

Les Caves de Pyrene - January Newsletter 2nd Edition

Reviews of new and recently tasted wines

Frothing Burghounds on the loose

Natural Wine - definitions and arguments

Where to drink Natural Wine in London

Natural Wines in the Press

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2011/jan/23/natural-wine-david-williams>

Recently tasted...

Who was it who said "we taste the wines so that you don't have to". Or am I just imagining that?

2009 L'Echappee Belle, Edouard Laffite

Wearing its guts for garters Laffite's Roussillon is neither filtered nor fined and manages to taste fresh and nuggety at the same time. The nose is elegant, exudes pretty aromas of black fruits with a suggestion of gaminess whilst in the mouth you have a bonbon full of minerality with a crunchy, suave palate. This is the kind of wine I love to drink. It has the rare quality of combining warmth with freshness, fruitiness with earthiness, smoothness with herbaceousness or what I call "herbacidity". In Eric's words we "demolished the bottle" - toot sweet.



2009 Pinot Noir, Thierry Puzelat

Initially reductive Puzelat's musky Pinot settles down to reveal much more fruit than the 08 but less jazz funk than the 06.



The wine - it lives!

2009 Melon de Bourgogne, Domaine de la Cadette

Really smart wine with linear fresh and cool minerality. Apple skin, lemon (rather than melon) and a hint of oyster shell – made to make the mouth water.

2002 Jasnières Les Rosiers, Domaine Bellivière

A rendez-vous with this Bellivière of fond memory. Or sherry amour since the pronounced oxidative notes have led this wine o'er the brink and into near oblivion and currently to be drunk whilst listening to The Ramones Pet Sematary. Despite my coup de coeur for wines of the yellowing persuasion I found this stale, flat and unprofitable, however, I'm quite prepared to believe that it will come back in its own fair time and once more display a kind of haunting varnished nuttiness.

2002 Bruno Schueller Pinot Noir

Slightly cloudy colour, damsons and cherry soda on the nose also some liquorice, bright and tangy in the mouth with beautifully defined stonefruit and a bit of background yeastiness for prickly support. Finish – daisy, fresh as a. Probably a shoo-in for my Pinot Noir of the year unless those underachievers from Burg can start delivering.

2010 Amedée Primeur, Domaine Leonine - NEW

Stephane Morin created Domaine Leonine when he purchased a twelve hectare estate of old vines in Banyuls à Passa. The vineyards had never undergone any chemical treatments, nor had they been weeded so that the roots of the vines had penetrated deep into the soil to draw water and mineral resources. He started working the land, making a travail do soil with a pick axe, using a horse to plough certain parcels, employing homeopathic treatments from tisanes of horsetail and nettles in accord with the lunar calendar and generally following biodynamic principles. In terms of vinification it is all about the indigenous yeasts, nothing added, just plain common sense.

Stephane says the carbonic method requires very healthy grapes – it gives an infusion of fruit, fluidity and smoothness in the mouth. Despite one might think there is subtle variation in each of the wines. The Amedée, Syrah/Grenache (60/40) blend, is soft and remarkably vibrant. There are notes of what the French might call torrefaction, gently roasted dark fruit and a whiff of herbs in the background. Texturally it is obviously a carbo wine, but without that artificial boiled sweet and banana foreground that mars many examples. The residue of sludge in my last glass attests to the fact that the wine is heroically unfiltered.

2008 Vin de Table Gascon, Pascal Simonutti - NEW



There is a great line in *Monsters Inc* where they are advertising the renewable power ethos behind frightening the bejasus out of little children “We scare because we care”. Drinking Pascal Simonutti’s Gascon wine one senses a wine that does not hold back from spooking the frail of heart. This wine is firmly positioned at the durian fruit end of the aromatic spectrum; if this wine were a labour of Hercules it would be the mares of Diomedes and the Augean stables rolled into one. And yet, reader, I loved it. Lurking amongst the funk is unmediated fruit and sweet earth; its lightness might charm the narrator of this piece: *What I like best is a clean, light, modest country vintage of no special name. One can carry plenty of it and it has a good and homely flavour of the land, and of the earth and sky and woods*”. (Steppenwolf.)

Incidentally, the wine is made from a grape variety called Gascon that still nibbles a living in a handful of vineyards in the Touraine. Claude Courtois makes another example. To say that not a lot of information exists in the public domaine about this grape is an understatement; you can get as googley as you like; you will be none the wiser.



New Zealand gets Burgundered

If you go down the St John Wood's today for the New Zealand ATT you're sure of a big non-surprise. The virtual absence of the on-trade. Because, hey, it is *always* the time for the heaving ranks of sommeliers and wine buyers to taste a billion and one Burgundies. The Burgundy week (fortnight) is the ultimate crack cocaine holiday for the wine trade – once you imbibe that Pinot sauce you're hooked, you can't get enough and soon you're scoring negoce swill cut with Gamay rather than high grade Mazis Grand cru . And once you've indulged in one Burgundy junket you have to do all of them. You call 'em Pinot philes – I call them the freemasonry of junkies with a collector's nerdling impulse, that necessary desire for completism, which necessitates having to taste all wines from all growers, regardless of their merits, in order to be able to pronounce upon the vintage with massive authority and, if necessary, inscribe marks on tablets of stone, which will further give the opportunity to pore over the scores retrospectively for mild recreation and unalloyed pleasure.

(I absolve the press because surely one of their jobs is to taste all the wines so that we don't have to.)

More seriously what is the point? (or, anagrammatically, what is the Pinot). Let's say you taste a hundred, or even two hundred, barrel samples a day. Maybe spend twenty seconds on a wine that may last half a lifetime. Maybe spend twenty seconds with a knackered palate on a wine that will last half a lifetime. And make a summary judgement on a particular day about a wine which is not bottled and whose evolution is uncertain.

Defining Silence

I believe that there is a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright. ~Henry David Thoreau



Didier Barral's beautiful biodynamic vineyards

I've been asked by sundry, if not all, to come up with a simple definition of natural wine. Loathe as I am to reduce things to mechanics this should clarify things for some.

Natural wines are wines where non-invasive farming methods and non-interventionist vinification allows for the best expression of the terroir and the vintage.

Desirable vineyard practice

The objective is to attain a healthy vineyard where the vines develop their resistance to disease. Chemicals are eschewed, every effort is made to ensure that the soil is alive with nutrients and mineral content.

No chemicals may therefore be used except very light doses of copper and sulphur mixture.

Natural solutions should always be sought to natural problems

Biodiversity should be encouraged at every opportunity and habitats for insects, bugs, birdlife and flowers be allowed to thrive.

The vine is part of a polyculture – the land and the countryside must be respected

Dynamic remedies may be used to nurture and bring the vineyard to optimum health such as natural manures, homeopathic remedies and biodynamic treatments

Other vineyard practices that may be encouraged

Travail du sol

Selection massale

Promotion (where possible) of indigenous grape varieties

Low yields

Hand harvest and selection of fruit

Respect for variability of vintages

Seeking maturity and balance

Desirable winery practice

To carry out fermentation with the fewest possible additions or subtractions

Healthy grapes sorted before vinification

Wild yeast ferment

No added enzymes

No additions or subtractions (addition of acids, sugar, dealcoholisation - “reverse osmosis”)

No added flavourings (oak chips etc)

No chaptalisation

No or very light filtration

No or very light fining

Minimal sulphur used (total sulphur less 25 mg/l white wines; less than 10mg/l for red wines)

Natural wine is not a set of absolute rules but an aspiration to make the purest possible wine in a given situation out of the best possible grapes. Like nature it is not about judgements and fixed positions but embraces arbitrariness and even chaos. I will elaborate.

The natural wine journey always begins in the vineyard where growers work in harmony with their environment. Some vineyards are born natural, some achieve naturalness and some need to have nature thrust upon them. Respecting what nature gives us, not taking more than it will allow, is the principle tenet of natural wine.

*Only after the last tree has been cut down,
only after the last river has been poisoned,
only after the last fish has been caught,
only then will you realize that money cannot be eaten.*

--The Cree People

The grapes have to be made into wine and here the natural movers and winemakers, want to be holistically consistent. For why grow something organically if you are going to smother it in additives and, in effect, denature it? Putting chemicals in the ground and additives in the wine is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Whilst we now accept that polluting the soil with synthetic fertilisers, pesticides and insecticides is untenable we fail to apply the same logic with additives in wine.



Bone idolatry at Domaine Derain

The rules of engagement

In every discourse I have read about natural wine (and this applies also to biodynamic viticulture) I have felt that the bad science argument has been overcooked. Scientists, of

course, demand verifiable proof that specific courses of action work. So if, for example, you'd converted your vineyard from conventional to organic viticulture you would have clearly demonstrate that such a conversion benefited the soil and the wine. The proof of the former is to do with the quality of the grapes and the subsequent material you have to work with; the latter presupposes that one can assess an improve in the taste of the wine but, even then, the correlation is uncertain because great farming practice does not imply great winemaking.

“Natural wine” has perversely been corrupted to mean unnatural. If one looks through the lens of a supermarket buyer this means unsellable (and that *is unnatural* in a supermarket environment). But this ain't necessarily so to a consumer who loves drinking wine. We are more than happy to brew our beer at home and drink it, we're positively itching to buy fruit and veg from farmer's markets and don't care whether it is misshapen or blotchy. Before standardisation and subsequent homogenisation we would drink unpasteurised milk without question, eat butter (not margarine) and drink wines that had not been cleansed of personality.

We now appreciate that natural cloudy apple juice has all the goodness left in, that unpasteurised smelly cheese has more flavour, that food can look relatively unappealing, smell and taste unusual and not only does not this not invalidate it, but indicates that it has not been denatured by endless interventions. We insist, however, on a correctness for wine that is fundamentally artificial; that wine should not nakedly taste of wine, but instead be a chemical product, stripped, fined and filtered.

We are also overly exercised by the notion of bacterial spoilage. Butter left out in a room grows mould, margarine doesn't. Does that make margarine better? Or isn't it that there is nothing for the bacteria to feed on? “Natural wine is recalibrating how we think about wine,” says Max Allen. “It's not just a commodity you can buy on a supermarket shelf and leave there for three years until somebody comes along and buys it. It's much more like an artisan cheese or a beautiful fresh homemade apple pie. You can't leave it lying around. You've got to look after and be a bit gentle with it.”

“Don't find fault with what you don't understand” (French proverb)

And so to tackle the nature, as it were, of faults. The fact that natural wines are unfiltered, unfined and have low levels of sulphur leaves them open to the accusation that they will be inevitably be faulty. Yet the fact that many (if not most) natural wines are *not* faulty suggests that faults are not inevitable. Are we predicting faults on the basis of likelihood or assessing the quality of wine by actually tasting it? As I've said on numerous occasions we must always go by what is in the glass rather than assume that orthodoxies are correct.

If then it is matter of taste then surely it is a matter of taste. As it were. Critics are quick to judge and consequently write off an entire genre of wine (as if wine could be poured into such neat categories) on the basis of a few examples tasted but mostly because of what they've read or what they've heard. Wine education is skewed because it gives the

impression that taste can be scientifically calibrated and that good wine is almost no more than a series of (bio)chemical reactions and expert manipulations. We have to recognise that wines are, or rather can be, very much living products, subtle, mutating and individual.

I recently asked an MW who professed scepticism about natural wines whether he didn't think there was too much sulphur in wines. If one admits that the allowable levels are high under EU law, and that any trained palate might easily detect the presence of sulphur in moderate amounts in a wine, then surely you would admit to the necessity of reducing said levels of sulphur. Instead of engaging with this point he gave me an auto-response with a blizzard of scientific verisimilitude relating to reduction and molecular chains of oxygen, hydrogen and sulphur... I forget. Given, in any case, that reduction and added sulphur are different matters it made me think that traditionalists have a tribal affinity towards standard winemaking that verges on a voodoo belief in cod-science. I would question anyone who dismisses something that he or she does not fully understand, but also implicitly believes in something that they do not fully understand.

Simplistic as it sounds the justification for using sulphur in wine is not proved. It may be that small amounts of sulphur help to stabilise the wine without materially altering the flavour; it may be that a wine contains enough of natural preservatives; it may be that in certain years a tiny amount of sulphur is required but not in others. What is undeniable is that it is overused as are all the tricks and tropes of the interventionist winemaker. You would only do this to alter the nature of the wine (and thereby denature the wine) and this is surely against the spirit of organic and biodynamic viticulture, against the spirit of wine as a product of nature.

Individuals make individual wines

Genius is the result of hard work, observation, imagination and intuition and something which cannot always be defined. You don't need to be a scientist to be a poet, painter or musician. You don't need to be a scientist to be a great chef or a great winemaker. You don't need to understand why things work to make beautiful things. We often say "he has an ability that can't be taught". On the other hand, a lot of natural winemakers have studied oenology, served apprenticeships in conventional wineries and have come to the intellectual position that wine should be made with the fewest number of interventions, that less does indeed mean more.

We are dealing with people who are making individual wines, true originals; they are artisan-artists and not manufacturers. The way they speak about wine is different, it is more personal, whether they are speaking of terroir or their intimate understanding of the vine or the quirks of the fermentation or their desire to rediscover the way wine tasted many generations ago. And the wine is almost never made the same way twice. "Anarchism has but one infallible, unchangeable motto, 'Freedom.' Freedom to discover any truth, freedom

to develop, to live naturally and fully." This could be the motto of the natural wine movement.

Natural Watering Dens

As I have previously announced this is the year of Natural Wine – with bells and whistles and the occasional trump of doom. So, you're in London, thirsting for the juice of the grape as nature intended, who you gonna call? Here's my pick of the bunch.

Bar Battu

48 Gresham Street EC2

www.barbattu.com

If you are in the heart of the barking (sorry, banking) sector, and even if you are not, make a bee line to this restaurant with its cherishable list of vins natures and excellent selection by the glass and carafe. Good charcuterie and meaty mains (try the bavette steak with bone marrow and pont neuf chips) and terrific puds.

Artisan & Vine

126 St John's Hill, SW11

www.artisanandvine.com

Kathryn O'Mara's bar/shop in Clapham has received great acclaim in the wine trade. A smart list, a nice atmosphere and Kathryn's multi-media flair have put this local firmly on the good wine map.

Green & Blue

38 Lordship Lane, East Dulwich SE22

www.greenandbluewines.com

Kate Thal is a passionate advocate of organic and biodynamic wines from small, artisan growers and ethical practices throughout the wine trade. Prices in the shop are extremely fair and for a slender additional mark-up you can drink your purchases in the atmospheric bar next door. Kate also runs popular weekly wine courses. Check out the web site for her funny, heart-felt blogs and beautifully tactile tasting notes.

Brawn

49 Columbia Road E2

The piggy beast in the east has been garnering good reviews for its wholesome grub and relaxed vibe. The wine list majors in the weird and the wonderful handsold with

gusto by Max, Oli et al. This place encapsulates the unpretentious spirit of natural wine.

Terroirs

5 William IV Street WC2

www.terroirswinebar.com

Over the past couple of years Terroirs has acquired an international reputation for its formidable wine list, good food and buzzy atmosphere.

Wholefoods, Kensington

The Barkers Building, Kensington High Street, W8

Described by Jamie Goode as "one of the best places in London to buy wine by the bottle" Wholefoods has a rich and varied selection of natural wines (amongst others) and an attractive bar where you can crack your bottle and have something delicious to nibble with it.