

# Austrian Winemakers at the Forefront of a Biodynamic Farming Revolution

BY ANNE KREBIEHL MW



*Courtesy Nikolaihof Vineyard*

Some of the country's winemakers realized 40 years ago that farming methods had to change. We talk to three forward-thinking producers who are still looking for new solutions.

The future of farming has to change. As the planet groans, more and more people understand this. But some of the approaches we accept today as possible solutions were once seen as unorthodox, especially the idea of biodynamic farming.

This method was developed by the controversial philosopher Rudolf Steiner early in the 20th century, and it has as many adherents as critics today. In addition to rejecting synthetic inputs, it espouses holistic, closed-loop farming that considers every plot to be a cosmos in itself. It's especially the mystical elements of biodynamics, based on lunar and star cycles, that set some people on edge.

Yet, Austria has long had biodynamic pioneers. They blazed the trail and are now making wines of astonishing beauty and depth.





*Photo Courtesy Nikolaihof Vineyards*

**Christine Saahs, Nikolaihof, Wachau**



Saahs and her husband, Nikolaus, were so ahead of their time that they had to bear derision and scorn. They started to farm biodynamically, pretty much in isolation, in 1971. The impulse to do things differently came from a family doctor who embraced another of Steiner's philosophies, anthroposophy. It holds that humans have the ability to access the spiritual world through their cognition.

"I had no idea who Rudolf Steiner was, or [what] anthroposophy [was], but fundamentally my husband and I were convinced that the future of farming had to be different," says Saahs. "Healthy soil with healthy plants."

Today, she smiles at those uncertain beginnings, but she also remembers a more experienced farmer telling her later that what matters is "to take a step in the right direction."

"Whether what we did was perfect or not, I believe that the will you put into your work for the future, and for what is good, is as important," she says.

Those beginnings were not easy. Sometimes they feared losing their existence.

"Some journalists turned up to explain to my husband what modern winemaking should be," she says. "But that did not bother us. We did the best we could. Because we were so resolute, people believed us. Thank heavens both of us were raised in a free spirit.

"You need to weave your own thoughts through everything you hear, see and experience, and then you can decide for yourself. If you then realize that it was not the best course, you can change."

Saahs says that the brand had exported a lot of wine during the 1980s, so she knew gaining international acceptance would be easier. Their children took over in 2005, and the estate is more solid than ever.

After almost 50 years of biodynamic farming, Saahs says it is "an incredible luck" to have encountered this philosophy.

"It enabled me to understand the meaning of life, and to impart this to my children," she says. "It is a blessing."





*Photo Courtesy Umathum*

### **Josef Umathum, Weingut Umathum, Burgenland**

“It is so important to have a view from outside,” says Umathum, who grew up in a winemaking family. When he was younger, he planned to leave it all behind, studying geography with an eye toward a different career.

“Stewing in your own juices is not good,” he says.

It was at university in the early 1980s that he encountered alternative farming. After stints in Germany, Burgundy, Provence and Bordeaux, he changed his mind. Umathum returned home to his family’s estate and implemented biodynamics.

This was in 1985, just after the devastating scandal when it was revealed that the toxic substance diethylene glycol was added to Austrian wines to make them taste more appealing. The country’s domestic and international wine markets had collapsed.

“There was this idea that there could be a different way,” he says. “I knew nothing about biodynamics.”

So, he went to lectures and started to read about it. Initially, it all seemed “mystical,” he says.

“But, above all, you learn to observe,” he says. “This is decisive. You look at nature with different eyes. The early years were hard. The vines needed to adapt. It takes a while for the inner forces of the plants to become effective.”

It took a lot to convince his vineyard crew and convert them to this way of farming.



Now, after 35 years of alternative farming, he says biodynamics are “about more than making wine, more than agriculture. There is depth. Taking part, observing, understanding correlations. That is important. This is a source of strength and the beauty.

“For me, it is a real enrichment. You may ask if the wines are better. But in reality, the question is, are you tasting the wines differently now? The most important thing is to change as a person, to change your view of nature. It is about being human as a whole, not just about farming.”



*Photo Courtesy Loimer*

### **Fred Loimer, Weingut Loimer, Kamptal**

Loimer abhorred the mineral fertilizers and pesticides that his parents used at their estate. As he became involved in the late 1980s, he stopped all that. His route to biodynamics, however, was slow. The change was not driven initially by environmental concern, but by his belief that so many wines in his region, Kamptal, began to taste the same.

“We fined our musts and used cultured yeasts,” he says. “It was all rather technical winemaking, and the wines were so samey.”

As he tasted with a friend in 2005, they began to question, “What now?” The friend floated the idea of biodynamics.

“All I knew about biodynamics at the time was something vague about moon phases and cow horns,” says Loimer.

He looked for advice, discarded those who were “dilettante or dogmatic,” and got together with other Austrian winemakers. These were the beginnings of Respekt, an association of biodynamic estates in Austria, Germany, Italy and Hungary.

“We learned biodynamics from the ground up,” he says. “The first thing to change was emotion. I was enthused, and carried that enthusiasm into the vineyard. We made nettle tea and drank some of it before spraying it in the vineyard. Imagine spraying something you can drink. That was a strong emotion. The vineyards showed their true face: some thrived, others suffered.

“We realized how important it is to have the right vines in the right place, down to the herbs and grasses in the vineyard. The basic biodynamic principle is to work with the resources at your farm . . . Each farm is a living organism, and this is the fascinating thing that continues to evolve. It is beautiful to taste today and feel that this individuality is in the wines, too.”



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