.au>



The homestead garden is home to friendly peacocks, ducks, chickens and guinea hens, which range freely during the day.