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## THE MONASTIC MOVEMENT

THERE is a developing divide in the world of winemaking. On the one side viticulturists practice a high degree of control over nature to lessen the risk of losing money on a vineyard investment. The resulting wine, made with a varying degree of technology, produces a consistent good quality product for a specific market. Whilst the other approach is where grapes are grown and wine is made with minimal intervention. Vineyards are run using organic and biodynamic methods as a point of difference, personal belief in its quality and to curtail the use of chemicals. The wine is made with minimal equipment and sometimes ancient methods. Often one method produces wines no better than the other, both have the capacity

underlying strengths of wine, and one which separates wine from other alcoholic beverages, is that it is a natural product and not a manufactured one. Nothing needs to be added.

Natural wine, by definition, is usually sourced from organic or bio-dynamically grown grapes, hand harvested and made into wine with minimal intervention from the winemaker. Wines are produced without additives or flavours. They use indigenous yeast to ferment the wine and administer low levels, or in some cases, absolutely no sulphur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>). Natural wines are artisan products made in small batches, and so do not use industrial methods of manipulating the outcomes of nature such as using micro-oxygenation, reverse osmosis or

a grapes' primary fruit is maintained. But there is nothing wrong in adding flavours to wine, as long as it is safe and legal. Traditionally pine resin (*pinus halepensis*) is added to savatiano grapes to make Retsina in Greece, perhaps a bad example! The majority of our manufactured food has additives. But what the naturalist would argue is that there is no ingredients list on the bottle when perhaps there should be.

Jules Chauvet (1907-1989) is considered to be one of the catalysts of the natural wine movement. A negociant from Beaujolais, he was a scientist and published papers on indigenous yeasts, carbonic maceration and worked on identifying aromas in wine at a time when descriptions were anything but fruity or flowery. Chauvet recognised that the heavy handed use of pesticides and the addition of too much SO<sub>2</sub> could have a detrimental impact on the natural yeast population and restrict the true aromas of the grape.

The use of indigenous "wild" yeasts and the restrictive use of SO<sub>2</sub>, seem the fundamental building blocks of natural wine. The organic process of building up a vineyards biomass - the microbial flora - allows native yeasts to thrive. These 10 or so yeasts kick off the fermentation before the alcohol tolerant *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, that lurks in wineries, takes over. Low SO<sub>2</sub> levels allow the wild yeast to operate. The more gentle start to a ferment means a more oxidative environment which could possibly have an effect on the final wine. Chauvet argued that it was the quality of these native yeasts that was the key to a vineyards terroir and typicity.

Andrew Guar, a leading wholesaler of natural wines, points out: "It's important to differentiate between what I consider to be natural wine (organic/bio, natural yeasts, no augmentation, minimal sulphur) and no sulphur wine.

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to make a good wine or a characterless drop. Probably the majority of good wine for sale in shops and restaurants has a "foot in both camps". You can categorise these two camps by using a number of labels, and some can be derogatory. When the knives are out between them, one could be described as "industrial winemaking" resulting in "homogenised wine"; whilst the second is "natural wine" resulting in a wine riddled with faults.

Natural wine, a name that implies that all other types of wines are labelled by default as "un-natural", is only a small sector of the industry but has grown and encompassed some more mainstream producers. The reason why this movement has gained momentum is that the traditional production process has developed, with the aid of science, into the realms of the agrochemical food industry. The movement is an attempt to get back to the basics. One of the

cryo-extraction. Fining and filtering are frowned upon as is chapitalisation and acidification. If fined, then organic egg whites would be the norm.

Whimsically, with such a strict regime of abstinence, I like the term monastery wine or monastic wine, in favour of natural, it also pays credit to the monastic orders that did such a great job in spreading the vine across Europe and indeed the world. In fact, some of the fermenting and maturation vessels used today are clay amphorae, a sight that would not be out of place in a 12th century monastery.

The aim of natural wines is to let the grape's terroir shine through without any adulteration. Mainstream winemakers can, if they choose, manipulate the outcome of their wines by selecting particular laboratory-made yeast strains to create additional aromas and flavours. Other chemicals are added to ensure

No sulphur wines can be wonderful with prudence, skill and high levels of winery sanitation but can all too often show faults. Some of the best wine producers of the world work 'naturally', although they would not refer to themselves as such (eg DRC), whereas very few producers work with no sulphur as successfully. Of course there are a few, but on the whole this area is incredibly inconsistent. The problem is that the two are always bunched together as 'natural wine'."

The advantage of natural wines is that they are practically chemical free and taste of the raw material. Guar believes that the "best examples taste better and leave me feeling better after drinking them". The downside is that there is a huge risk of spoilage and wine faults occurring. Sometimes vigneron develop "cellar palates" that completely fail to recognise a problem in their own wines. Natural wines can have a short shelf life and require more careful storage compared to other wines.

You need to have an open mind with natural wines. For example, some white wines can appear orange, a style founded in Friuli, Italy, and championed by Josko Gravner. There are other wines that you wouldn't even notice as being different from the rest. David Lowe in Mudjee makes a reliable preservative free, organic merlot in his Tinja range and the Hunter Valley's Harkham Estate makes an attractive rosé. Torbreck, in the Barossa, has a "natural wine project" and has produced three vintages of Natural Grenache.

Australia now hosts a small band of wine bars and restaurants where you can sample natural wines and make up your own mind. In Sydney you have Fix St James, Love Tilly Devine, 121BC and The Wine Library. Or try Virginia Plain in Melbourne, which has an "orange and grippy white" wine selection on its list. 🍷