

## *Les Caves de Pyrene*

### January 2011 Newsletter

Predictions... New wines... Not quite so new wines... Natural wine argumental

If your 2011 has started with whimper rather than a bang then heed Mark Twain's caustic observation about New Year's Day "... now is the accepted time to make your regular annual good resolutions. Next week you can begin paving hell with them as usual."

We wish everyone a happy and healthy new year on a personal and professional level.

It is customary now to don the oenomancer's robes, look into crystal glass, sift through the skanky lees and prognosticate like you mean it. So here goes - a baker's dozen of flailing guesses and vague predictions.

1. This is the year when long-held assumptions about the way we think about wine and the way we taste will be challenged. I say this because I see a generation of people who are confident in questioning received wisdom.
2. The tasting calendar will become so crowded that it will eventually deter people from going to any of them. (This is called Buridan's ass syndrome)
3. Sherry becomes valued for the drink that it is and champagne (or a lot of it) is unmasked for the drink that it isn't.
4. Natural wine in its good-humoured, dishevelled way will provoke much heated, and perhaps some enlightened, debate. Culturally established in France, Japan, Australia and the States and with green shoots in New Zealand, South Africa and Chile, it seems, for once, the UK is lagging behind. This will be remedied. Watch this space etc etc (and other spaces).
5. Carignan will be king - what a trooper! But we may not have a world carignan day.
6. Italian wines - other than the usual suspects - will continue to be a hard sell, no matter how wonderful those wines are.
7. The diminution, if not the end, of gimmicks to sell wine in restaurants. The recipe for good wine sales: a friendly person, ungrasping mark-ups, a decent glass to serve your decent selection by the glass, and then it's just what's in the bottle that counts.
8. The universal realisation that it is very difficult to drink wine above 14.5% (with a few exceptions) with any degree of pleasure.
9. That people have finally stopped being snobby about Beaujolais. For the first times in years even Beaujolais Nouveau was fun.
10. Groovy region - Ribera Sacra/Asturia and the fringes of Galicia- but don't tell anyone I said so.
11. Wine blogging will largely replace broadsheet journalism as a means of disseminating intelligent opinion about wine. It would be nice to see greater passion and agenda-forming though rather than analysis and bottle-scoring.

12. The notion of terroir is rocking all over the world (an idea which is now the status quo rather the French romanticising about their soils). Every grower from every country talks about it; it gives their wines a point of difference.

13. Supermarkets will continue to sell below cost price absorbing vat and duty increases despite government threats, warnings from health bodies etc. They do it because they can and because they care. About themselves.

And my hope for the year? That people in the trade take themselves a little less seriously.

That television takes wine more seriously and stops treating us like morons with two-second attention levels.

## **New PyreneEntries**

### **Dard et Ribo est arrive!**

Hail to the 09s - they're lush. If you like your organic bacon fatty and hickory-smoked, your garrigue scrubbed and your yeast in a cloth cap.

Crozes are red  
Violets are blue  
St Joseph is also red  
As is Hermitage too.\*

\* Except when they are all white.

We've also received a small allocation of Hermitage 09.

### **More Roussillons?!**

First out of the lion's den is a brace of cubs from Stephane Morin's Domaine Leonine. Amedee Primeur is the name of one simple cuvee sans soufre. Think juice. Carbone 14 (as in 14% abv) is a blend of the three Grenaches: Noir, Gris and Blanc. Ebony, ivory and pinko-grey live together in perfect harmony.



**Domaine du Matin Calme** is a five hectare estate near Belesta due west of Perpignan about 500 m up in the Pyrenees-Orientales. It ticks all our boxes being organic and hands-on in the vineyard, whilst non-interventionist in the winery (wines are unfiltered, unfinned and have no added sulphur).

Mano a Mano is a Grenache-Carignan (70/30) blend from low yielding old bush vines. Not a complex wine but fresh and balanced - as nature intended. It is a wine of the table - in every sense.



Calm down, my dear, it's only a commercial for a vin nature

### **2006 Dettori Bianco, Romangia, Sardegna**

Okay, I'm going to say it. Totally radical, dude. Or since this is an amber wine – totally radikon, dude (that's too obscure, Ed). Those wishing to go to the university of Vermentino should take an advanced degree in Dettori's phenomenally pure, terroir-driven Galluran white because it will enlighten them as to the qualitative capability of this grape.

If the wine is complex the recipe is usually simple and traditional - old clones, single vineyard with bush vines on poor granitic soils, minimal spraying (organic viticulture) required since doctor mistral keeps the grapes healthy, tiny yields, no additions, virtually no sulphites, no temperature control and nary a plank of wood.

*"I don't follow the market, I produce wines that I like, wines from my territory, wines from Sennori. They are what they are and not what you want them to be."*  
Alessandro Dettori

This Vermentino wine from Romangia, made without chemicals or preservatives (apart from a homeopathic dose of sulphur) and after a resting period in cement vat is bottled,

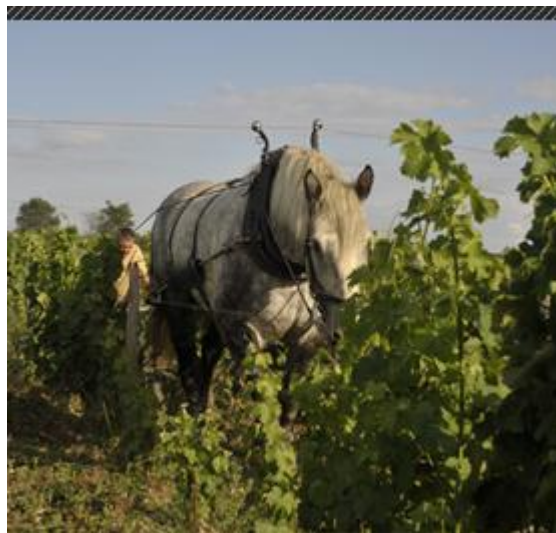
unfiltered and unclarified. Its colour is more cloudy amber than yellow; mind you there is not a hint of oxidation on the nose, nor on the palate. This is a fabulous wine; funky and captivating, revealing overripe citrus on the nose with hints of roasted almonds. On the palate is it rich, textured and fennel-oily with a real grainy grip. The citrus, mainly grapefruit pith with a touch of apple-skin by now, returns and flavours of ripe figs develop along with delicate nuances of flowers, ginger beer and granitic minerals.

I'm would guess that the Dettori Bianco has twenty years in the bank. Carafeing it is *de rigueur*; what is more interesting is the evolution – it barely moves – and one can leave it in a decanter for two or three days and still return to a pristine (cloudy) wine.

### **Daring to be different - Musings on Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé**

For ages we've been accustomed to the notion that Sauvignon should smell like cat's pee in a gooseberry bush and subscribed to the varietal determinism which insists that any other flavour profile is not a true reflection of the way the wine should be. Sauvignon is Sauvignon for a' that; it exists within a narrow flavour spectrum...

I've written on another occasion that once when I presented Sebastien Riffault's Sancerre Akmeniné to a pooh-poohing-and-fuming group of wine experts the consequence was collective reeling, writhing and fainting in coils. For this was not Sancerre as we know it, Jim, Jean-Luc and Kathryn Janeway, but an alien deviation from the sixth dimension. **Alexandre Bain**, Seb Riffault's partner-in-vinicultural-crime, if you regard making a Sauvignon in this idiom a crime, started making wine in Pouilly-Fumé in 2007 on seven hectares of vineyards. He immediately started conversion to biodynamic farming, which for him was the precursor of making natural wines. The main reason to work the vineyard according to these principles, according to Alexandre, is to be able to harvest healthy grapes that contain the living organisms that will play a role in the cellar and give the wine its identity. He considers that organic rules only target the vineyard but exclude the winemaking process and that an integrated organic, natural philosophy should go all the way through to the end product, to the bottled wine itself.



Spot the horse

Alex has vineyards both on Portland limestone and Kimmeridgean marl. The white and stony soils of the former are very difficult to work and extremely shallow, with 20 inches

of soil before the mother rock. The dual advantages are that it provides excellent drainage and the stones reflect the heat back onto the vines aiding ripening.

No additives are used to adjust the wine, and they will thus reflect the year's particularities. He aims for maturity preferring wines that are verging on over-ripe rather than the varietal/vegetal style. Picked ripe Sauvignon will give quince and cooked-fruit notes. Alexandre believes that the variety should take the back seat in the wine and you should be able to feel the terroir and the vintage. The *elevage* of the wines is essential to find the expression of terroir and his Pouilly-Fumé spends twelve to fourteen months in wood on average, before racking in vats and bottling by gravity (no pumps).

The 2009 is a wine of the vintage, as they say in France, being buttercup yellow and sporting very attractive aromas of pink grapefruit and ripe kiwi. The palate encompasses flavours of quince and pear with just a hint of crystallised sweets and the mouth is warm, mellow, a touch sweet and almost spicy on the finish. The acidity is moderate as one might expect of a 2009.

So the thought for the day is this. Is the goosey-grassberry unripe style of Sauvignon with the cultivated yeast ferment, cool ferment, stopped malo, filtered, clarified and given a whack of sulphur *le vrai Sancerre/Pouilly-Fumé* or does a richer, more textured style with autumnal fruits and wilder back notes more truly strike at the heart of the wine?

## **Domaine des Vignes du Maynes - Lip-Smacon Good Wines**



How good are these Burgundies? Sometimes when you rave about something you love, people tut-tut indulgently thinking your passion has transported your palate to a Panglossian place where all is for the best in the best possible world. However, I've never been disappointed by the wines from the Guillot family. That's an understatement. The terroir ranks with the best in France; vines have been here since Roman times and wine has been continuously made in this location for ten centuries.

The proof is in the tasting. Here are some notes that I found on the web that perfectly captured the flavour and the spirit of the wines. Below are my rather inferior efforts.

[http://www.vinography.com/archives/2010/11/domaine\\_vignes\\_du\\_maynes\\_macon.htm](http://www.vinography.com/archives/2010/11/domaine_vignes_du_maynes_macon.htm)  
!

### **2009 Bourgogne Rouge, Clos des Vignes du Maynes**

Pale red with a whip crack of stony minerality scoring arcs across a palette of red and black fruits, leather, cool earth, wild herbs and the kitchen sink.

### **2009 Bourgogne Rouge "Auguste", Clos des Vignes du Maynes**

This domaine is laboriously restoring vineyards on a mountain that were cultivated 1,100 years ago. This is the Pinot Fin and under this dorsal is a mouth with the bite of a Great White (or, in this case, a Great Red). I haven't tasted a Pinot Noir of this mineral intensity for a very long time. It is difficult to describe – liquidised rocks, perhaps? – cloudy cherry-red colour a natural Griotte cherries, wild strawberries, menthol, saffron plus a fizzing bright yeasty quality. Wow – this makes 95% Burgundy taste flabby. So pure – the terroir of the monastery.

### **2009 Macon-Cruzille Rouge "Manganite", Clos des Vignes du Maynes**

Monster crunch mark 2. Manganite is a greyish soil with a high metallic and crystalline content that militates into the flavour of the wine. Stonefruit, earth, iron filings. Gamay proves that when the vines are old and the soil is poor can make bloody good wines as Bill Baker used to say. Redolent of mango and musk, as well as cooked cherries and delightfully juggling notes of sandalwood and an aromatic array of red berries (wild cherries) this Macon is for grown-ups. It is sappy and stony and the acidity is nicely coiled like a cobra about to strike.

### **2009 Macon-Cruzille Blanc "Aragonite", Clos des Vignes du Maynes**

Aragonite was named after the Aragon region in Spain where it was discovered. It is an excellent stone to have around in times of stress as it is said to reduce anger and to enhance patience and acceptance under stressful conditions. It is also believed to raise energy levels and to help clear and focus the mind so that you can concentrate on the task in hand. Like drinking Julien Guillot's Macons from Clos des Vignes du Maynes.

Aragonite is white Macon which undergoes two strict selections. Fermentation takes place in barrels with wild yeast. The wine is left on the lees and aged eleven months, without chaptalization or the addition of artificial yeast. Its striking appearance may be described as a lovely pale gold. Initially, the nose releases pure mineral notes of gunflint and steel and the palate is similar taut keeping the fruit in a leesy lock before unwinding the tension slowly to reveal notes of citrus, blanched almond and dry honey with the most delicate seasoning of oak spice.

### **2009 Macon-Cruzille Blanc "Les Chassagnes", Clos des Vignes du Maynes**

Forget what you think you know about Macon. Somewhere someone is flogging AOC Macon for 4.99. Another new wine from Julien Guillot, an effort of such high seriousness that it makes many Cote d'Or classics taste like complaisant bimbois and bimbettes.

Fermentation is in barrels with wild yeast. The wine is left on the lees and aged eleven months, without chaptalization or the addition of artificial yeast. Its striking appearance may be described as a lovely pale gold. Dried fruit and white flowers (acacia) on the nose opening and evolving into a bouquet of citrus fruit and pineapple with secondary notes pollen, truffle and grilled almond. Pure tension and grappling acidity allied to a coruscating minerality (that word, again) as if flints or crystals were being repeatedly struck.

## **It doesn't have to be Burgundy**

### **2009 Pinot Noir Z Cuvee Julien, Jean-Francois Ganevat**

In every man's heart there is a secret nerve that answers to the vibrations of beauty - so wrote Christopher Morley. Natural wines are breezes plucking the tension of the strings on an Aeolian harp; they don't need to explain themselves, appealing on a nerve-jingling visceral as well as an aesthetic level. Jean-François Ganevat's Pinot Noir, so

seamless and taut, its limpid fruit pulled across the palate by darting minerality, reminds me of an elegantly-wrought sculpture which looks so simple because its form is so graceful yet or of a complex melody that flows inevitably or a poem where every word is pertinent to the underlying meaning.

Eric Asimov of *The New York Times* extols Ganevat's Pinots as "gorgeous - light-bodied, lively and pure pleasure to drink." We second this emotion. With age (say five to ten years), it may assume a Chambolle-like quality: ethereal perfume and finesse with a firm, concentrated backbone.

With shimmering, pristine clarity this Pinot Noir demonstrates the finical attention Ganevat bestows upon his wines and vines. We've listed the Cuvée Julien for several vintages; before J-F went down the zero-sulphur track it was rather richer having a dark burgundy colour, nose of blueberry, black cherry and beetroot with black fruits, hints of chocolate and leather on the palate, but progressively it has become purer, more fragrant and brisker with a textured mineral quality. In 09, a vintage of beautifully ripe and healthy grapes, Ganevat's wines strike a hitherto unseen level of concentration and silken complexity. Agility and raciness belies this Pinot's concentration and multifaceted nature, a gouleyant wine underscored by elegance and subtle depths of layered mineral, mountain flowers and bright red fruits. Be enchanted, be very enchanted. I am reminded of Remy de Gourmont's aphorism: "Aesthetic emotion puts man in a state favourable to the reception of erotic emotion. ... Art is the accomplice of love. Take love away and there is no longer art."

### **Brawn to be wild**



Restaurant evacuated after particularly reductive bottle of Pet Nat is opened

Sunday lunch *en famille* at a bustling Brawn at the back end of December. Outside Columbia Flower Market was in full flow (surely, it should be on Pollen Street – Ed). From roses to rosés. Well, maybe not in December. Brawn feels like a family restaurant, plenty of babes-a-dandling (new-brawns?) and older children sitting down and ploughing and chowing through an earthy menu. My youngest chomped through some Garfagnana, Tuscan no-nonsense brawn, ate mussels and clams with gusto, devoured chunks of squid with romesco (that's a spiky sauce not a type of gusto) and even gamely tackled some of the Caillette which is normally for certified pigaholics only. That's ma girl.

Collectively occupying a table of twelve in the corner, we didn't drink excessively, but everything we opened merited attention. Were I converting the sceptic to natural wine I might begin with **Massa Vecchia, 2006 Ariento, Vino Bianco, Toscana**, which to those who tasted largely agreed was a thing of beauty and a joy forever. A blend of Vermentino, Malvasia, Ortruga and others it's the amber wine which gives a green light

to aesthetic enjoyment. Prolonged skin contact and ageing in chestnut casks gives structure and tannic resolve to the richly aromatic apricot and warm peach-skin fruit that shimmers out of the glass. The magic dust is care of the wild yeasts, a veritable spice box of cumin, dried cinnamon and ginger.

Whilst we are on the subject of yellow peril, our next bottle, a squat clavelin of Vin Jaune (I can't recall the producer's name) reminded me of Gimli in the Lord of the Rings trilogy. There was something defiantly "take me as I am", old fashioned, crusty, essentially honourable and brave about this wine. I love *vin jaune*, the thought of this cantankerous yellow liquid sulking under its yeast veil, a bitter Miss Havisham eventually giving way to a risque saffron-hued Estella. Feeling somehow ancient and young at the same time the wine was exotic, the curry spice bazaar incarnate, with a rip of acidity that jolted your attention and conjured respect..

The Jurassic mood was continued by an oddity, a hoary old Ploussard (from 1979), that showed it was still capable of mischief. Ploussard is a pale red grape making red wines of freshness and nerve, expressing raspberries, redcurrant and cherries as well as quince and age throws some mulch into the mix. Actually, this was a Ploussard rosé, which, by virtue of time, had grown darker than a normal Ploussard rouge. Nosing this was akin to burying the schnozz in a sous-bois of bramble bushes, leaves and moist earth. It was delicious, like a late autumn cross country run in a glass. Thence to a magnum of **La Sagesse** from **Domaine Gramenon**, a rich, spicy oldish vines Grenache brew with roasted fruit, cocoa bean, herbs and dusty spices. The 06 was a bit of a beast with some chewy tannins, but jogged along well with a main course of pork belly.

The White Queen may have believed in as many as six impossible things before breakfast; I am quite prepared to drink six impossible things with lunch. **Didier Chaffardon's L'Incrédule** might test the faith of *vin nature* acolytes and neophytes alike; it is the gamiest of game chickens, but I loved its sanguinary chutzpah. It is the sort of wine you have to drink in (demotic) French.



Believe it because it's true

*Robe rouge rubis sur l'ongle. Beau jus éclatant de mauve ! Nez exacerbé aux intonations salines, nacrées et fumées perdus de notes fraîches de fruits rouges et bleus (griotte – noyaux-, framboise et fraise, prunelle, groseille, etc) rehaussées de nuances épicées de coriandre, de poivre de Sichuan ! Bouche gouleyante, juteuse, aux saveurs élégantes et prégnantes de fruits rouges acérés, sur un fond d'épices "nacrées" par une minéralité très particulière (terroir de marnes ostracées et huîtres) qui lui donne une salinité exacerbant l'expression du cabernet franc ! Belle et longue finale friande et rafraichissante....rabelaisienne*

Rabelaisian – yes, naughty but nice. I love this tasting note, you can almost hear the pan pipes in the background.



His working pose

It got me thinking when you look at photos of the guy with the obligatory fag hanging out of his mouth that with natural wines you have to take the rough with the rough. The less you mediate, the wilder the flavours are, more things in heaven and (especially) earth than our dreamt of in our philosophy. It is so important to taste the flavours around the funkiness, to feel the wine. I sense that those with mappined palates wrinkle their nose at first whiff and never move past the negative initial impressions, whereas more emancipated thinkers and drinkers will meet the wine on its own terms and sense the life therein. It boils down to prescriptive and responsive approaches; not everything you dislike is wrong; not every blemish is a fault; as we are exposed to a narrow register of aromas and flavours our responses are increasingly conditioned to recognise those as correct. Natural wines are not trying to love-bomb one with pleasantries; their wildness, which sometimes manifests itself ... takes one out of the comfort zone. If you taste badly because your nose is wrinkled in disdain you will miss the nuances in the wine. As the tasting note above suggests there is a definite nacreous edge (oyster shell/briny crunch) to this wine that hints at fossilised shell terroir and makes it a real drinker.

Let's face it... all that glisters is not gold medal wines. When judging a wine we have to give a little to take a little.

#### **A brief digression concerning the Durian fruit...**

"It is neither acid nor sweet nor juicy; yet it wants neither of these qualities, for it is in itself perfect. It produces no nausea or other bad effect, and the more you eat of it the less you feel inclined to stop."

Alfred Russel Wallace may have been describing the Durian fruit but he might have been equally been talking about natural wines. Initially reluctant to try it because of the aroma, "but in Borneo I found a ripe fruit on the ground, and, eating it out of doors, I at once became a confirmed Durian eater". He cited one traveller from 1599: "it is of such an excellent taste that it surpasses in flavour all other fruits of the world, according to those who have tasted it". He cites another writer: "To those not used to it, it seems at first to smell like rotten onions, but immediately they have tasted it they prefer it to all other food. The natives give it honourable titles, exalt it, and make verses on it".

While Wallace cautions that "the smell of the ripe fruit is certainly at first disagreeable", Anthony Bourdain, a devotee of durian, relates his encounter with the fruit as thus: "Its taste can only be described as...indescribable, something you will either love or despise. ...Your breath will smell as if you'd been French-kissing your dead grandmother."

Eat the peach... Or, in this case, the durian. Or that Munster that's crawling across the floor. Or that grouse that's been hanging around for a while. There are many cultures entirely unversed the marketing of plastic-tasting apples sprayed with fake dew, Primula spread and turkey twizzlers; it says a lot for our supermarket mentality that ;mainstream and consumer-friendly. One feels that even those gastronomically in-the-know would rather drink a highly-confected wine, liquid twizzlers or vinous muzak, if you will, than something which does not fit into their experience of the way wine *should* (my italics) smell and taste.

## **Natural Wines – what's in a blame name game?**

Let's live and let live in the debate on natural wine. Let's not? If you say so. Too many people, however, speak from positions of absolute certainty as if they believe all wine should conform to a paradigm of correctness; these naysayers are caught up in a weird Manichean world view that posits that the wines they like are good and the wines they don't are bad (and are therefore wrong to an offensive degree). Who are the naysayers – the conservatives, the "orthodoxes", the ayatollahs of taste, chips off the old obloquy, the "magic markers". They refuse to engage emotionally or intellectually; they may have lost sight that wine is not something to be pedantically picked over in the groves of pseudo-academe, but a social lubricant. Remember fun!

In vino veritas? Not from where I'm standing. The truth is neither pure nor simple. I could simply dead-bat all the criticism, but my squeaking rationalism seeks to confront prejudice and open up the debate. I know that we are never going to get closure on this until we puncture the notion that there is a hierarchy of good taste and an overall need for consistency. Natural wine, as I understand it, is about mood, about flow, about improvisation and not about blanket judgements and boxy definitions.

A hundred years ago I was a decidedly moist behind the ears student writing essays on the great poets of our time (our particular time being the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century) and making sweeping generalisations as I did so. Whereof I knew little, thereof the volume of rhetoric rose. It was the intellectual equivalent of standing with my legs slightly apart, thumbs jammed into my belt, pronouncing on philosophical matters like some preening coxcomb. I see a similar tendency amongst the wineabee critics who want to plant flags and salute them. The wine world is theoretically a broad church - and in my house there are many mansions, saith the Lord - so you wouldn't think that people would be too threatened by a few unorthodox wines. But there are those who believe that anything must necessarily be invalid if the philosophy behind it can't be proved. In a test tube. Biodynamics excites such a vigorous debate; the antis attack current practice by having a pop at Steiner (often personally) from various angles without understanding the



Another part of wilful critical disengagement stems from snobbery. Biodynamics, for example, became more acceptable when so many of the superstar winemakers in Burgundy and Alsace started to convert their vineyards. The lustre of such stellar reputations seemingly lent verisimilitude to the apparent marginal lunacy of small unknown growers. And yet biodynamics was based on observation and trials in the vineyards; there is a prevailing mythology that intelligent people espouse philosophies without prior investigation. Viticulturalists want to do what's best for the vineyard.

There are celebrated names also in the natural wine family. Because a natural wine might, after all, be a *grand cru* Burgundy or a *vin de table*, because it might be pure pinot noir or a mixture of ten different grape varieties, because it might cost £5 or £5000. Egalitarians won't care, but those who measure their wine on hundred point scales, require the fustian charade of critical approbation before accepting quality.

Whilst natural wine movement may preclude a bunch of vinicultural practices it recognises that there are different ways to reach the same end. The wines share purity and honesty of expression. It is a cliché, but it is true that natural wine begins in the vineyard where the personality of the vines are born and nourished. Organic viticulture, certainly, and biodynamics, a more holistic view of the vine and the vineyard, create the preconditions for healthy grapes.

Natural wines largely taste of the grapes from which they are made and the place where they have grown. However, being certified as organic or biodynamic doesn't apply to techniques or products that the winemaker may use to transform the grapes into wine. That's where the term 'natural' comes in; it means that the winemaker minimizes intervention and manipulation during the winemaking process as much as possible so that the finished product is a reflection of the terroir (the soil, location, and altitude as well as the climate and conditions of a particular vintage).

Even this assertion is contested by sceptics who contend that the nuances of terroir are obliterated (or funkyed up) by over-exuberant wild yeastiness. This fundamentally misrepresents the nature of the wine in question. The yeasts are active components with strong, vital signatures, but they are just an element; the terroir is another and reveals itself subtly in the wine; the grape variety is another; the vintage is another. The wine is thus the sum of its many parts, and a great wine is greater than the sum of its many parts. Many natural wines are made to be "soifed", made with the primary intention to express the most primary fruit possible.

Natural winemaking reduces the element of control that a winemaker has over the finished product (which increases the element of risk in a difficult year, from a commercial standpoint). Exactly how a wine is made is not something that can be decided in advance. Each year, and each wine, is different. And this is where narrow definitions of what or who is natural are invidious. The winemaker invariably has to improvise. There will always be times when, however reluctantly, he/she has to intervene to prevent it from spoiling.. However, with careful supervision, it can lead to a beautiful and authentic expression of the wine's origin. Basically, though, what really matters in the end is whether the wine stimulates the drinker in some way. Drinking wine isn't really a necessity; why bother drinking it if it doesn't create energy or an emotion?

### **Additions and subtractions**

When I started learning about wine I was instructed in scientific certainties; truths held to be self-evident etc. etc. I heard it that natural wines were unpleasant to drink because they were badly made, reductive/ bretty/oxidised, suffering from a litany of faults. Any of these criticisms could apply to conventional wine. A badly made wine is a badly made wine. To which I would add that so many of the interventions made during the

conventional process can result in wines that are seriously out-of-kilter, over-sulphured, unbalanced and indigestible.

One of the presumptions is that wine cannot be wine unless it is stable (as opposed to natural wine which is supposed to smell like a stable). Sulphur is the ingredient, used - and abused - that cleans the wine and makes its face shiny and presentable. It has been employed for hundreds, if not thousands of years, as a preservative. But do winemakers use it as an article of faith or out of sheer necessity?

Flipping the usual question I would not ask: Is it wrong that natural vigneron use no sulphur, but rather, what are conventional winemakers doing wrong that necessitates the use of so much sulphur? It's over bad-egging the omelette.

### **Digestibility of wine – the dyspepsia challenge**

A good chef doesn't season a dish without first tasting and one wonders whether winemakers have lost touch with their raw ingredients, the grapes, and practise winemaking by rote. Beautiful healthy grapes contain their own preservatives; there is often no necessity to manipulate. Using sulphur has become a safety-first approach rather than a sensitive or sensible one.

So many things are added to conventional wine to reconfigure flavours or to add something which wasn't there before. Some wines can be asphyxiated by being overlarded with enhancements. It is very difficult to drink a glass let alone of a bottle of such wines.

At the heart of winemaking is the fear of failure predicated on the notion that losing control over the process leads to the spoiling of the wine. Natural winemakers aren't inferior or technically incompetent; when one leaves so much to chance one has to be extra vigilant in the winery. However, they taste assiduously and understand that it is important to have confidence in the wine.

### **The Real Deal**

This returns us to the main difference between a conventional and a natural wine: the former is a product that does not vary from year to year, wherein every glass tastes identical, where nothing is left to chance and a battery of questionable devices may be used to correct perceived flaws; the latter is intended to express the nature of the terroir and the typicity of the vintage by neither adding nor subtracting anything during the vinification process. The winemaker exists to guide the wine to the bottle; he or she is the gentle interpreter not a cog in a huge industrial wheel.

Anton Klopper (Lucy Margaux) puts it succinctly: "We aim to produce wines that express themselves. To achieve this at the highest level I would never consider adding yeast, bacteria, acid, sugar or any of the other artificial or natural additives. A winemaker can choose to be an artist or a chemist. I believe that winemaking is a craft; all our decisions are made with the aid of a wine glass and traditional skills, with the aim of developing the wines true identity." He espouses "Natural Selection Theory", a wine movement that is like free flow jazz, outrageous winemaking with no beat of security, only an endeavour to push the boundary of wine beyond its "stale present".

Einstein sagely observed: "Any intelligent fool can make things bigger and more complex... It takes a touch of genius - and a lot of courage to move in the opposite direction." With natural wines it takes the genius of nature and the courage of the winemaker to leave well alone.