

A YEAR OF TALKS WITH DEMETER

On 14th June 2012 a large group of farmers gathered in Valgiano with the intention of finding a solution to the problem of certification related both to the quality guarantee for consumers and the costs incurred by producers.

This meeting was proposed by Alex Podolinsky to whom numerous European farmers - tired of the bureaucracy and high costs of Demeter in Europe - had turned, asking to be certified directly by Australia. As he had no intention to satisfy the demands of some farmers while ignoring others, Podolinsky decided to hold a meeting where the farmers could organize themselves independently and find a solution capable of satisfying everyone in Europe.

Alex Podolinsky had the advantage of knowing several farmers from different countries and was therefore able to establish a committee during the meeting whose first task was to decide whether it would be possible to collaborate with Demeter or if an entirely new body would have to be established.

The group was made up of the following members: Dimitri Dimitriades for Greece, for his experience in dealing with certificatory bodies, Jasminka Ilic for Croatia, Vincent Masson for France, Saverio Petrilli, Dora Brio, Leonardo Angeloni and Christian Panarella for Italy. Demeter Italia (DAI) and Demeter International (DI) member of the board Lapo Cianferoni was also invited to participate on the basis of his honesty and willingness to collaborate.

During the first sitting the group decided on the name "Valgianogroup" (VG).

Dimitri also requested that Lapo not be given permanent membership of the group but that he simply be invited to participate as a visiting member. It was also decided to direct their efforts to talking directly to Demeter and only in the event of the talks breaking down would a new body be established.

In the subsequent months VG set out a proposal that was sent to DI in September (attached is the original and translated versions). In the **proposal the main objective was to certify the result, as done in Australia, and not the process involved**. Biodynamic farming, if done well, allows structuring the land and objectively observing the expression of the plants.

DI sent a written reply dated 23rd November 2012 where they claimed a desire to develop an inspection system capable of incorporating this ideal and invited VG to participate in the process of finding the appropriate means for improvement. As for the rest, the DI board did not understand the definition of surface composting, agreed to discuss Preparation 500 and appointed the standards committee to look into: the use of 501, practical information to add to the standards, the use of copper spraying in countries with hot climates, and invited VG to participate in the agricultural conferences in Dornach.

Valgianogroup in turn replied at the end of January giving further clarifications, explaining that, considering the number of topics at the conference which were not particularly practical, they did not intend to participate officially but would send a few members. Cristoph Simpfendoerfer, the German member of DI invited VG to a meeting on the first day of the conference but this invitation had to be turned down as it was impossible to organize everything in such a short time.

The agricultural conferences at the Gotheanum in Dornach were duly held during the month of February. The title of the conferences was "Alliances for the Earth", and among the participants were Vincent Masson, Saverio Petrilli and Maria Bienert, who was invited to join VG for Germany. Upon invitation by Simplerdorfer, Bienert together with Petrilli and Ewald Tscheppe - who had also been invited to join VG for Austria - organized a work group during the conference on "The Quality of Biodynamics". On the first day more than 30 people participated, several members from different national Demeter branches who were not present over the subsequent days due to other binding official commitments.

The concept of quality was introduced in its more common meaning as the quality of the end product with all the cultural, technical and philosophical variables that influence judgment, stating that the (relative) quality of the end product always derives from the (objective, absolute) qualities of the soil structure and plant behavior, a direct expression of the "naturalness" of a plant living within the organization of Nature. This latter aspect of plant behavior was only marginally touched upon as the limited time available was dedicated to discussing soil structure, examined in depth with examples of clods of earth and related produce harvested.

It was during this examination of the clods of earth on the last day, with unanimous agreement and general understanding of the value of soil structure, that a Dutch member of Demeter, challenged and destroyed the general harmony by deliberately claiming the opposite, namely that compact soil was well structured soil and vice-versa. His aim: to demonstrate that it is not possible to issue a certification on the structure of soil because not objectively assessable, while the entire assembly had already gained a profound understanding of the objectivity of the term.

This episode dented only the surface of our work as both Simplerdorfer and Cianferoni as well as Jean- Marie de France, a French member of DI, had fully understood the subject. Carried along on this tide of enthusiasm, the three aforementioned representatives of DI met with Masson and Petrilli for lunch. During the meeting the introduction of 500K or Prepared 500 into the DI standards was singled out as being the main immediate objective, thus removing a great number of successful farmers in many European countries from a state of unlawfulness. Despite opposition from the rest of the DI board, the motion was put before the assembly. Furthermore, the decision was made to pilot the use of the certification system requested by VG in France and Italy, including the examination of the soil structure and the expression of the plants. De France and Cianferoni agreed to exchange the corrected inspection table.

There was also a discussion about whether it would be beneficial for VG to participate in the DI board meeting in Holland in March, at the assembly in the UK or at the General Meeting in Dornach in September. The discussion brought to the fore the pointlessness of such participation as there were already too many topics to be discussed and there would not be enough time to deal with such an important subject in the manner it deserved.

On the 22nd April 2013 DI sent another letter thanking for the messages and describing the meetings in Dornach as "yielding fruit" with an eye to the General Assembly in June. The letter also underscores that the cooperation of Italy and France in the development of the topics would be so much more important than further meetings and hoped that VG would agree with this approach. It also renewed the invitation to participate again in Dornach in February to continue the "lively discussion in greater number".

In June, the DI Assembly in Great Britain was held, the motion to add 500K or Prepared 500 to the standards was made and voted, and passed 9 to 8. The initial proposal by a portion of the DI assembly to allow use of the 500K as long as it was followed by the use of normal 500 was rejected as ridiculous.

Simultaneously another debate was in progress with DI, namely that of the Italian winemakers who had presented more restrictive standards compared to the one issued by DI. Since the new standard- finalized after a year of meetings and work with the Demeter winegrowers - contains restrictions on fundamental themes such as the use of additives and sulfur and three unrestrictive motions compared to the DI standards:

1. the use of different wood in the maturing process
2. the use of polypropylene filters
3. the use of the flower logo in place of the orange band,

these have to be presented to the assembly and voted on. During the presentation of these three points to the DI board, some members who were opposed to the use of the flower logo put forward a unilateral proposal to ignore the request. Cianferoni underlined the need to respect the democratic spirit claimed by DI, which meant presenting the proposal to the assembly and accepting the outcome of the vote. The motion passed in this case as well.

During this last year we have been able to see how the tireless work of Alex Podolinsky during his annual visits to Europe are producing results everywhere, stirring peoples' consciences, arousing more attention and precision in biodynamic practices, pointing out nonsensical or egoistic behavior and above all supporting farmers in the effectiveness of their work with prompt and stimulating advice.

The zealous activity of the Massons, too, father and son, both in promoting biodynamics and in their constant presence in Dornach, always ready to shed light on debatable issues and join the positive forces together, is also producing the desired effects.

Finally, a special thanks goes to all those European farmers who, through their tireless efforts in practicing biodynamic farming with passion and competence following Podolinsky's advice, are the demonstration that biodynamics is a practical and objectively effective farming method. Through the serenity of their work, they have contributed in an essential way to broadening awareness of "doing good" and melting any contrast and egocentricity away like snow in the sun.

Sintheses made by Saverio Petrilli