

WINE & SPIRITS / BACK TO NATURE

Natural wines don't have additives, use fancy technology, or even maintain a uniform taste from year to year. What they do have is a growing number of people who love them. BY PATRICK COMISKEY ILLUSTRATIONS BY SERGE BLOCH

WHEN YOU UNCORK OR UNSCREW A BOTTLE OF WINE THESE days, you probably make the very reasonable assumption that your wine is a natural product, that it has more in common with orange juice than, say, Tang.

But chances are good that the wine is a long way from fresh-squeezed. In the last 60 years, numerous practices have taken winemaking further and further from its simplest, most natural form: grape juice that's been fermented by yeast and preserved in a bottle. Many of these practices amount to technological advances or solutions to long-standing problems. In the last decade, however, some have taken the form of cosmetic enhancement—nips and tucks to smooth away less-than-consistent expressions of the grape. More than ever before, wine is processed: in large-scale operations especially, wineries are more like factories.

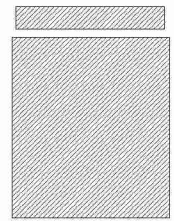
All of which has led to a dogged subculture of winemakers, importers, and advocates who are devoted to a return to traditional winemaking and vine-growing, to make a product that is as pure as humanly possible. These naturalists, to varying degrees, are growing grapes without the use of herbicides, pesticides, fungicides, or any other 'cides. The fruit is nearly always hand-harvested and grown without irrigation. It is vinified using indigenous yeasts that live naturally on the surface of the grape or in the winery. New oak barrels, while not technically unnatural, are frowned upon, as is the excessive use of sulfur as a preservative. As much as possible, the winemaker allows the wine to make itself.

This type of winemaker is still rare, and the wines themselves are expensive to produce and sometimes so rustic or exotic that they're not likely to appeal to everyone's tastes. Nevertheless, natural wines are being made in sufficient numbers—and are garnering enough critical attention—to provide a real alternative to conventional wines.

When did wine become anything but natural? For more than 4,000 years, winemaking and vine-growing changed little. Technological advances amounted to the use of glass bottles and cork stoppers to reduce spoilage and preserve wine. But in the middle of the last century, large-scale industrial farming transformed agriculture by instituting many nontraditional practices, including the widespread use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Europe's wine regions, decimated by war and years of economic hardship, turned increasingly to chemically

enhanced farming because of its reliability. But that kind of farming reduced soil to little more than a lifeless medium for fertilizers and additives, and there were times of the year when vineyards became hazardous, even deadly, to walk through. At the same time, the global market called for production that emphasized volume, efficiency, and, above all, consistency—a trend that continues to this day.

While throughout history wine has been praised for its variability—the fact that it changes in the bottle, in the glass, and across vintages—marketplace consistency still breeds brand loyalty, whether it's to a bottle of wine, a bottle of Coke, or a bottle of dandruff shampoo. As a result, many >>



less-than-natural processes have been developed to ensure consistency, from minor tweaks to major innovations. In the vineyard, high-performance clones and rootstocks maximize yield and machines harvest the grapes; in the winery, additives include enzymes, modified yeasts, oak chips, oak dust, tannins, sugar, and coloring agents.

Enhancements are hardly limited to mass-market wines. For boutique wines, there are costlier methods of manipulation. Does your wine taste hard or aggressively tannic? Break out a micro-oxygenator, a device that pushes tiny oxygen bubbles into the wine to soften the tannins. Grapes too ripe or too sweet? You can add water or acid to correct any imbalance. If alcohol's the problem (and it often is, with overripe grapes), simply remove it using "spinning cone" technology. Enzyme cocktails and yeast enhancers (which go by names like OptiRed and OptiWhite) can push your yeasts to over-perform. Many of these processed, or "spoofulated," wines are irresistibly delicious and often get high marks in competitions and from critics. But they can taste soulless.

A few years ago, I was interviewing a prominent Oregon winemaker who poured me an especially seductive Pinot Noir. She informed me, with obvious pride, that she adds oak balls the size of Ping-Pong balls at a certain stage of the fermentation to give the wine a creamier mouthfeel.

I was amazed at her skill, but the disclosure also seemed kind of creepy. This was Pinot Noir: a varietal famous for its ability to express vineyard character. Where was the Oregon-ness of this wine? I felt a little manipulated, as if the winemaker, like a plastic surgeon, had cosmetically altered the wine to guarantee my seduction, and sacrificed its authenticity to do so. Still, it was drop-dead delicious. Where was the fault in that?

Natural winemakers do find fault in this sort of tampering. They prefer to let the vines and the wine reflect what nature bestowed upon that vintage. This might make them wonderfully interesting or, sometimes, just funky and weird. At the very least, they taste unique—they're like the poster children for *terroir*, the French term that refers to the

HOT BOTTLES

Natural wines aren't labeled as such, but you'll find them via specialty importers and stores like San Francisco's Terroir (terroirsf.com) and New York's Chambers Street Wines (chambersstwines.com). Here are a few favorites.

WHITES



Clos Roche Blanche 2006 "Sauvignon No. 5," Loire Valley/ \$20
A haunting and earthy spice note lies beneath a fresh, lime-like aroma.



Bonny Doon 2006 "Le Cigare Blanc," California/ \$22
This Rhône-style blend of Grenache Blanc and Roussanne is biodynamic.



Domaine Dirlar-Cadé 2005 Sylvaner, Alsace/ \$24
Contains scents of white flowers, pear blossoms, and a bit of green herb.



Movia 2006 Ribolla, Slovenia/ \$30
Rich in the mouth, but with a clean edge and an herbal fragrance.



Domaine Huet 2006 "Le Haut-Lieu" Vouvray Sec, Loire Valley/ \$35
A biodynamic Loire Chenin Blanc with traces of lime and apple.

REDS



Catherine & Pierre Breton 2005 "Clos Sénéchal" Bourgueil, Loire Valley/ \$23
A violet aroma with dark-purple fruit.



Dashe Cellars 2007 "L'Enfant Terrible" Zinfandel, California/ \$24
This organic wine is unfiltered, and made with natural yeast.



Montirius 2005 "Le Clos" Vacqueyras, France/ \$30
Biodynamic, and redolent of violets, iron, deep strawberry, and raspberry.



Brick House 2006 "Cuvée du Tonnelier" Pinot Noir, Oregon/ \$42
Scents of black raspberry are mingled with a hint of tar and earth.



R. López de Heredia 1999 "Viña Tondonia" Reserva, Rioja/ \$47
Aromas of tobacco overlay bright-red cherry. —P.C.

way a wine expresses the place where its grapes are grown.

I still struggle with the question—natural or not?—every time I open a bottle, but I'm grateful to have the choice, just as I am glad to have the choice between, say, a roasted heirloom potato and a Tater Tot. We all know that there are times when a Tater Tot totally hits the spot. The same is true for a ten-dollar red. It's a big world, and there's plenty of room in it for both the natural wine that proclaims difference and the satisfying sameness of a reliable conventional bottling. Your wine tastes can, and should, include both. ■

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