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# Biodynamic Apostles of the Languedoc

How a Brit and an American are striving to make some of southern France's best reds • By Kim Marcus



Robert "Bertie" Eden at home in the biodynamic vineyards of Château de Combeville. He is a strong believer in the increasingly popular agricultural philosophy and methods of Austrian Rudolf Steiner.

**R**obert Eden, an Englishman with a mop of red hair and a mischievous gaze, walks gingerly up to a pile of, to put it politely, straw and manure. "This is good shit," he says with a broad smile. Eden's piles of compost are located next to the vineyards of Château de Combeville, high in the rugged hills of St.-Chinian in the western Languedoc of France. He co-owns it with New York financier Kevin Parker. Set in an upland vale that neighbors a small *chevrerie*, or goat farm, Combeville is surrounded by oak forests and aromatic scrubland. It offers a stunning view of a long stretch of Mediterranean coastline, all the way south to the lofty Pyrenees and the Spanish border. But it's not toward the horizon that Eden, 41, looks eagerly today. Instead, he grabs a pitchfork and

breaks open the surface of one of the moldering piles. He's ecstatic when he sees it honeycombed with earthworms. The worms mean that the compost is rich, alive and almost ready to be applied to the soil. And for Eden, an avid environmentalist and a practitioner of the esoteric but increasingly popular system of organic agriculture known as biodynamics, that's one of the most important elements to making good wine.

"The only way you can bring back the soil is through compost," he says. "Nobody can really explain it, but there is a greater concentration of [beneficial] nitrates in a vineyard that has been handled biodynamically." Before the application of compost and biodynamics, Combebelles was, in Eden's words, "a typical, dead, hillside Languedoc vineyard," extinguished by a combination of synthetic herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers that increased yields at the expense of the native ecology.

While Eden is the public face of Combebelles and its sister estate, Château Maris, in the neighboring Minervois appellation, Parker, 46, is the chief financial backer and the one who pushed early for the biodynamic strategy. A one-time partner with Wall Street investment house Morgan Stanley, Parker has worked for Deutsche Bank since 1997, and today is its global head of asset management. Parker began his involvement with Eden in 1993, when Eden needed an investor and the two men met through a mutual acquaintance.

"I bought a little stake in Combebelles, and as a sanity check I looked around California and Oregon and did a comparison of prices. I just decided [Combebelles] was a better significant long-term



New York financier Kevin Parker was an early proponent of biodynamics for the estates he owns with Eden in the Languedoc. Parker is currently renovating his Manhattan apartment in accordance with green principles.

value," Parker says. "I was a lot more interested in France, with its base of wine knowledge and access to great vineyards and wines."

Today, Parker's ambition is to transform Maris and Combebelles into Languedoc *grands crus*, an audacious goal in one of France's most maligned, least understood and generally underperforming wine regions. Eden and Parker believe that biodynamics, as applied to the *terroir* of Combebelles and Maris, is instrumental to their goals. "Once I learned about biodynamics and the number of really top domaines in France that follow biodynamics, it seemed like a natural," Parker says. "I think if you don't know much about biodynamics, it's easy to dismiss it as voodoo and hokey."

There's definitely a whiff of the premodern to biodynamics, as well as a bit of the New Age. A key aspect of biodynamics stresses the flow of energy, or disruption thereof (especially from electrically conductive metals), that is supposed to affect agricultural productivity. As in other organic regimes, no man-made chemicals are allowed, and grasses and other cover crops are grown between the vines to encourage beneficial natural fauna and to act as mulch. There are reasonable allowances, however. Sulfur, for example, can be used on the vineyards to control fungal infestations and also to stabilize wines, because sulfur is a naturally occurring compound.

Parker and Eden's belief in the sometimes idiosyncratic requirements of biodynamics is a mixture of faith and common sense. In a way, it has to be, because biodynamics is more than a method of composting or even organic grapegrowing. It is more like a philosophy in that it places value on symbols of astrological import (planets and zodiacal constellations) and totemic power (animal horns, skulls and even stags' bladders) in making compost preparations. Then there are the more traditional aspects of biodynamics that take a page from the *Old Farmer's Almanac*, such as planting schedules based on the phases of the moon.

Biodynamics' founding father was an Austrian named Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), who also developed the Waldorf educational method. Author Monty Waldin, one of the leading authorities on the subject, has written in his comprehensive book *Biodynamic Wines* (Mitchell Beazley, 2004) that Steiner was forthright about the more eccentric aspects of biodynamics. "The animal organs are not ingredients in themselves, and are never actually used in the compost. Instead, they act as sheaths while the compost preparations are being transformed. ... Steiner even admitted that some could see his compost preparations as 'insane,' so the real question is, do they work?"

Given that many of France's top estates—including Domaine Zind-Humbrecht in Alsace, Domaine des Comtes Lafon and Domaine Leflaive in Burgundy, S.A. Huët and N. Joly in the Loire and M. Chapoutier in the Rhône—embrace biodynamics, its practice appears to promote quality, at least in the abstract.

The wines Eden makes at Combebelles and Maris are worthy examples of biodynamic quality. Though they vary quite a bit in style, they are all concentrated and full-bodied renditions of Syrah, Grenache or blends thereof. The Château Maris Grenache Minervois La Livinière Old Vine 2003 is one of the best reds to come out of the Languedoc this year (92 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale, \$26). It is a supple red with an amazing purity to its rich, dark fruit flavors. "Grenache is a wild

beast," Eden says. "It makes what I call country wines. I love the stuff. Instead of drinking it out of fine wine glasses you [should] drink it out of a goblet. I can't see getting a lot of finesse out of this wine, but I am really trying."

Maris also makes a reserve Syrah called La Touge. The 2002 (92, \$14) features meaty and decadent flavors reminiscent of a fine Northern Rhône. It's definitely a candidate for the cellar. The Minervois 2003 (91, \$10) is brooding and ripe, with dark plum and spice flavors, while the Château Combe Belle Syrah-Grenache 2001 is the most backward of Eden's top reds (89, \$15), though it opens up with delectating.

Combe Belle and Maris form what Eden and Parker call the Comte Cathare group. It takes its name from the medieval religious movement native to the Languedoc and neighboring Roussillon. The Cathars challenged the authority of Rome and broke away from the church until they were brutally suppressed in the 13th century. Eden draws strength from the rebellious Cathar legacy in the region, and there are also cosmological overtones to his grapegrowing philosophy. "I believe that plants have spirits as well as animals because they are alive," he says. "Caring for the land becomes a way of life."

The Comte Cathare label has been around since 1994, at one time encompassing a series of négociant and estate labels. But two years ago, Eden and Parker decided to refocus the label solely on their red-wine estates, Maris and Combe Belle, selling off top white-wine estate Domaine Begude near Limoux. Eden also makes a small-production dessert-style Muscat from Domaine de Montahuc, whose vineyards are rooted in the dramatic, chalk-encrusted plateau of St.-Jean-de-Minervois, near Combe Belle. Over the past 10 years, the Comte Cathare wines have shown good to outstanding quality for their pure flavors and firm structures, but have lacked a strong image because of shifting marketing strategies.

All of Eden's reds undergo malolactic fermentation, to soften their natural acidity, and are unfiltered and unfinned. The wines from Maris are aged 16 months in oak, while Combe Belle's see about a year of barrel aging. Other than that, Eden says little about his winemaking techniques, except to note that his main mission is to harvest the best and healthiest fruit possible. "The key is you have to grow fruit directly from that," he says, pointing to the compost pile.

The compost is vital to the biodynamic strategy and is applied at the rate of just under .5 tons per year for the 35 planted acres at Combe Belle and the 110 at Maris. It is a mixture of mostly



Eden is also a culinary force in the Languedoc, where he oversees Michelin one-star restaurant Le Relais de Pigasse. Eden and Parker are upgrading François Plantation on the Caribbean island of St. Bart's. Biodynamically produced wines will take center stage at the resort's restaurant.

sheep dung, cow manure and wood chips that is treated for about nine months with biodynamic preparations that help turn the mixture into a nutrient-rich fertilizer. Under the very specific protocols of Steiner's method, there are seven different preparations. They encompass an assortment of herbs and plant materials, including nettles, chamomile, yarrow and oak bark, which are variously stewed, steeped or even aged before application.

Late one night, Eden pounds his fist on the table in the beautiful, limestone-walled Michelin one-star restaurant that he and Parker own, Le Relais de Pigasse, in the small village of Ouveillan near their two estates. An old way station and inn on the Canal du Midi, the restaurant has been transformed through Eden's vision and Parker's financing into one of the culinary high points of the Languedoc. As Eden speaks, he rails alternately against the power of corporations and the waste and corruption of agricultural subsidies in the European Union and the United States. He even questions the benefits of modern medical science. His dining partners, who include fellow Languedoc vintner Bruno Lafon, move uneasily in their chairs. "But Bertie," Lafon says, trying to get a word in edgewise and calling Eden by his nickname.

Political discourse is in Eden's blood. He is the great-nephew of former British Prime Minister Anthony Eden and he backs up his politics with more than words. He makes a line of specially labeled wines that benefit the U.K.-based Rainforest Foundation, which seeks to protect endangered tropical environments and their peoples. Eden also does special bottlings for the Woodland Trust, which aims to preserve ancient trees and groves in the United Kingdom.

Eden has lived in France since his early 20s, when he came over with a small inheritance to make his way in the wine world.

Since his youth, Eden says he has been attracted to the adventure and romance of winemaking. Though he has no formal academic training, he has plenty of hands-on experience, both in production and sales. His first job was selling wines for Burgundy wine broker Becky Wasserman. From there, he went to work in the vineyards and cellars at Castello di Rampolla in Tuscany, where he was first introduced to biodynamics, the Rothbury Estates in Australia and then back in Burgundy for a stint at the famed Côte d'Or estate of Comtes Lafon. Dominique Lafon, Bruno's brother, oversees the Lafon cellar and has been a valued advisor to Eden over the years.

As an iconoclast forging his place in a remote corner of France, Eden seems a fitting disciple of biodynamics. But Parker, who hails from New Jersey and inhabits the realm of high finance, would at first seem an odd partner for such a venture. Until, that is, he begins talking about how he tries to live his life by organic principles. He and his wife are currently using a green consultant in the renovation of their Manhattan apartment, with the goal of limiting the use of synthetic materials—most of which Parker deems toxic.

"My dad passed away at an early age," Parker explains. "It got

me thinking about all the poisonous substances in our man-made environment that I want to avoid." In addition, while working for Morgan Stanley, Parker lived in Tokyo for seven years, where he says he learned to appreciate the aesthetic sense in Japanese culture that places an emphasis on respect for the natural world.

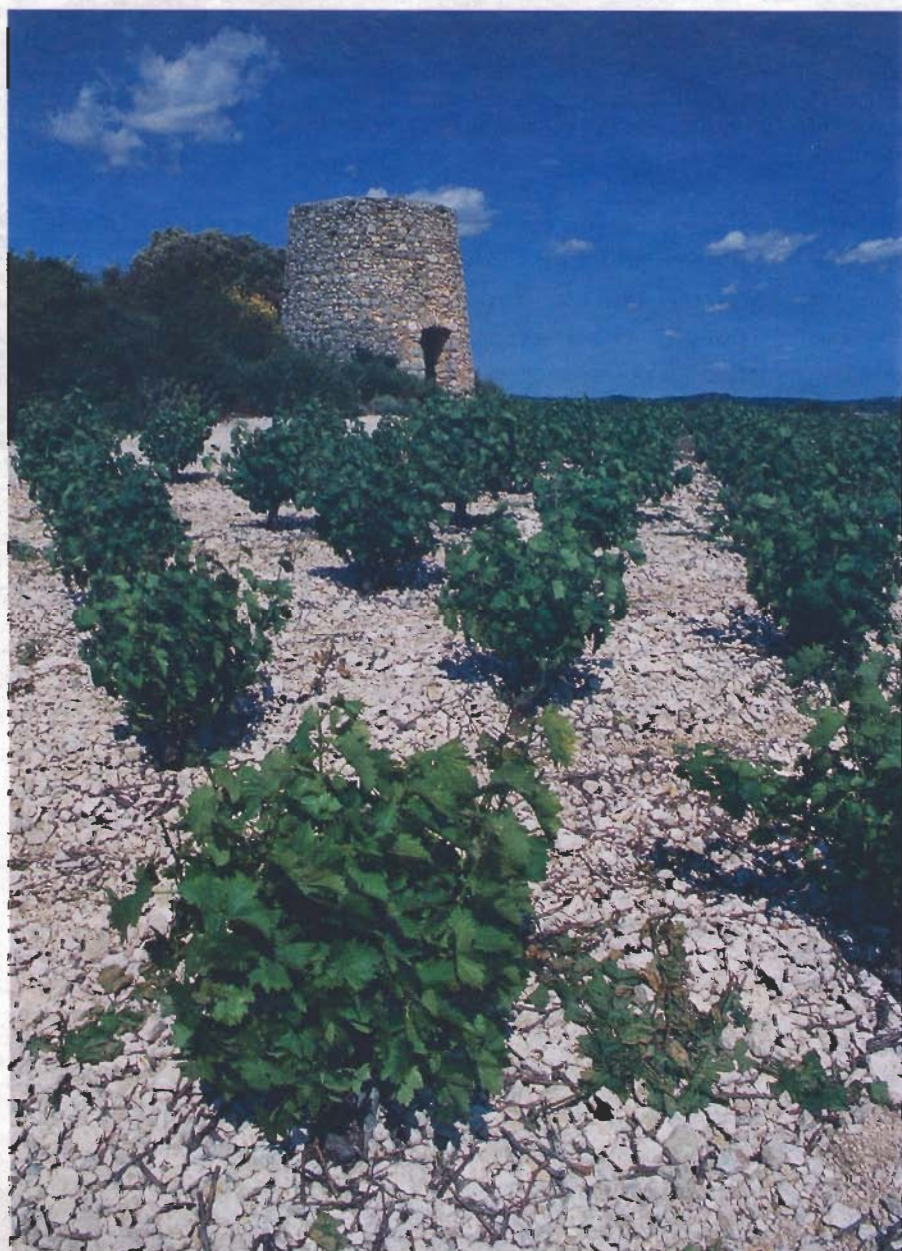
Despite the dedication of Parker and Eden, it's been a long row to hoe. While the benefits are beginning to pay off in the rising quality of wine from Maris and Combeville, it's taken the better part of a decade to get the nutrient levels of the soil revitalized through biodynamics. Maris, Combeville and Montahuc gained biodynamic certification in 2002 after more than five years of adhering to its methods.

An attempt to build a winery for Comte Cathare went down a blind alley in the renovation of an old tile-and-brick factory outside La Livinière. Though today it is a large, modern winemaking facility, it did not include a gravity-flow setup, which Parker and Eden now consider crucial to quality. La Tuilière, as it is known, is now home to L'Ostal Cazes, the new Languedoc venture of Bordeaux's Jean-Michel Cazes, who bought the facility from Eden and Parker in 2003.

The pair is looking forward to the completion of a new winery for Maris, which is being built according to organic and biodynamic principles and will feature gravity flow. While Combeville is close to Eden's heart, it's clear that Maris will be the financial and marketing engine. Not only is it located near the top-quality Minervois village of La Livinière, but its 13,500-case production is also nearly triple that of Combeville's. The new Maris winery will be an environmental showcase, powered by renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power. "The fact that there will be no conductive metals or errant energies in the new winery is all done with the objective of making wines with greater elegance and finesse," Eden says.

Parker travels to France about three or four times a year to help oversee Comte Cathare. Eden and Parker also hope to gain a second Michelin star for Pigasse and are planning to offer lodgings at the site sometime next year. Eden had wanted to open the rooms at Pigasse this year, but Parker had other plans—he bought the storied François Plantation resort on the island of St. Bart's in the Caribbean and is now busy upgrading its restaurant and hotel, with Eden's help. Of course, the wine list will place an emphasis on biodynamic bottlings.

It is an ambitious agenda, but it's evident that Eden and Parker are in it for the long haul. Parker has stuck by Eden for 12 years, and Eden is literally dug in at Combeville. They represent a unique team in the world of winemaking, given their backgrounds and their biodynamic strategy. For Parker, the emphasis in the years ahead will be on realizing the potential of Château Maris. "La Livinière is where we want to be and we were way out in front in recognizing its quality," he says. For Eden, his focus is on the land. "What has always attracted me to the Languedoc is the wildness," he says. □



The unique *terroir* of Domaine de Montahuc in St.-Jean-de-Minervois is also farmed biodynamically. The Muscat vines planted in its chalk and limestone make a light, dessert-style white.