

Les Caves De Pyrene

MAY NEWSLETTER - 2ND EDITION

Stop Press!!!

Brawn wins newcomer of the year at the Tatler Restaurant Awards. Congrats to the lads and lasses.

Breaking the Loire

“... the river that moves sideways, boldly challenging the psychic cartography which decrees that everything about France is aligned north to south.” (John Lanchester)

Endlessly fascinating, wonderfully rewarding, great value wines – the Loire is also the spiritual home of biodynamics and natural wine with myriads of small artisan growers doing their thang and doing it very well.

The wines are perfect for summer from the Pet Nats in all colours, to ridiculously fruity off-dry rosés, to an avalanche of Chenin of all shapes, sizes and relative residual sugars. Do we like Sauvignon – when it is from Riffault, Bain, Puzelat, Morantin, Clos Roche Blanche, Villemade... and, of course, the beautifully nuanced Sancerres and Pouilly-Fumés of family Bourgeois. How about Muscadet, no longer retro, saltily familiar, wonderfully refreshing and crisp over oysters. And it ages surprisingly well (don't believe me – try the L d'Or du Luneau 1999 still in nappies). It wouldn't be us if we didn't unearth some recondite lovelies – three examples of Romorantin from 100 plus year old vines, some Menu Pineau. We apologise deeply for the omission of Tresallier.

Hail our Cabs. You wait for one and thirty odd appear at once. Damn it, we do give a Franc. Confusingly, we have Olivier Cousin who makes a Pur Breton (Cab Franc) as well as a Cab Franc. And we have a grower called Breton. What gives? And if you thought you had seen and tasted everything in your life you should take out a mortgage and try the Pedro Rabernet (sic), a Christmas harvested Cab Franc from Jean-François Chene. The mind boggles gently.

Ne'er cast a clout till Gamay is out. So they say. We have plenty of darling buds of Gamay (stop it, Ed) to delight in. Noella Morantin makes lovely *gamine* version. Plouzeau's is called Tra La La whereas Thierry Michon plays on words with Gamme-en-May and finally we have the wild and wacky volcanic trio from the Auvergne from Maupertuis including the ever-fermenting Pet Nat called Pink Bulles.

We've got a lot of Côt. That's Malbec to the uninitiated. It may appear purely as itself (In Cot We Trust, Puzelat) or in blends (Pivoine, Tabeneaux) but also gives a nice bite and grip to the wine. Grolleau is another grape that has been revived to make delightfully fresh 'n' fruity summer reds. Cousin, Leclerc, Bernadeau all make reckonable at a variety that was considered fit only for le bog standard Rosé d'Anjou.

Snapperuppers of unconsidered trifles would surely like to assay Pineau d'Aunis (try the wonderful versions from Domaine Le Briseau and Jean-Pierre Robinot) or go wild in the country with a Gascon from Pascal Simonutti.

Our next newsletter will be slavishly dedicated to the multifarious wines from this "region".

The Fair gets fairly close

Just a few days to go. We're all drowning in administrone (sic) soup trying to tie the different elements of the natural wine fair and fortnight together.

The event seems to be receiving plenty lot of publicity, mostly positive. Some in the trade are sceptical, self-styled Zolas who *will* pen their "J'accuse" pamphlets. The trouble is there really isn't a lightning rod for their indignation, a feral natural bête noire to slay. There is no point of accusing a movement (which it isn't) of being something which it is not. We're all reasonable people and weren't suddenly abducted by aliens and returned to earth with natural wine implants in our brains..

Rather than going round thumping tubs with our theoretical wine bibles we are inviting people to come and enjoy themselves, talk to the growers, taste the wines and get a flavour of the style and range of the wines on offer. People are free to taste and judge on the basis of the tasting – which is always how it should be.

The Natural Wine Fair, not entirely coincidentally, takes place in the same week at the International Wine Fair at Excel. The idea is that London will be the focus of the world wine trade and that our event is off the main corporate drag, an alternative commentary on the wine scene. If London wants to be regarded as having an exciting wine culture it has to embrace diversity and have lots of little festivals of wine (like ours) rather than one huge shindig.

I venture to make one sanguine prediction. Natural wine is a ripple in the ocean of wine, but it commands enormous interest and attention. We will see these wines feature more heavily on restaurant wine lists and in the specialist independent merchants. We will see the embryonic natural wine bar movement become something more substantial. We will see more tastings, debates and press on this subject because it a breath of fresh air which should engage both the trade and the public and make them reassess their attitudes to wine in general (what is the nature of taste, what is good, what is flawed...) and these wines in particular.

EVENTS & SEMINARS

During the Fair we will be holding seminars and master-classes featuring experts from the trade at Elliot's Café (Borough Market) which are free of charge to attendees of the Fair. Capacity is limited and admission will be on a first come, first served basis.

Sunday 15th May

1:30 – 2:30 'Understanding what makes Natural Wine special'

Speaker: Isabelle Legeron MW (that crazy Frenchwoman)

This will include a tutored tasting so please bring your wine glass.

3:00 – 4:00 Alice's Adventures in Natural Wonderland

Speaker: Alice Feiring (author of 'The Battle for Wine and Love')

This will include a tutored tasting so please bring your wine glass.

Monday 16th May

11:00 – 1:00 'Everything you ever wanted to know about Biodynamics'

Speaker: Nicholas Joly (La Coulée de Serrant)

3.00 – 4.00 'Selling Natural wine in the On-Trade'

Speakers: Doug Wregg (Les Caves), Gerard Basset MW MS (TerraVina), Romain Henry (Hibiscus Restaurant), Xavier Rousset (Texture & 28-50)

Tuesday 17th May

11:30 – 12:30 'Natural Wine, a New World perspective'

Speaker: Ron Laughton (Jasper Hill, Australia)

2:30 – 3:30 Monty Waldin & The Meaning of Biodynamics

Speaker: Monty Waldin (author of 'Monty Waldin's Biodynamic Wine Guide 2011' and star of Channel 4's 'Chateau Monty').

All of the events detailed above will take place at:
Elliot's Cafe, 12 Stoney Street, Borough, London SE1 9AD

The view from the middle

Meanwhile, I am breakfasting on nailed canard today. One such spiked duckling is the self-indulgent caricaturing of natural wines which are painted in certain parts of the media as transgressive, (and therefore extreme), whereas one might easily flip the argument and assert just as easily that some conventionally-made wines are the extreme end of chemical intervention. It is hardly truly-madly-deeply-extraordinary to desire fewer additives in our food and wine, although it seems that the moral logic of additive-free food, however, is not similarly applied to wine. Naked wines are often seen as an aberration, effectively viewed as “unnatural” because critical opinions is schooled (wrongly, in my view) to put a premium on perceived correctness rather than on interest and individuality. That way blandness lies.

And blandness is a lie.

Most students of wine are taught to taste within peculiarly narrow parameters and exalt the ideal that everything should be in its right place and thereby arriving at a simplistic Manichean view of a wine world, where this is right and that is wrong, as if the holiest purpose of wine is to exist within comfortable tramlines. Familiarity breeds contempt towards unusual styles of wines, and overt contentment with, correct wines, in this cosy world. The result is favouring the wine of least resistance, so to speak, a style intended to appeal to the mythical consumer and the common denominator. We are all surely able to live with a tad more uncertainty in our lives and to think for ourselves. Our aesthetic appreciation of wine has the potential to be a lot more profound than the received wisdom of a few movers and shakers. In any case the wheel will turn, opinions will change and new orthodoxies will prevail.

To appreciate natural wine you have first to understand the norm. The majority of conventional wines are a succession of chemical interventions (ironic when we think of wine as a largely natural product). At one of the end of the spectrum (cheaper mass-produced wines) they are flavour-profiled, denatured drinks, at the other end, cosmetically mocked up, they become overworked and pretentious. On many occasions I have tasted wonderful wine in vat and thought: This would be so beautiful if they bottle it without doing anything more to the wine. But too many winemakers seem to see the wine merely as a foundation on which to add more and more layers of flavour, and so one intervention leads to another. And another. In the end the spirit of the wine is lost. This is not to say that wines made with chemical interventions are inferior, but that the winemakers move beyond the merely interpretative towards changing the wine into something that it is not.

What's in a name?

Confusion about natural wine arises because those who make the most confident statements about it rarely define their terms precisely, and also tend to generalise about a wide range of wines having only tasted a tiny number. Each wine should be understood in context as each wine stands alone, each wine being the singular product of its terroir or the vision of the vigneron, each wine the net result of all the physical (I use the word advisedly) interventions of the winemaker and the caprice of the vintage. Natural wine is thus less a co-ordinated movement than an umbrella harbouring different winemakers from different regions and different countries with different agendas. Growers either belong to micro-groups, which, if you examine the way they approach wine, can be said to share common values, but, to ascribe a common political agenda to all growers, is misleading.

So what are the wines like? Despite what certain people say, or write, they are certainly not homogenous. One myth is that white wines taste beery or cidery, the result of unwarranted aldehydes or oxidation. I have been told by certain winemakers and experts in the trade that it is impossible to make terroir wines with low sulphur because the inevitable by-product of indigenous yeast- ambient fermentation are microbiological aromas that will obscure the terroir nuances. Those who believe that wine is pure chemistry and can only discuss it at the molecular level are missing the point somewhat, because vinifications are never the same from one year to the next. (Since the material within the grapes is always different). The resultant wine will reflect this. Certain vigneronns avail themselves of a wide vinicultural palette – exploiting reductive techniques of winemaking, allowing a certain amount of VA or using controlled oxidation to confer secondary aromatics – these are the physical choices designed to push the wine, albeit within natural boundaries. Is this any different to pushing the wine in certain directions by introducing flavoured yeasts, acid and oak chips to name but a few? Yes, of course, because the physical choices in the winery are meant to elicit what is in the very fabric of the wine, whereas the chemical interventions are designed to compensate for its perceived deficiencies.

Here's the science bit...

Acetaldehyde (CH_3CHO) is a volatile compound found in wine. On average, red wines contain 30 mg/L, white 80 mg/L, and Sherries 300 mg/L. The high levels in sherry are considered a unique feature of this wine. At low levels acetaldehyde can contribute pleasant fruity aromas to a wine; however, at higher levels the aroma is considered a defect and is reminiscent of rotten-apples. The threshold in wine ranges between 100-125 mg/L.

Acetaldehyde is one of the most important sensory carbonyl compounds in wine and constitutes approximately 90% of the total aldehyde content in wine. Acetaldehyde can be formed by yeasts and acetic acid bacteria (AAB). AAB form acetaldehyde by oxidizing ethanol. The amount formed by yeasts varies with species, but is considered to be a leakage product of the alcoholic fermentation. Additionally, film yeasts (important in sherry production) will oxidize ethanol to form acetaldehyde. Oxygen, and SO_2 can all impact the amount of acetaldehyde formed by yeasts. Wines fermented in the presence of SO_2 have considerably higher amounts of acetaldehyde. This is related to SO_2 resistance of certain yeasts. In wine, acetaldehyde concentration increases with higher temperatures, though production was higher at cooler temperatures in fermented cider with *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*. Acetaldehyde can also be formed as a result of oxidation of phenolic compounds. Hydrogen peroxide, a product of phenolic oxidation, will oxidize ethanol to acetaldehyde.

At wine pH (3-4), SO_2 consists mainly of bisulfite (HSO_3^-), and small amounts of molecular (SO_2) and sulfite ion (SO_3^{2-}). The bisulfite can form complexes with carbonyl compounds, predominately acetaldehyde. The binding of acetaldehyde to bisulfite limits its sensory contribution to wine. Addition of SO_2 to 'inhibit' acetaldehyde production may reduce the perceived aldehyde aroma character, but is *most likely only masking the aroma contribution of the acetaldehyde that is present instead of actually inhibiting its production.*

Liu S.Q. and G.J. Pilone 2000

Natural winemakers are aspirational rather than slapdash, airy-fairy, grass-chewing idealists. When you work so diligently both in the vineyard and then in the winery you develop a uniquely intimate knowledge of the wine and the way it potentially develops. The objective is to guide that wine into the bottle rather than impose material change to it. Sulphur may be employed, for example, but in small amounts, and only when deemed necessary, rather than blindly following a standard winemaking recipe. Instead of having blind faith in chemicals, natural winemakers prefer to use empirical judgement.

The microbiological transformations which contribute aromatics to the wine are tonal rather than total. An intelligent, intuitive taster will detect the terroir minerality that adds another piece to the mosaic. To airily dismiss wines for being cidery is, therefore, only seeing part of the picture – and the same goes for the other molecular flaws from reduction to VA, for it ignores the fact that wine is about transformation at every level. Natural winemakers engage with those transformations rather than seek to eliminate every trace of them.

One would like to state that the proof of this pudding would be in the drinking, but, as we've seen, one person's vin is another's vinegar. You will always find faults if you are predisposed to look for them. This cuts both ways; in my opinion, additives which have a marked effect on the flavour of the wine (I include sulphur in this) are technical faults, because they have been used indiscriminately and their presence makes the wine nearly undrinkable.

All winemaking involves control. Natural winemaking involves ceding a part of that control, whereas conventional winemaking is more deterministic and wishes to exert absolute, or near absolute, control. The conventional winemaker posits that without controlled interventions the wine cannot be any good, and that natural fermentations are, per se, faulty. If this logic were true we should also dismiss unpasteurised cheese because they are the result of microbiological processes.

Only by observing the life of a wine will you truly understand it. To know the vine, to experience the vintage, to see the cellar, to witness the ferment, to taste from the barrel... is to understand how a wine can be natural (and how that can be right for the wine).

An essay on understanding

*And time for all the works and days of hands...
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions
Before the bottling of a wine sur lie'*

With apologies to TS Eliot

Do critics, let alone consumers, comprehend the nature of the choices to be made? They examine the so-called finished product and look at its functionality rather than appreciate the creative journey.

Some wines are the compelling art of nature – they are what they are.

Every process, of course, starts in the vineyard and every wine is the product of the vintage.

Take a grower in the Loire, for example – he has about thirty barrels out of which he will make about 12-15 wines released over several years. They are brewing like huge tureens filled with stock – microbiological transformations are occurring as the ferments tick over. He runs from barrel to barrel, smelling, tasting, listening...

To understand the whole as well as to appreciate the nuances of each wine is to understand these cellar activities, this combination of intuition, observation and a *priori* knowledge, the partnership of the winemaker and the wine.

The vigneron in question makes Chenin and a little Pineau d'Aunis in Jasnières and the Coteaux du Loir.

Roll out the very different barrels

Barrel 1 - with the grapes harvested in difficult year, the resultant wine has lots of acidity that needs to soften in the cask. The cellar is quite cold and the fermentations are not finished, either there's still some sugar or the malolactic fermentation is on.

Barrel 2. Same wine different barrel same cellar. Some CO₂ here, still slightly pearly. Fermentation still going on... The winemaker knows instantly that this wine will need a long time to mature, especially as this particular cellar is very cold.

Barrel 3 is from the same year. More advanced than 1 & 2. The winemaker is not sure whether he will blend this with the first two barrels" *He observes that with the warmer weather these years, he will change a few things, on the harvest, and also with leaving a bit more clusters on the vines to have a little less concentration. He is looking for a 13° wine, not a 15°.*

Barrel 4 In flux. Malolactic fermentation is not over and there is still some sugar. He will probably set this cask aside. He says *that's the risk with his non-interventionist approach, the wine goes to his own rhythm.* This one had lots of noble rot, the malo is getting on the sugar and this brings volatile risks. *"To watch closely", he says.*

Barrel 7 Young vines (3 years old) up the hill . The vineyard was never pushed with products and the terroir is strong. The roots (which already go deep as the ground was ploughed) reach very easily the limestone over our heads. Very rich mouth, surprising for a first harvest. Nose is less expressive. He says that the wine is in the middle of its malolactic fermentation plus alc. fermentation. Grapefruit and peach on the nose, still. *Fermentation has been going on for 10 months. In a "chemically vinified" winery, there would have been industrial yeasts added and the fermentation would not have lasted more than 15 days...*

Barrel 8 2005 vintage. Explosive nose with lemon, orange, citrus peel. Spices, too. Very turbid. Slightly pearly in the mouth. This will have a minimum elevage of 24 months in casks. Potential is 15.5° here.

Barrel 9 2005 another cask. 16.5° potential. Turbid. Tangerine, citrus aromas, botrytis aromas too: Apricot jam. Noble rot here. Will be used to make another cuvee.

Barrel 10 Other cask of Chenin Blanc from a different vineyard. Very turbid. Very refined. Lots of sugar left but it does not taste too sweet, lots of acidity. From low-yield old vines. These 16.5° potential will maybe get 36 months in the cask. *"We'll see", he says. When asked about who is "we" he says "me and the wine". He often comes alone in the evening, to taste...*

Barrel 11 A 2-casks cuvée with 20° potential. Special cuvee. This is a noble rot sorting, harvested in October. *Minimum 4 years in the cask for this one, with nary a hint of sulphur added.*

Barrel 17 2002 Will be bottled soon, after nearly 4 years in the cask...It fermented slowly during 3 years and never had stirring. Ample nose with lots of aromas. Extremely complex wine. He says it could have easily spent another year in the cask. Still some gas, and a little bit of sugar.

Manifestations of the same grape variety, different expressions reflecting the journey from sun and soil to vine to grape to cellar to barrel to winemaker decision. The wine is nature nurtured gently.

Mything the mark

The final quack-quack to nobble is the idea that low sulphur wines are a lottery. We speak blithely about the fragility of wines and that they need to be transported and stored in cool containers. This is true of all wines, indeed of all fresh produce from butter to meat to fish. Only denatured, pasteurised products can withstand extreme temperatures. In terms of storage and service wines have their preferred temperatures from Muscadet through old red Burgundy to Rhone... And whereas low sulphur reds with their low tannins and their juicy fruit perform best when lightly chilled, the more phenolic, skin-contact whites enjoy being served almost at room temperature in a decanter. There is a possibility that the yeasts will referment above a certain temperature in wines made with zero-sulphur; the fact that the wines have to be served cool does not invalidate their quality. It is the nature of the beast rather than beastly nature.

Wines don't have to be natural to be different on different days, but because they are generally unfiltered, unfinned and low in sulphur there is a sense that natural wines are more biologically active and thus are constantly evolving. In this sense they are like individual people, whereas the mass-produced chemical wines are like people on tranquillisers or even automatons – in short, the Stepford Wines.

There are a lot of myths about natural wine because some people in the wine trade would have you believe that it is a single one stop shop philosophy peddled by swivel-eyed evangelicals, that we are all being deceived, that it is based on a big sulphurous lie. I have heard that natural wines are bretty or oxidised as if to perpetuate the caricature that there is a fault line running through wine, and on one side everything is natural (faulty), whilst on the other, everything is chemical (clean as laboratory whistle). Because so many people are talking about natural wine it behoves them to have an opinion, whereas the more humble approach would be to visit the vineyards, try different wines from different growers and talk to vigneron about their methods.

Failing that – come to the Natural Wine Fair!