

ORGANIC, BIODYNAMIC AND NATURAL WINE WALKABOUT

ROBERSON WINE

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ORGANIC, BIODYNAMIC AND NATURAL WINE PREVIEW

ORGANIC WINE

Organic wine refers to wine made from organic grapes. So, essentially what we are talking about with 'organic' is the way the fruit is farmed. There will be no chemical fertilisers, pesticides, fungicides or herbicides and the treatments that are applied throughout the viticultural year will be accredited by one of the official organic bodies. It is worth remembering that many 'commercial' vineyards (mass-production may be a better way to put it) will have all sorts of chemical treatments sprayed over the plants. Why? Well, because it helps the fruit to grow in larger quantities and in some instances can protect the vine from diseases and other maladies. Basically, it means everything can be done by machine and you don't need to spend any time tending to your plants on a vine-by-vine basis. It is a dangerous game to play though, because many of the treatments become addictive for the plants and result in much weaker vines that need the treatments in order to survive or give a large yield. Sleeping pills will make you sleep, but taking them everyday is not good news for your body!

Organic farming eschews most of these modern chemical treatments and focuses on applying environmentally friendly ones that are good for the vineyard and good for the planet. Adherents to this form of sustainable agriculture will often be denoted on the labels by the logo of the body that accredits them (each country has different ones), but there are also many farmers/winemakers that follow organic principles but for one reason or another they haven't applied for accreditation.

The above relates to the vast majority of organic wines around the world, but there is one notable exception - the USA. To be fully accredited by their National Organic Program there must be no added sulphites in the winery either (so halfway to being a natural wine then...). But, don't worry about that too much - to all intents and purposes, organic wines are wines made (and that could be conventionally made) from organic grapes.

BIODYNAMIC WINE

OK, so we know what organic wine is, but what about biodynamic wine? What's the difference? Well, a very simple way to explain it would be to say that it is like organic+, with a whole layer of (slightly bizarre sounding) philosophy on top. The system comes from a series of lectures given by an Austrian philosopher called Rudolph Steiner and has been applied to viticulture, as it has to many other forms of agriculture.

It is a complex system, but here is a basic overview of what it entails:

The central idea is that the different components of the eco-system (ie the soil, grass, plants, trees etc) must be healthy and operate in harmony, so as with organic viticulture there are no synthetic materials used during the cultivation of the vineyard. In order to promote the balance between elements, the farmer will apply a variety of 'preparations' (there are 9 in total) that are designed to improve the life and health of the soil. The preparations are homeopathic in character and made using a 'dynamiser' which stirs the liquid in order to energise and activate the treatment. Some of the treatments are more famous than others - the most notorious one is prepared by fermenting cow dung in a horn, burying it in a corner of the vineyard over winter and then adding water, dynamizing and spraying. There are a few other wacky ones, but others of a more conventional nature such as teas (herbal and green varieties). Most of them are applied to the organic compost which is used as fertiliser in the vineyard, but some of them are used as sprays that are applied to the plants.

The other aspect of biodynamics is the lunar calendar and the strict adherence to it for carrying out certain tasks in the vineyard or winery. To put it simply, there are four kinds of day - root days, fruit days, flower days and leaf days. The days relate to the position of the moon and the idea is that this will have a distinct effect of the atmosphere in the eco-system/winery, impacting on the position of sap in the plant or the movement of lees in barrels and tanks. Therefore, a root day is ideal for planting vines while a leaf day is best for pruning. Practitioners of biodynamics also maintain that the different days will have an impact on the taste of wines and many wine geeks have attempted to test the theory by tasting the same group of wines on each of the different days. Nothing conclusive has yet been proven.....

Unlike organic wines, where the farming is all that counts, biodynamic wines will be made using biodynamic principles in the winery too, in accordance with the calendar. But to all intents and purposes, biodynamic wines can still be made in a conventional way - if you want natural processes in the winery then you need to move on a step further and embrace natural wines.

PREVIEW ORGANIC, BIODYNAMIC AND NATURAL WINE

NATURAL WINE

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 80s/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 vigneron 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 and chemically farmed 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 vigneron 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 (not to mention other things like no chaptalization etc) 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 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, most of whom looked to the king of synthetic wines, Georges Duboeuf, for their inspiration.

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. It was around this time that Marcel met Chauvet and became enamoured by his ideas on winemaking. Marcel decided to jump in with both feet - eliminating sulphur and chaptalisation from his winemaking program and relying solely on indigenous yeasts in the winery.

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 Lapiere'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 Lapiere had found some fellow devotees. Something had to change though, and Lapiere tweaked his winemaking to encourage more of the wine's natural protection (ie longer lees contact and prolonged elevelage) 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 Lapiere and his friends (Jean Foillard, Jean-Paul Thévenet and Guy Breton) 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, Thierry Puzelat), they were embracing organic or 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 Racines 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.

ORGANIC, BIODYNAMIC AND NATURAL WINE PREVIEW

So, in summary - what are natural wines?

Here is a general checklist:

MADE FROM ORGANIC OR BIODYNAMIC GRAPES

There are a couple of exceptions, but normally speaking every natural wine will be made from organic or biodynamic fruit. Many of the natural winemakers won't seek accreditation and some will pick and choose the elements of biodynamics that they adhere to, but all will use fruit that has been farmed in at least an organic fashion.

WILD / NATURAL YEAST FERMENTATIONS

When you get the fruit to the winery and load it into the tank, after a while it will begin the fermentation in a 'spontaneous' fashion. The trouble with spontaneity is that it is difficult to control and wild ferments can cause winemakers sleepless nights worrying about microbial contamination during the process. The solution for many vigneronns and certainly the solution for large production wines, is to use cultured yeasts to allow for a synthetic but easy to manage fermentation. The upside is that everything happens according to the winemaker's timetable - the downside is that you lose all the character and complexity that wild yeasts bring to the wine via flavour and aroma compounds. The yeast comes primarily from the vineyard, so therefore it is a key part of terroir in the mind of natural winemakers.

NO ADDITION OF ENZYMES

You would probably be shocked to learn how many wines are made using added enzymes, which can be used to make the colour of a Californian Cabernet richer and deeper or to add some of the grassy aromas to a NZ Sauvignon Blanc. The commercial argument is that it is cheaper to crop at higher levels in the vineyard (reducing the complexity and concentration of the flavours) and then add enzymes to extract the maximum from the fruit during the vinification, even if it is character that would never normally be eeked out of the grapes otherwise.

NO MICRO-OXYGENATION

A favoured technique of many Bordeaux producers, this carefully controlled technique of adding tiny amounts of oxygen during the winemaking process will make the wine appear smoother and more expressive early in its life.

NO SUGAR ADDITIONS / CHAPTALIZATION

Sugar addition is used to give more alcohol and body to wines that lack natural ripeness. Some winemakers will do it even when they don't need to, simply to create a style of wine closer to the modern 'blockbuster' ideal. But it can make wines unbalanced and masks terroir.

NO ADDITION OR REMOVAL OF ACID

In hot areas such as parts of Australia, many wines are harvested late to guarantee ripe fruit flavours and then acid is added in the winery to try and balance things out. Pretty shocking really, but a very common technique in mass produced wines from hot climates. The opposite is true in very cold places (Germany is an example), where acid levels are deliberately reduced to achieve balance.

NO BLOCKING OF MALO-LACTIC FERMENTATION

Why block a natural process from taking place? Well some winemakers are trying to cling on to every last drop of acidity and will manipulate their wine to achieve this, but natural winemakers let nature take its course.

NO AGEING IN NEW OAK BARRELS OR ADDING OF WOOD CHIPS/STAVES

Woody, oaky flavours are effectively an additive and not one that does anything to promote varietal or terroir character.

NO FINING OR FILTRATION

Not only do natural winemakers eschew additions, they don't want to strip their wines of their natural character by fining or (especially) filtering.

NO MUST CONCENTRATION OR ALCOHOL REMOVAL

The use of reverse osmosis machines to separate the components of wine and then add or remove them as the winemaker requires, is about as Frankenstein as the world of wine gets but it is becoming increasingly prevalent in Bordeaux, Napa Valley and other quality regions.

NO SULPHUR ADDED THROUGHOUT THE VINIFICATION PROCESS, EXCEPTING A MINUTE AMOUNT AT BOTTLING

We could write pages on this subject but to put it briefly - SO₂ is a naturally occurring product of the fermentation process, but natural winemakers will strive to add as little extra sulphur as possible to their wine. The only part of the entire process (vineyard or winery) where it is considered acceptable to make a sulphur addition is before bottling and even then it is a microscopic amount to help stabilise the wine for shipping.