



GRAPES AND NOTHING ELSE

Is it possible to make good wine solely from grapes? From grapes and nothing else? For an amateur surely the question seems quite odd - what else should wine be made from? The winemaker however, knows that there are many additives that can be legally used to influence the style of wine and which has consequently led to shape the idea of good wine today. Nevertheless, it is still possible to find winegrowers nowadays who pursue an alternative - people who make so called Natural Wines or Vins Vivants. Back to our roots. Our author is one of them.

TEXT: RUDOLF TROSSEN

OUR STEP INTO FREEDOM

Since we took over my parents' estate in the Mosel valley in 1978, we have worked with biodynamic principles

in the vineyards and in the cellar to gradually reduce the impact from the way we make our wine. We left our wines on the lees for as long as we could in the hope that nature would

somehow create drinkable wine. Well, to be fair, back in the 1980s when our summer was short and our sugar grades were not ideal, we had to sporadically interfere. Nonetheless,

over time we learned from Mother Nature to spread manure and use seeded green cover as well as many other biodynamic preparations, to allow our soils to breath and as a result our wine got better and better.

After some years we were discovered by sommeliers from Copenhagen as well as wine-lovers from Belgium who slowly introduced us to wines with no additions whatsoever - so called Vins Naturels. Not all of the wines we tried were convincing to us. It took some time for us to understand some of the wines that we tasted from the Jura or the Loire Valley for example, of which many had volatile acidity and other temporary odd tones. But, at the same time we encountered wines that showed layers of complexity, open and vibrant - wines that were alive. It made us think more than ever how wine was supposed to taste and challenged our common beliefs.

In the summer of 2011, we bottled a small amount of one of our 2010 single-vineyard Riesling's (after finishing malolactic fermentation) into sparkling wine bottles without filtration and without sulphur. *Zero Zero* was the name of this cuvée. We enjoyed the wine and other people agreed - it became a milestone in the development of our winery. Now, more than half of our wine is bottled without filtration and sulphur. Pure - and just as it is: fermented grape juice. Hell yeah, it's possible - to make wine just from grapes. And on top of that, there are people who are looking for exactly that - with that said all controversy should be moved out of the way - you can't fight about taste.

But is this natural wine? Nature does not harvest any grapes - it's always human beings who are at work. Winemakers know when they

proceed with which step and what footprints they leave behind - in the vineyards as much as in the cellar.

Nature does not harvest any grapes - it's always human beings who are at work

With every step we interfere, change and shape nature and the wine. To conclude, the term natural wine is not existent.

Back about 8000 years ago there was potentially an origin of viticulture. Grapes were picked by means of nourishment whether being fresh, dried as raisins or cooked as syrup. Eventually wine was made from such grapes. Without a doubt wine was organic (free of any pesticides or herbicides), with skin-contact (fermented on stems and skins), spontaneously fermented (free of added yeast) aged in amphora (buried clay pots underground) and most probably natural (without any additions and finings). Such wine was a complete expression of place and time of origin - transformed by human kind to a prime expression of cultural heritage. The relationship between humankind and nature must have been completely contrary to today's rational and squared way of thinking.

FROM NATURE TO CULTURE

The very first wines must have been similar to some of the wines still made in Georgia today. The wines shine shimmering orange and amber of the skin-contact, while tannins create structure and power with the uplifting tone of light oxidation. The vine was a holy relic and the viticul-

ture, vinification and enjoyment of wine was a sacred experience.

People felt that in drinking wine they received the nourishment, revival and ecstasy to bring them closer to god and higher powers. In Georgia up to this day, people celebrate the opening of the buried amphora known as quevris which are most likely natural (without any additions and finings), with a toast alongside dance, music and chant.

Contrary to this, today our so-called classic wines (with fresh, primary fruit and reductive characteristics) are a relatively young birth child of the 20th century that came with the rise of electricity, technology, machinery and additives of many kinds.

GLOBAL UNIFORMITY OR NAKED WINE?

The big dilemma arises when there is an increasing uniformity and use of standardized methods, recipes and additives that make it virtually impossible to tell the difference between a Chardonnay from California and Burgenland. If vineyards are irrigated this effect is even exacerbated. The character of the wine depends to a greater extent to the selection of yeast, enzymes and concentrates rather than the actual terroir. The more vigneronns that use strong fungicides in the vineyard, the stronger the need for trained (added) yeast in the cellar.

Many chefs and sommeliers that support authentic, low-intervention wines today have had their fair share of polished and squared wines that show a sense of uniformity across vintages and regions. It is a kind of superficiality with no depth that characterizes these wines.

There are wines that taste different because they were produced differently

There are in fact wines that are different to this, wines that taste different because they were produced differently. Wines that are subtle and need time and do not require any additives. They are 'wines without borders' as Alice Feiring (www.alicefeiring.com) describes these wines in her book - Naked Wine. Producing such pure wines does not mean doing nothing, but looking closely at the wine to build a certain sense of balance. It requires a sensitivity and awareness to create clean, genuine and living wines that tell a story of place and origin. This development of such wines is even more dependent on healthy vineyards that are full of life and in balance with mother nature. Such vines are the essence and root of fertility for the quality of a wine. And in other words, the key to success.

TRANSPARENCY BEYOND WINE LABELS

How to identify such wines? For some years now, members of the Association des Vins Naturels (www.lesvinsnaturels.org) in France have set required rules to define such wines. They take inspiration from traditional, century old principles. Skin-fermentation as well as Amphora-aging are not part of their rules, nevertheless allowed within their context. Others that have set rules for such wines are RAW Wine Fair (www.rawfair.com) in London, Vienna, Berlin, New York and Los Angeles as well as Weinsalon Naturel in Cologne (weinsalonnaturel.com): Obligatory, the viticulture needs to be

organic or biodynamic - grapes must be picked by hand and must be fermented with wild indigenous yeasts. They are not fined or filtered, and only receive, if necessary, a small amount of sulphur before bottling.

Organic agriculture exists because producers and consumers demand it

Governing bodies only require wines with more than 10mg/l of total sulphur to declare it on the label, even though 1 mg/l of added sulphur can dilute the character of a wine. Such zero sulphur wines are therefore very hard to identify. In saying all of this, sulphur per se should not be demonized, especially as without it there would not be protein - essential for life on planet earth.

NATURAL WINEGROWERS AS AVANT-GARDISTS

Producing and drinking such pure and alive wines without any use of chemicals and heavy intervention is a statement. The natural wine movement today consists of over 1000 winegrowers as well as countless restaurateurs, sommeliers, wine buyers and wine lovers around the globe - they all see themselves as pioneers and visionaries - somewhat similar to the beginning of the organic movement in the mid 1970s. Both phenomena are part of a more holistic movement that puts emancipation and freedom centre stage. What freedom though? Back in the 1970s freedom was seen as a fight for the fertility of mother earth, fresh and sustainably farmed food, while protesting against synthetic and profit-maximizing farming. Forward-thinking organic farmers anticipated

an unforeseeable catastrophe and global crisis if we continued with unsustainable agriculture. They joined forces and set principles, created organizations and eventually formulated international laws. All this also created an increased interest by the media and the general public. Organic agriculture exists because producers and consumers demand it - it is also in increasing demand due to the devastating downsides and consequences of industrial agriculture and its effects on the environment.

The time has come to extend this awareness to the perception of wine - reevaluating taste and breaking free of paternalism. It is no coincidence that in times of personal autonomy, individualism and self-determination, natural wine is on the rise and there is a growing demand. Ultimately, consumers who enjoy it should have the freedom to drink it - without animosity or mockery of any kind. Vice versa this should also apply to consumers still drinking more classic wines. A well-aged single-vineyard off-dry Riesling can be of enormous beauty. Nonetheless, such wines cannot be produced without intervening with the fermentation by adding sulphur and using filtration. In a way these wines are framed in the very moment the winemaker decides to stop its development in order to preserve freshness and primary fruit aromas which appeals to a large number of consumers. Consequently, many wine connoisseurs' tastes have been shaped by this style of sulphured wine. Such trained taste can be changed by trying living wines. They open new spectrums of taste and require a certain open-mind, as well as time for orientation in order to enjoy the flavors that are underdeveloped in wines with high-sulphur levels.

But there is a thin line and the boundaries of quality can be unclear

Sometimes, such genuine and characterful wines can have trace elements of faults or technical errors, but there is a thin line and the boundaries of quality can be unclear. Ultimately it comes down to personal perception. Perhaps it is exactly the reason why the natural wine movement is such an exciting and unique territory - pushing limits of individuality in the vineyard and cellar, whilst overcoming certain norms and anxieties. A winemaker needs courage to allow certain things to be as they are. Same applies to the consumer who needs to leave all of their preconceptions behind to trust and believe in the discovery and development of their palate.

THE EFFECT OF WINE

Perhaps sensitive people are able to perceive the spiritual dimension of a wine? And when they have a glass of good wine in their hand, is it this supernatural force that emotionally affects them? This spiritual presence is often what elevates the quality of such wines. Therefore does quality in wine directly correlate to something ethereal or supernatural? If this is true, is wine the best medium in which to transport this? When a wine has this extra layer of complexity, is this what makes our souls swim and in turn, is this then the meaning of soulful, living wine?

LET GO AND CONTROL

At this point, we cannot answer such questions, but we can look in a direction to where the answers might lie: inward, this is where we can create a certain awareness of what moves and influences us. As Rudolf Steiner said in his "Agricultural course", the basic work for biodynamic agriculture: "man is the foundation". It is only in our inner self that we can develop the criteria for observing the power of taste. This may be more apparent in wines that have been left without intervention or have been less worked, as each addition brings a significant change, and thus oscillation, imprinting new information into the wine, that in turn changes the "melody of the terroir". Why, then, with these revelations, do we continue to intervene and dilute something that is genuine by using measurements and ingredients? Is it due to our fear and habits?

The fact is that not all winemakers have mastered the art of *laissez faire* - letting the wine find its own path - as sometimes wines with such freedom can also become faulty. We don't have to drink them. On the other hand, there are some monotonous, expressionless and uninspiring wines made in the conventional wine industry - boredom in bottles. We don't have to drink them either. However, with our own senses, especially when we eat and drink, we explore and begin to understand our surrounding environment - this experience is a life long journey. Used carefully in the correct dose and attitude, wine can be an incredible medium for the awareness of quality as it allows us to fine-tune our senses to a broad spectrum of aromas and flavors. It also allows us to dig deep into the very essence of the place and the time of its origin. Wine in its purest form, by only using what is essential,

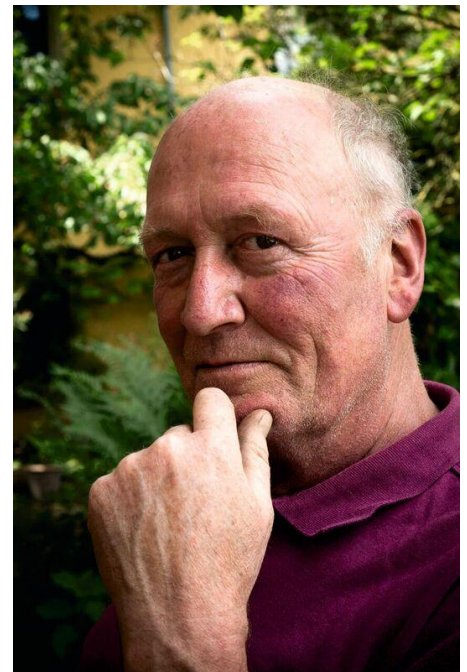
in search for the unmistakable, the authentic, the desire for the kiss of terroir, the essence of the wine, in the grape, the time and place of the workmanship transported, pure and undisturbed, longing for the taste of eroticism, it is this truth in wine, that will remain and bring joy. In the kitchen as well as in the cellar.

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