



## NATURAL WINE

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# NATURAL WINE WHAT IS IT?

## **The definition (according to morethanorganic.com):**

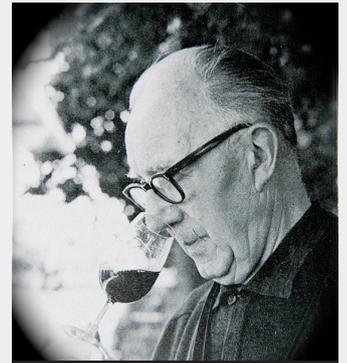
A natural wine is a wine made:

- \* in small quantities
- \* by an independent producer
- \* on low-yielding vineyards
- \* from handpicked, organically grown grapes
- \* without added sugars or foreign yeasts
- \* without adjustments for acidity
- \* without micro-oxygenation or reverse-osmosis
- \* little or no added sulphites

A natural wine contains no more than:

- \* 10 mg/l total sulphur if red
- \* 25 mg/l total sulphur if white

If sulphur dioxide is added, it will be only at bottling and only in the tinnest quantities. Many natural wines are made without the addition of sulphur dioxide at any point.



Jules Chauvet - father of natural wines



Marcel Lapiere

The first question that people ask about natural wines is "what are they?". Are they organic wines? What is different compared to conventional wines? The definition above comes from an interesting website called [morethanorganic.com](http://morethanorganic.com), which is a rallying point for many in the French natural wine movement and is run by a chap called Pierre Jancou who has been an important part of the scene's development.

But let's go back to the start. What are natural wines all about?

In the oldest of the olden days, wine was left to its own devices - indeed, that's how it was discovered in the first place. Grow some vines and harvest their fruit. Crush the grapes in some sort of container, leave them macerating on their skins until the juice begins to ferment and once nature has taken its course, pour it into a glass and away you go.

Fast forward to the 90s and obviously things had got a lot more complicated, resulting in the technical approach pioneered by students of Davis (USA) and Rosemount (Australia) Universities, and creating a generation of winemakers that thought themselves more important than their terroir (if indeed their vineyards had any terroir). It was around this time that the New World countries had well and truly knocked the French off their perch and many vigneronns in the motherland were searching for a way to reinvigorate their businesses. Most of them decided that if they couldn't beat the New Worlders, they better join them. The Vin de Pays category became increasingly important, as varietally labelled wines that were mechanically harvested reached the market as the likes of 'Arrogant Frog' or 'Chat en Oeuf'. This attempt to rival the Jacob's Creek and Gallo wines was a success for many and relaxing the label laws and production regulations allowed the French to recapture some market share.

But not everyone wanted to go down this road. Some winemakers began looking for a different banner to rally around and there was something going on in Beaujolais that caught the imagination of many young vigneronns across the country.

Jules Chauvet is recognised as being the father of natural wines. Back in the 50s and 60s he pioneered the idea of using little or no sulphur during the production process and continued to research and develop his ideas throughout his career as a winemaker and chemist. Chauvet was a brilliant man who made great strides in the understanding of yeasts, malolactic fermentations and carbonic maceration. He was widely regarded as a brilliant taster (he even invented the now ubiquitous ISO tasting glass) and was a highly respected Beaujolais negociant for most of his life, although his ideas on sulphur were treated with suspicion by the region's rank and file winemakers.

In 1973 a man called Marcel Lapiere inherited his family domaine and after a few years he became disillusioned with what he saw as a homogenisation of styles in the region. By the early 1980s Bojo Nouveau was at the height of its powers and thanks to the use of synthetic yeasts, Lapiere thought everyone's wine was beginning to taste the same (something many critics of Beaujolais would doubtless agree with). It was around this point that Marcel met Chauvet and became enamoured by the big man's ideas on winemaking. Marcel decided to jump in with both feet - eliminating sulphur from his winemaking program and relying solely on indigenous yeasts in the winery.

# THE PRODUCERS NATURAL WINE

So how did this bold experiment go? Well, initially things were looking up for Marcel. His wines gained many plaudits and pretty quickly he was exporting them all over the world and selling them to top Parisian restaurants. But then the problems started, because Lapierre's wines began to change in bottle. Some bottles would begin refermenting. Some bottles would be fine (and delicious) but others would suffer from microbial contamination and other problems. It wasn't long before Marcel had to deal with a raft of complaints and returns - the experiment wasn't going too well. By this time though, his (and of course Chauvet's) ideas were being talked about across the region and Lapierre had found some fellow devotees. Something had to change though, and Lapierre tweaked his winemaking to encourage more of the wine's natural protection (ie longer lees contact and prolonged élevage) and adjusted the use of sulphur to introduce minimal additions at the time of bottling. These slight tweaks resulted in wines that were much more stable, and soon Lapierre and his friends (Jean Foillard, Jean-Paul Thévenet and Yvon Métras) became known as the 'Gang of Four' - they were to change France's wine scene forever.

By the late 80s and early 90s, the gang of four had begun to get international recognition for their wines and importers like Kermit Lynch in the USA were spreading the message far and wide. Japan was already a big market for Beaujolais and the Japanese enthusiastically embraced these more complex, terroir driven wines that were made in such a stripped back way. Other winemakers in other regions started to get interested in what was going on and began to use the same or similar techniques. Sons were taking over from fathers all over France and, particularly in places like the Languedoc (Leon Barral, Jean-Francois Coutelou) and the Loire Valley (Claude Courtois, the Puzelat brothers), they were embracing organic and biodynamic viticulture and minimal intervention in the winery. It wasn't long before a chap called Pierre Jancou opened a wine shop in Paris called Caves Miard (also known as La Cremerie), which sold exclusively natural wines. Jancou was also the man behind Racine's wine bar and is widely credited as starting the natural wine bar scene in Paris that brought the movement in to the public's consciousness. The city's oldest wine merchant - Caves d'Augé - decided to follow Jancou's lead and move towards promoting natural wines and a number of other cavistes, wine bars and restaurants have emerged in the past decade to establish Paris as the centre of the world's natural wine scene. Recent additions to London's wine bar/restaurant scene like Terroirs, Battu and Brawn are all spin offs from the Parisian movement and the same is happening in New York and Tokyo.

Of course, it's not just France that is witnessing the rise of natural wines. In Italy in particular, there are hundreds of winemakers making wine in the same way as their French counterparts. They even have their own sub-genre: Amphora wine. Made in the same vessels as the ancient wines made by the Greeks and Romans. In a similar vein to the French scene, production is concentrated in the very cool regions of the north (Friuli, Alto Adige and parts of Veneto) or the hot, maritime climates further south (Tuscany, Sicily). The movement has spread to Spain and Germany but it remains to be seen whether it will be fully embraced in the New World.

So what is good about natural wines?

Well, to me they are the ultimate in purity and terroir expression. Nothing is added to them, nothing is taken away. When made correctly, a natural wine should show the vineyard site for exactly what it is worth. They are often lower in alcohol and whether the tales of no hangovers are true or not, the lack of foreign additives certainly can't be bad for the health.

What's the bad news?

Well, a lot of them taste dirty or, let's face it, faulty. When they are not made perfectly the whites can taste like old cider and the reds can taste like...older cider. Many of them are made in a 'reductive' style to avoid oxidation, but they reek of their natural sulphur for hours after opening. So choose carefully and avoid wines made by vigneronns that don't know what they are doing.

Last November me & Joe were on a buying trip in the Languedoc and we visited a young natural winemaker called Antony Tortul. Some of his wines were superb, but for every great one there were two that tasted like a blend of horlicks and cider. He was younger than us and clearly has talent, but he, like many others, is still learning his trade.

Are other wines not natural?

This is one of the things that drives regular winemakers crazy about the natural wine movement. Surely if these wines are natural, then that must render all other wines unnatural? Well, no. Sulphur additions have been going on since time immemorial and in many regions they are the only way to avoid significant rot damage in the vineyard. Basically, natural wines are proud to be farmed sustainably and vinified without intervention, but that doesn't mean that intervention is always a bad thing. When raising children, letting them do whatever they want and never imposing rules or boundaries may result in wonderfully creative adults or it may produce feral nightmares! Natural wines are the same - some of them turn out great but there are plenty of natural wines that should've been given a bit more discipline!