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# Natural Selection

► Does a natural wine prone to oxidation stay truer to its terroir, or does it merely deliver a kick in the face, asks Stuart George

Like the English conductor and impresario Sir Thomas Beecham, I believe that you should try everything once – except incest and folk dancing. “Everything” includes “natural wine”.

In February 2011, I spent a very enjoyable evening in New York with Alice Feiring, the so-called ‘high priestess’ (though she prefers “Patti Smith”) of natural wine and author of (in parts excellent) *The Battle for Wine and Love: Or How I Saved the World from Parkerization*.

We tried several natural wines, which, with no official recognition, can be difficult to define. Essentially, as little as possible is added to the wine. Grapes are grown organically or biodynamically, and only natural yeasts are used.

The use of sulphur with natural wines is contentious. In principle, a bare minimum is used but the bravest (some would say most foolish) winemakers don’t use any at all, which makes the wine highly prone to oxidation and microbial growth.

The wines we tasted in New York were, for the most part, oxidised. Some were deliberately so, apparently — but this may be tautological. They had acidity like a cat’s claws. Natural as they were, I took no pleasure in drinking them. I like freshness and balance, not decay and a kick in the face.

Feiring’s view of wine is, “I want them natural and most of all, I want them to speak the truth even if we argue.” Feiring and other proponents of natural wine believe emphatically that natural wine equates good wine, or, more poetically, truth is beauty. But, on the basis of what we tasted together that night in NYC and other wines that I have tasted subsequently, this is a fallacy. Just because a wine has used cultured yeasts or sulphur doesn’t mean that it’s bad or that it doesn’t speak the truth. Chemicals won’t make a wine better, but they do stabilise it. Is an oxidised wine more ‘truthful’ than a wine freshened by sulphur? Which would have the most expressive fruit and best interpretation of its terroir?

During the Natural Wine Fair, held at Borough Market in London on 15 to 17 May (and at which Feiring was a speaker), there was a panel discussion on ‘Selling Natural Wine in the On-Trade’. Chaired by Doug Wregg of the excellent importer and natural/organic/biodynamic wine

specialist Les Caves de Pyrène, the panel comprised the current world champion sommelier Gérard Basset MS MW, Xavier Rousset MS of Texture and 28-50, and Romain Henry of Hibiscus, which has one of the most extensive restaurant lists of natural wines in the UK.

As Wregg admitted, “The big problem is defining the term ‘natural wine’. We deliberately don’t want too many precise rules. A lot of producers have opted out of systems like AOC or Vin de Table and don’t want to be evaluated by the wine press or other people; we can respect them for being individuals.”

Rousset said, “I tasted a lot of very good wines today but I’m even more confused than I was before going in. I thought there was never any sulphur but some producers used sulphur... The biggest issue for me is people hiding behind ‘natural wine’ and bottling oxidised wine and thinking, ‘I can get away with that because I’m natural’... I find them interesting and I enjoy a glass — but never a bottle.” It’s difficult for consumers because, as Rousset pointed out, some natural wines are “crazy” and some are “very clean and fresh.”

The distinguished wine writer Margaret Rand was in the audience. She asked Basset if he had any oxidised-style whites on his list. “No,” came the answer. Rand continued, “I’ve tasted some outstanding wines here but some wines that, frankly, were horrible because they were oxidised to hell. I thought, bring on the sulphur! I have nothing against natural wines in principal but surely they stand or fall on their quality?”

Rousset asked Henry what was “the best wine he had ever tasted, perhaps a Grand Cru Burgundy or 1961 Bordeaux, probably it was conventional.” Henry didn’t answer specifically but Feiring piped up that it was “probably naturally made”, though what defines “natural” remained elusive.

What was intended as a debate on how to sell these sometimes esoteric wines turned into a clash of cultures: “natural equals good” versus “good equals good”. The natural wine “debate” has turned into an argument about moral judgements. Even the philosopher Bertrand Russell, who said, “Drunkenness is temporary suicide”, could not settle this one. 

## STUART GEORGE

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