

# BIODYNAMIC PROVES GOOD BUSINESS

Emiliana Organic Vineyards in Chile have focused on biodynamic production, including taking employee sustainability seriously. Jürgen Mathäb finds it's an approach that has not only paid off, but which has inspired sustainable practices elsewhere.



José Guilisasti,  
CEO, Emiliana

Like the Chilean wine-producing giant Concha y Toro, Emiliana Organic Vineyards, the largest biodynamic wine producer in the world, is controlled by the Guilisasti family. Unlike other subsidiaries, Emiliana runs its operation independently. "It has to be that way because we're talking here about an entirely different world," says CEO José Guilisasti.

## Role model

Emiliana was established in 1986 by the Guilisasti family to produce lower-priced wines. Since then the business has changed direction radically. In 2001 Emiliana produced 'Coyam', Chile's first-ever biodynamic wine. Now, out of almost 2,500 acres of vineyards, approximately 1,560 are biodynamic, with the rest farmed organically in line with IMO (Switzerland) standards. The company produces around 800,000 cases of wine, 300,000 of which are simple varietal wines made from outsourced grapes grown using conventional methods. Guilisasti hopes that by 2015 they will be using only grapes grown in an organically controlled environment.

"Size is not the key factor here," says Guilisasti, talking about the vast size of the company. "In fact, it is only relevant insofar as it means we are widely regarded as a role model in the industry. In Chile we have definitely helped to bring about an encouraging

change in people's attitude to sustainability." And there is no doubt that, compared to the small-scale nature of European winegrowing, it is easier to cultivate large, adjoining areas as one biodynamic unit.

What marks Emiliana apart from the Concha y Toro Group, Guilisasti continues, is a different company ethos: "We don't just focus on a few selected aspects of sustainability or organic wine production - we are completely committed to the whole idea with all that that entails." For Emiliana, there is also an important social dimension. "Our 400 employees are trained to understand fully what living sustainably means so that they can then take this back to their village and to their families." Large employers have a greater influence on life in these small towns than would be the case in Europe. Employees have their own vegetable garden at the finca and there is also a kindergarden, communal sports ground and a school. And there are further targeted initiatives in the village, such as a biodynamically-run garden, for everyone in the community to enjoy. "People know this is their future," says Guilisasti. "This is the kind of positive change Chile needs."

## Seriously sustainable

Since 2009, Emiliana has gone over to completely carbon-neutral production and in 2011 the company achieved Fair for Life status, followed by the award of a Fair Trade certificate in 2012. The example of Emiliana has had an impact on winegrowing in Chile generally, with more attention now being paid to soil quality, soil life and the natural process of winegrowing. Guilisasti adds that organic production is in the interests of the people working in the vineyard. "When I first started out I wasn't so much interested in organics from the point of view of protecting flora and fauna - it was more to do with us forever coming back from the vineyard with irritations of the skin and eyes." He says that getting the best out of the soil and the vineyard site "is all about leaving it intact and allowing the plants

to reflect their natural surroundings. Evidence shows that the whole microbiology of the soil and of the vineyard in biodynamic cultivation is vastly different to that in conventional winegrowing." The vine, he explains, is better able to break down and process materials. The direct result of this production method, he says, is that the wine is a clearer expression of its terroir which is, after all, a key factor in the marketing strategy adopted by many bodegas. The result: "Our wines are steadily improving and becoming more expressive."

What does Guilisasti think about the sometimes confusing variety of certifications facing consumers? "As long as these various seals are credible, the minor differences between them are not important. And anyway, people tend to head in the right direction themselves if a seal turns out to be not worth much."

In Guilisasti's view, Emiliana's profitability is assured because high production costs are offset by better quality grapes which can in turn be translated into higher sales prices. At the last harvest in Chile normal grapes cost around \$0.60, while those produced biodynamically cost around \$0.75. Yet in the last 10 years, Emiliana has been able to raise its wine prices. Guilisasti is keen to point out that Emiliana is able to compete across the whole wine market and not just within "the organic sector". "We are able to command these prices purely on the basis of our high quality and not because of our philosophy. We certainly don't want to base our marketing entirely on our eco-credentials - we want to compete on price and quality with all other wines." Emiliana is actively seeking importers of conventionally-grown wine whose ethos includes a belief in the Fair Trade ideal and sustainability.

Individual wines from Emiliana may well be less profitable than those from other bodegas, "but, thinking long term and taking our circumstances and what we achieve into consideration, we reckon our approach brings benefits both for the company and its employees," says Guilisasti. ■