



'Les Caves De Pyrene'

THE NATURAL WINE FAIR EDITION – PART 1

The Math(s), The Aftermath & The Aftermyth

or leave your baggage behind...

“People need to get out more often”, said a *vin nature* sceptic who had admirably screwed his courage to the sticking-place – and got out. “I didn’t expect to find so many wines I could drink”, he continued enthusiastically. A hit, a palpable hit. And one of many.

Facts and figures

Venue: Borough Market

Sunday: Bright, mild, a touch of breeze

Marie Thun: ----

Monday: Cloudy with a couple of bright spells

Marie Thun: Flower

Tuesday: Cloudy, cool

Marie Thun: Flower until noon then leaf

116 growers from France, Italy, Spain, Portugal & Australia...

Over 500 wines...

The vast majority certified organic and/or biodynamic

130 restaurants participating in the Natural Wine Fortnight

2000 punters (900 consumers; 1,100 trade)

A world of flavours to discover...

Seminars and sizzling sausages...

Thanks!

~ Thanks to Isabelle, Deborah, Tom & Jason, Fred, Guillaume & Thibault. And Amy, of course, for her fantastic organisational ability.

~ Thanks to Alice Feiring, Nicolas Joly, Gerard Basset, Xavier Rousset, Romain Henry, Ron Laughton and Monty Waldin for their insightful contributions to the seminars.

~ Thanks to Terroirs (Ed, Oli, Pascal et al) for hosting the growers on the Sunday, to Bar Battu for making us so welcome on the Saturday and to Brawn over various nights.

~ Thanks to Elliot's Cafe in Stoney Street as well for hosting the seminars and providing such delicious food for the weary growers and exhibitors on two of the evenings.

What they said about the Natural Wine Fair

...the tasting itself was stunning. An embarrassment of riches.

Jamie Goode – Journalist & Blogger

I have rarely been to such a big tasting where quality has been so high! I tasted some truly interesting and individual wines, it was a great tasting, my only regret was not having two days in which to taste.

James MacMillan - Exmoor Wines

May I say what an absolutely great tasting it was, great to see so many friends of the good stuff and great to see so many challenged by its wonderment,

Nigel Sutcliffe – Restaurant Consultant

So many incredible and unique wines you don't taste everywhere.

Radka Slovackova

Frankly, I was like a kid in a candy shop. All those superstars of natural winemaking under one roof! All that wonderful (a lot of it anyway) natural wine! It was almost too much for this wine geek to handle.

Christina Pickard

I'm SO glad I went. Whatever these wines stand for, there's no doubt that there were a number of damn good wines at the fair, wines that tasted fresh, bright, sometimes exotic, sometimes traditional, sometimes fascinatingly weird. And with engaging producers too, thankfully not the kind who want to ram the 'natural' wine message down your throat (again, I was sceptically expecting a bit of that).

Jane Parkinson

I'm an emotional guy and this wine is so beautiful I just want to cry. (and he does steam up)

Unnamed customer!

Links to articles about Natural Wine Fair

<http://www.winewithchristina.co.uk/index.php/category/blog/>

www.alicefeiring.com

<http://www.wineanorak.com/wineblog/italy/the-natural-wine-fair>

<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/a20110517.html>

<http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/lifestyle/article-23951480-the-discerning-drinker-natural-wines.do>

<http://winemadenaturally.blogspot.com/2011/05/six-things-that-struck-me-at-natural.html>

The Premise

Not the premises, mind, (a fruit and veg storage market – I'm getting apples, I'm getting asparagus...) but the *raison d'être* of our 'umble *affaire*. Simply to bring together like-minded people and create an event featuring small dedicated growers with a strong link to the land. The idea of natural wine had been knocking around London for a couple of years, and Les Caves de Pyrène itself had already hosted several self-styled "Real Wine" events, but now it was time to collaborate with others (see www.thenaturalwinefair.com for details of our partners in this enterprise) and take it to the next level.

What's in a name? Although this jamboree may not have been the clarion call for a trendy movement the publicity generated would hopefully provide the energy to put down roots, raising awareness of wines that had hitherto scarcely been on the radar in this country.

Anti-Semantic - The final word?

What's in a name? You could either seek to legitimise the word "natural" by introducing a strict code to describe natural wines, a set of commandments that dictates whether growers are allowed to be part of the natural tribe. And attract opprobrium for being extremist and exclusive. Or you can be more relaxed in the terminology, allow a broader definition of the wines and invite opprobrium for being woolly and non-prescriptive.

Participants in the fair included growers certified every step of the way, some who have abandoned appellation and are anti-establishment, some making zero intervention wines and others who make low-to-moderate intervention wines. We need to recognise the needs of the individuals every bit as much as promoting an

inflexible ideology. I am for rainbow alliances, for dialogue, for bringing people on board through rather than setting up a movement in isolation.

There has been so much blah-blah written about natural wine and I am conscious of jumping down people's throats when I feel that they have pronounced airily and fairly (unfairly) on the subject without sufficient evidence for their assertions. I suppose if your experience of *vins naturels* is the odd, isolated crook bottle you taste in a bar, or buy in a shop, you are probably not best equipped to generalise, although it might be natural, to coin a phrase, to assume the worst. By getting a hundred plus growers to exhibit their wines we provided a comprehensive context for the wines to flourish.

Tasting aside, a fair is ultimately a celebration, for friends to catch up and an opportunity for some *craic*.

Decanting the dregs

So, the event was a massive success. I would say that, wouldn't I? I saw lots of happy faces, felt good energy from the customers and growers and tasted some cracking wines. What's not to like?

Being outdoors was refreshing. Did not Jules Chauvet himself extol the virtues of tasting wine in the open air. I read a couple of comments observing that we were lucky we didn't have pounding sun or driving rain as if it was tantamount to natural winechutzpah to consider braving the elements. Consider me guilty ofchutzpah. That would be the Jewish side of my family to blame for that. I'm sure wines express themselves more fluently (fluidly?) in an al fresco environment with better quality of light. The idea of holding it in a small farmer's market was also significant, the antithesis of the massive exhibition halls and clunky corporate venues wherein the cloned big brands doth nest. Visits later that week to the soulless Excel convention centre confirmed that the biggest of events may well possess the slightest of statures.

The Contra-Naturalists

He's the hairy-handed gent who ran amuck in Kent
Lately he's been overheard in Mayfair
Better stay away from him
He'll rip your lungs out, Jim
I'd like to meet his tailor
Werewolves of London

Werewolves of London – Warren Zevon

Putting the colic in alcoholic

But what is it about the subject of natural wine that gets people barking at the moon? It's enough to get you believing that people's moods and intellects are governed by spooky cosmic forces.

And that would be absurd, wouldn't it?

Whichever way you slice it the subject in question never ends up as the subject in question. Intent on starting an argument in an empty room sane and rational contra-naturalists (note coinage) feel they have been sold a pup and must complain to all

and sundry. But I'm sane and rational, they cry, and these natural wine Voldemorts (us) with their insidious agendas and voodoo philosophies are trying to bamboozle/brainwash the unsuspecting public. Poor defenceless public! So double-trouble caveat emptor. Drill down deeper into these cris de coeurs and it seems to be just angry flummery masked as pseudo-science. The mantle of disgusted of Tunbridge Wells has passed to the blogger generation. Or in the words of Isabella in Measure for Measure:

...but man, proud man,
Dress'd in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd—
His glassy essence—like an angry ape
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As makes the angels weep

If you repeat a gaggle of canards often enough you will end up believing them and persuade others that your opinions are facts. I've heard the schtick about all natural wines being oxidised so often, I'm in danger of becoming rusty by association. Politicians do it all the time; it's call spinning the truth. We need a healthy homeopathic dose of perspective.

Let's crit these critters by disentangling their tangled accusations. Firstly, the contras (invariably portray natural wines as homogenous products) as if vineyards, growers and methodologies never change, and will always yield identical results year after year as well. We would suggest that even within the natural idiom the stylistic range of wines is incredibly diverse. If you like there are apples (pock-mark'd apples, natch), oranges, cherries and plums. What there isn't it is a range of homogenising, pasteurising chemical techniques which excise nuance in favour of bland broad brush-stroke flavours. The accusation levelled at the mass of natural wines is that they "reek" of sameness – be they white, red or yellow. Fiddlesticks and flapdoodle, as Professor Yaffle would say. The opposite is the case. But you need to be there with the wines to see it. The other principle accusation of the contras, which we will return to with tiresome frequency, is that a number of wines are oxidised, the necessary consequence of using low or no sulphur. This calls to mind my favourite episode of Black Books with Kevin Eldon as The Cleaner... All together now: "Dir-ty!"

<http://youtu.be/C4wBLUBa8YI>

An oxidised wine is a terminal case; it cannot move because it is dead; it is an ex wine. Then how is it that these wines are alive, constantly changing and paradoxically never deteriorating; could it be that they are made *oxidatively*? Perish the thought that the taster always knows better than the vigneron. This is not an apology for oxidised wines, rather a plea to understand a particular winemaking technique that encourages this characteristic in the wine. Is this truth-in-wine or falsely-made? Discuss heatedly.

The other week on his Wine Anorak blog Jamie Goode wrote an impassioned plea for open-mindedness, venturing that he likes the excitement of natural wines. I understand this visceral appeal of the wines which provoke sharp aesthetic and intellectual responses and makes us continually re-evaluate our notion of what is good and bad.

Some of the responses to his reasoned observations illustrate everything that is narrow-minded, deprecating and self-preening about the wine world. Alas. Too many people attack what they believe to be the message rather than exploring the wines.

The natural wine message is simple and wouldn't fright the most skittish of horses: wine should come from vineyards which have been sustainably farmed without the use of chemicals and then vinified without additives (with a little SO₂, as necessary, to stabilise the wine). Vive la revolution, man the barricades and shiver your timbers because judging by the hoo-ha natural wine has reinvented the wheel (or thrown away the wheel and taken us back to the dark ages).

Sceptic shock

Sceptics love to believe they are scientists and that natural wine embodies baddest of science. A little learning though is proving to be a dangerous thing and seems to act as an alibi for not thinking things through. Reciting chemical formulae, like some sort of religious mantra, is no more a comprehensive description of the wine, than saying that my entire personality can be explained by chemical and biological programming. Someone observed to me blithely that we know a lot more now than we did way back when. Do we? Just a few years ago we thought that chemical interventions in wines were the artificial bees-knees. Now we see them as stripping life from the wine. I'm not so sure that winemaking has improved as a science per se, but that human beings are always learning from their mistakes, which is why natural winemaking has come on leaps and bounds in the last decade.

Interestingly, the current generation of natural winemakers have rejected the wines of their fathers, metaphorically speaking, to embrace the practical wisdom of their grandfathers. Wine was made for centuries without chemicals presumably without detriment to the wines; we have only come to accept oenological standardisation in the last couple of generations and then for commercial rather than scientific reasons. Intensive farming practices are also a relatively recent phenomenon; once they became established those who farmed organically were regarded as eccentric. And biodynamicists were the worst sort of druidical tree-huggers! The wheel turned and now it is generally accepted that the over-application of chemical treatments in the vineyard weakened the vines, damaging the living organisms in the soil and destroying biodiversity. As Joly often observes we have lost touch with nature and fundamental universal laws. The desire to improve authenticity and to rediscover the taste of wines led to the emergence of sympathetic sustainable farming methods designed to restore the equilibrium of the vineyard. Biodynamics has moved from the occult to the pragmatic; it posits a kind of e.q. in farming and exalts sensitivity, prescience and human observation as a means for improving the wines. As one grower said to me: "I am not sure whether all the treatments work, but biodynamics has made me a much better grower." Whether or not you subscribe to all his theories Joly is surely correct to suggest that our generation does not have the monopoly of wisdom. Progress is, consequently, not the unthinking appliance of technology but rather the cultivation of intuition and understanding. We taste, but if we don't like what we taste, we assume that the fault is with the wine, disregarding both the natural processes that took place and the intention of the winemaker. We assume that our palates are already perfectly calibrated, therefore we disengage our curiosity. Our very desire for perfection thus creates the biggest hole in our understanding.

A digression concerning digressions....

I was moderating (ha – I love that word) a seminar on how to sell wine in the on-trade. Unfortunately, it was hijacked or partially derailed, depending on how you want to look at it, by a heated disagreement about faults in wines. This kind of discussion is only interesting to me in the way it touches on the philosophical and aesthetic approaches to taste. Arguing until the oxygen has been sucked out of the

room about whether oxidation is a fault or VA is acceptable is an intentionalist fallacy best left to the winemakers themselves who can respond to such hypotheses with direct information or a strong right hook. Suffice to say that when you make wine naturally the microbiological consequences of the vinification gives you an interesting palette of flavours to play with. The nature of those aromas and flavours are controversial and what I might think unusual and complex, others may find distorted and simplistic – or off. If the intention of the winemaker is to allow (or encourage) this to happen it is surely presumptuous to put one's moral taste preference before the wine. Perish the thought that an artist-artisan or free thinker should express his or her work in a unique way. Or, to put it simply, by all means say whether you like or dislike the wine, but don't state categorically that this is right and that is wrong unless you have undeniable evidence for your assertion. Whether one is appreciating wine, interpreting literature or trying to understand history there is a received wisdom, a critique for trammelled minds and, whereas on Sunday consumers were ahead of the curve, tasting without preconceptions, largely enjoying the wines for what they were and engaging with the growers, it was noticeable that some professionals were standoffish, taking critical bee-sips with a kind of "presumption of guilt". I call this reductive tasting, looking at wine as no more than the sum of its perceived flaws or faults. There will always be some bad eggs in a tasting but that is no excuse to hatch a generic-phobic approach to the whole exercise.

If we do not understand what we should always be prepared to ask why. Wine tasting should not take place in a hermetically sealed bubble for wine *au fond* is a social drink, the spur to curiosity and debate. Tom Lubbe, for example, is an extremely articulate cicerone to his wines. He understands the grapes and the conversion process (vinification) and can strongly justify the result by describing the intention. He is a farmer, scientist and a philosopher and will also challenge your ability to taste his wines on every level. Another grower without those intellectual reference points would be puzzled by super-analytical blah-blah. "My wine is my wine. You don't like it?" You go to taste and to understand not to be converted (although you may be). No grower, as far as I know, says with glittering eye: "I make natural wines ergo you must like them", but rather, by making the wines as naturally as possible, "I make the wines that I like to drink". Taste wine, not dogma.

People will taste with preconceptions. This is human nature. When I took over from one of the growers who had sloped off for the afternoon to visit the Tate Modern, I had to present her seven (very different) wines. I discovered that good communication helps to alleviate distrust and that understanding lubricates enjoyment. To tell the story it is necessary to describe the terroir, the vintage, the specific vinification and I generally found the more information I gave people the more they seemed to like the wines. The critical taster doesn't want the information because it clouds their desire for objectivity something which is entirely based on the analytical quality of their palate. If their palates are purely trained to like certain things and reject others out of hand then I would say some recalibration is necessary.

The British disease – disoriented by WSET?

The crustifarian tendency will always defend the status quo and resist the very notion of change. But I am an argumentative cove; and I truly believe that bad taste is the deplorable absence of imagination. The WSET courses tend to institutionalise taste by placing disproportionate value on cleanness and fruitiness - at the expense of individuality and interest. Rather than encouraging people to think outside the box

and explore the wilder shore of wine the WSET remains firmly entrenched in its doctrinaire approach to wine tasting. This is no doubt why an MW could say to me - without a flicker of irony - that Josko Gravner was absolutely incapable of making decent wines; he had, in the MW's words, lost the plot. In his not-so-humble opinion. As well as exhibiting the worst form of critical snobbery which exalts an observer over a do-er, and ignoring the fact are many more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in their meagre philosophy, this reminds me that plots are part of narratives and the narrative here is generated by a critical hierarchy. But it is also like stating that jazz is a corrupt form of music, or that Turner couldn't paint strictly accurate sunsets or that freeform poetry is inherently inferior to rhyming couplets - tantamount to saying that one form of art is superior to another, or even more arrogantly, that one form is art and the other is not. Throughout school and university, although I enjoyed a liberal education, I was taught the establishment line to take whether interpreting a poem or understanding historical perspective. With an independent mind I can reject that deterministic approach and decide what's what for myself. Educated wine opinion should not be the prerogative of a hierarchical cabal of wine cognoscenti. As it is often said: "Education is everything you didn't learn at school".

The world loves a sweeping generalisation and I have to say that the peddlers of wine orthodoxy seem to be addicted to the grandiloquent dismissal. All natural whites are oxidised – tick; the wines are unstable and don't age – tick; it is impossible to make zero sulphur wine – tick. It's just astonishing that it happens at all – it's obviously a massive con trick perpetrated on the world of wine by people too stupid to understand that their wines are undrinkable on people too ignorant to realise they are drinking vinegar. Of course, I am parodying the argument, but delve into blogosphere (and national newspapers) and you will read similar egregious fulminations.

All concord's born of contraries (Ben Jonson)

Unlike those who make a virtue of damning natural wines I wouldn't never tar all members of the wine establishment with a single brush. There are many I like personally and most that I respect. Few people are totally closed to the notion that the wines can be wholesome and delicious; they would simply argue which ones. Disagreement is healthy; we need to test propositions and dearly-held beliefs otherwise the world of wine will become stale, flat and just concerned with being profitable. And yet I taste with people who regard themselves as having conventional palates and witness them responding to the wines. The variety and excitement of natural wines is beginning to attract more and more people – they may like the idea, but without the taste the idea, per se, would be unpalatable. Natural wines (even the concept of them) is a firecracker up the bottom of the establishment; people are talking about wine with passion, be they consumers, sommeliers, restaurateurs or the wine press. Our job is not to be divisive but hopefully to bring people together, to champion the wines in a humble and humorous way, to stimulate people to try them, to discover the story behind, and the life within, the wines. The naturalists, I hope, do not believe in lines in the sand, or sitting in a trench fighting a war against so-called conventional wines. They want to tell you what is in chemically-made wines and show what can be done without the usual interventions.

Natural wines are unpredictable. You said it, kiddo. And three cheers for that. Their sheer perversity is embodied in these lines by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

*And all things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim...*

Selling natural wine into the on-trade

<http://www.harpers.co.uk/news/news-headlines/10559-on-trade-must-explain-natural-wines-to-diners.html>

Despite the jousting on the floor regarding the warp and weft of good taste we also discussed in our seminar the difficulties of presenting natural wines to unwitting or potentially sceptical customers. Was there resistance and did it reside in the customers or sommeliers? As mentioned 130 restaurants and bars have been selling wines by the glass during the Natural Wine Fortnight. Baby steps. Romain Henry, who works at ** Michelin Hibiscus, is a passionate advocate of natural wines. His take is that as a customer you are in the hands of the chef and the sommelier – that the list is the list and the menu is the menu and that there are no easy hostages to fortune. With 90% of the list effectively natural and a healthy chunk of vins jaunes (skin contact), the offering at Hibiscus reconciles sophisticated cooking with complex wines (Noma, in Copenhagen, does the same). The speciality list is the most obvious and powerful way of promoting these wines – Terroirs, Brawn, Artisan & Vine, Bar Battu and Green & Blue have nailed their respective colours to the mast. If you go to these joints you know what to expect and that expectation conditions the response to the wines themselves. Early doors at Terroirs I saw a businessman order a bottle of Sancerre and be flummoxed by the amber-coloured liquid poured into his glass. Nowadays, we get people complaining if the wine tastes conventional (i.e. insipid). TS Eliot once said that “humankind cannot bear too much reality”. Well, when your palate is sufficiently calibrated you can absorb real wine in spades.

Gerard Basset gave a balanced response: “I am not an extremist either way”, he says. He likes to drink the low-sulphur, sapid, healthy style of wines, but admits still not being a fan of the more extreme styles. Hotel Terravina has a page devoted to natural wines, highlighted by the fact that they are the only wines with an introduction and tasting notes. This strikes me as an eminently sensible “first step” approach, drawing the customers’ attention to their existence without forcing the wines down their throats.

Xavier Rousset has energised the London wine scene with his two projects, Texture and 28-50. Although not an out-and-out sceptic he felt that a lot of the wines were flawed and not customer-friendly. He lists wines on their merits, but would not make any special dispensation for them on his lists.

Romain pointed out that certain sommeliers were happy enough to drink certain wines at home but would not serve them in their restaurants which he felt was hypocritical. He went on to say that the job is surely to sell, to engage, to enthrall

rather than take the line of least resistance. I would agree and go even further. London may be the clearing house for all the wines of the world and yet you see over and over again the prefab anodyne-eclectic wine list at a base level and the sommelier-tick-the-classic-box at a more rarefied one. Natural wines sit uneasily on such lists – they are like a bleeding steak in a vegetarian restaurant, and those who serve the wine are reluctant to recommend them unless they are totally sold on the concept themselves. Rather than being the life and soul of the list the wines are relegated to the fringes. It does not have to be this way. My local serves Olivier Cousin's Grolleau by the glass as well as listing Thierry Puzelat's Cot; the general manager pushes these wines enthusiastically. His passion animates the customers who usually end up loving the wines. As Romain says: The wines are the story of the growers. That story deserves to be told.

The Final Word... for the time being

*A wine fair is a party. Not all your best friends may be invited, but there's enough entertainment to be getting on with.

*One person's natural may be another's unnatural.

*The word "oxidised" is banned forthwith.

*Liberté, Fraternité and Copinage! (Joe Dressner)