

# *fine lees*

## **Volcanic Wine**

Explosive wines from the world's most hostile terroirs

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## **A tale of the landless**

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## **Natural Wine - The great debate**



Design and illustration by Matt Ellis

Cover image: Mount Etna eruption December 2015, by Giuseppe Torre

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The two most wine-soaked months of 2018 are ahead of us. We're nearing the craziest, but most rewarding time of the year when it comes to bars, restaurants and independent wine shops. It seems that consumers, our guests, are more and more concerned about what they're drinking. Wine of course, but what kind? How and where was it made? What were the rocks like below the vineyard?

If consumers are asking more questions, then we have to be ready with the answers. In our fourth issue of Fine Lees we are looking for answers to some of today's most exciting vinous questions: natural wine, volcanoes, and the economics of the garagiste.

The legendary Willie Lebus tackles the question of 'natural' wine from the most important, hedonistic aspect, while Jess Broadbent climbs to some of the highest volcanoes with our great 'volcanic' producers. The journey leads through Sicily, Northern-Hungary and Santorini, to decipher the secrets of volcanic wines and all the buzz around them.

Can we call someone a winemaker who doesn't own a vineyard? Is buying grapes the ultimate evil or is it a way to save a wine region's diversity? The vineyard economics is a lesser-known – but in our case very important – branch of science. Christina Schneider considers different business models in her article about landowners and grape-buyers.

And finally, Douglas Blyde takes a trip through Italy in search of all the indigenous grapes with our Italian expert Mauro Segatta.

The cellars are almost full, the Christmas bookings are in; the season's upon us. We hope that our latest issue will provide enough reading and wine knowledge for the breaks in-between long shifts.

Cheers,

*Gergely Barsi Szabo*



Originally a sommelier – and a journalist in a previous life – Gergely joined Bibendum after years spent at Gordon Ramsay group and a year detour at Sager and Wilde. He is now part of the Bibendum Fine Wine sales team and a Business Development Executive. As a side project, G makes wine in his native Hungary, a dry Furmint from Tokaj to be precise. Follow him @gergelywine



# A TALE OF THE

# landless

by Christina Schneider, Bibendum Ambassador



The Vietti vineyards, Piedmont

I read an article on estate wine recently, which opened with a statement that went a little like this: “When you see a wine described as ‘estate’ on the label, it means it’s something pretty special and you can see it as a sign of quality”

This made me think of two very different conversations I have had with two very different winemakers over the last few weeks. One of them was Elena Currado from Vietti, whose family has been making wine in Piedmont since the 19th Century. Elena was talking proudly about the winery’s heritage and their own vineyards, planted by her father-in-law and his father-in-law before that. She was also jokingly referring to her husband as a farmer, who spends more time in the vineyard than at home, and she kept stressing the importance of growing their own fruit. I was convinced the romantic, historic, family-owned estate winery was the real deal.

The other conversation was with Pilar Miranda, one third of the Garage Wine Co., who makes tiny quantities of single plot wines in the Maule and Maipo Valleys in Chile. Her story started about 10 years ago, when she, her husband Derek Mossman Knapp and their friend Alvaro Pena started making wine in their garage with just eight barrels, mostly by hand. Fruit was sourced from small growers who couldn’t supply the quantities that the ‘big guys’ were after and who sometimes didn’t even know what was growing in their fields.

Today Garage Wine Co. makes only 1,500 cases of wine from 11 different plots, many of which are field blends, and in the process they support a number of farmers who would otherwise have a hard time selling their fruit at fair prices. I was absolutely certain that this David versus Goliath model, supporting the little guy and promoting weird and wonderful grape varieties and field blends, was the real deal.

But wait! Surely they can’t both be right, right? I had to dig a little deeper...

## The ‘real’ real deal

Most of us have grown up in the wine world, often considering those who buy grapes as the big, bad wolf: big Champagne houses and négociants making huge volumes of supermarket quality wines – and a lot of money doing so – on the back of the growers who do all the work, while getting little credit or money for it. Although producers like Louis Jadot and Bollinger make exceptional wines from bought fruit, we tend to believe that the best of wines can only come from those who are in total control of what happens in the vineyard and that for this to be the case, you have to own (or rent) the land.

Certainly, there is a lot of truth to that argument and no-one can debate that farming your own grapes is the only way to ensure that no shortcuts are ever taken. It also feels right to buy wine made by those who do all the work themselves, who get their hands dirty. Another reason customers might choose an estate-grown wine, is the sense of place that comes with it – being able to trace exactly where things come from has never been more important to people.



## So estate-grown fruit is the real deal, the only real deal? Well, not quite...

Let's head back to Pilar and Garage Wine Co. Big bad wolf? Certainly not. Control in the vineyard? Yes – and here it comes down to relationships. Some of the growers have worked with Pilar, Derek and Alvaro from the beginning; the farmers know exactly what they are looking for and doing. Those relationships are long-term partnerships, beneficial to both sides. As for the sense of place, every Garage wine comes with a plot number and a bottle number. The 11 plots they source from add up to around 4ha in total, which means the average size of a plot is a mere 0.35ha. I would say it doesn't get more precise than that.

## A landless identity

More and more 'landless' winemakers are popping up, and these are often young, innovative people who make up for their lack of funding with passion and ideas. Starting a winery from scratch isn't easy – or cheap! Buying a vineyard is pretty much impossible, unless you're a celebrity dreaming of making rosé in the south of France, or a hedge fund tycoon, realising your dream after watching *Sideways*.

Often, the only way to do it for fresh-out-of-school oenologists, ex-sommeliers or rebellious wine royalty offspring is to buy grapes and sometimes house-share with friendly winemakers, or even to buy juice or young wines; basically becoming micro-négociants, as they call it in Burgundy. The upside to this is easy to see: more innovation and more variety, being able to react to trends much quicker, making wine for the here and now. You want to make an orange Aligoté? If you had to buy the land, plant Aligoté, wait until you have decent fruit, buy Quevri, make wine and sell it, 10 years

would have passed before any money comes in. And what if people are totally over orange Aligoté by then?

The sheer cost and the long time it takes often prevent estate winemakers from taking risks, and understandably so. The landless (and sometimes even winery-less) approach makes a lot of things possible that wouldn't make sense for an estate winery. But there's not just upsides for the consumer and the start-up winemaker. There're also upsides for farmers, who might not own enough land to justify the investment of having a winery on it, or who might not even want to be a winemaker to start with.

In the end, it doesn't really matter whether or not a winemaker owns land, but whether or not they care about what they do and whether they respect the terroir and the community around them. I'm sure Elena and Pilar would both agree.

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Born where the Rhine and Mosel meet, **Christina** is a proper wine and spirits geek, with a particular love of Riesling (perhaps unsurprisingly). While starting out as a professional horse trainer – and taking a detour while studying maths – she's spent the last 18 years working in hospitality, running both bars and restaurants in Berlin, Paris and London, notably at Happiness

Forgets and Som Saa.

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# Indigenous ITALY

Douglas Blyde joined us for  
a journey through rural Italy

"When the Roman Empire fell, vines were left to their own devices, and, like regional Italian dishes, they cross pollinated, leading to a wonderful diversity of expressions," says charismatic Mauro Segatta. The Anglo-Italian sophist eagerly ushers me through Bibendum's showcase of indigenous Italians, held at Covent Garden's Li Veli Bistro.

A venture between proactive Puglian winery, Masseria Li Veli, and San Domenico Hotels, the cool, Covent Garden haven unites rich Puglian dishes including sautéed peppered mussels, bombetta pork rolls with caciocavallo and olive oil enriched pistachio ice cream, with ripe and distinctively signed Southerly wines.

## From the North...

To begin, Mauro hands me a chilled glass of homophonic Soave from Suavia. "Prior to 1931, Soave was known as 'Petit Chablis'," says Mauro, advising that the finest examples evoke the perfume of 'petrichor' – that welcome, earthy scent produced when rain disturbs dry soil. With vines tugging hills close to the town of Soave itself, characterised by its crenellated tenth-century castle, Suavia sold grapes to the local cooperative until oldest daughter and winemaker Valentina Tessari realised the

sadness in consigning such special fruit to anonymous blends.

"There are two faces of Soave," echoes Mauro, "the small families working low volumes on volcanic hillsides by hand, and the big coops planting the flatlands."

The "nervous", layered, incisively fresh Bianco Veronese Masiffiti Trebbiano di Soave is the result of a quest to restore "the real Trebbiano", supported by the esteemed Attilio Scienza of the University of Milan. Up next and presented by Valentina's sister, Alessandra Tessari, is the hugely opulent, honeyed Superiore le Rive Vitecola from 2010. At the time of writing, just 48 bottles of an annual 5,000 are allocated to the UK. "People appreciate Soave when done well," says Mauro. "But trying to convince them to try it when it has the reputation of being a cash cow is a challenge!"

We segue to Le Marche, a region known for the quality of its handmade shoes and nutty wines from Verdicchio. Marotti Campi abuts medieval Morro d'Alba, enclosed by the Apennine Mountains and Adriatic Sea. "But we wanted to show something different than Verdicchio," posits Mauro, introducing rare grape variety, Lacrima. Meaning 'tear', the name is thought to derive from its tear-like shape and thin skin



which allows tear-like drops of juice to weep free. The Rosato features a depiction of climbing roses on the label in a preview to the come-hither aromas that beckon when uncorked.

Meanwhile, supple red Orgiolo Superiore, “a best-seller by the glass at Knightsbridge’s Harry’s Dolce Vita,” weaves, among markedly silky tannins and a useful, perky acidity, the cheerful fragrance of handmade Turkish Delight. “It’s lovely and unusual with a long aftertaste, at home with lamb cutlets rubbed with Middle Eastern spices.”

Next, I learn about the famous, third-generation Bolzano winemaker, Alois Lageder, who tends vines on the vertigo-inducing Dolomites of Italy’s most northerly winegrowing region. “The gateway to Europe and trading route in Roman times, when it was the only way into Austria and Germany,” Mauro situates.



Alois and Alois Clemens Lageder, Alto Adige

Alois, it transpires, built Italy’s first sustainable winery in the early 1980s, and loves putting his terroir through experiments. Of Lageder’s breadth of wines, Forra is one of the most intriguing, being a single-vineyard expression of Incrocio Manzoni, a relatively frost resistant cross of Riesling and Pinot Blanc named after its deviser, Luigi Manzoni. A little melodramatic, and multifaceted, it somehow walks the tightrope of being able to appeal to both hardcore natural wine fanatics and those who might be irked by them. Despite being in a blisteringly hot valley, the spectacular lessening in temperature come night time allows agriculture, including olive trees and vines, to flourish. “It means you can sleep at night as the vacuum effect takes the heat towards Lake Garda.”

With a version of his famous Eataly that “looks likely to come to 135 Bishopsgate in 2020,” says Mauro, Joe Bastianich is the co-author of two books on Italian wine and, as a restaurateur, is the mind behind 30 operations including Babbo. He also makes wine in Friuli and his *Vino Orsone Friulano*, with flinty minerality and notably elaborate, leisurely spun texture, is apparently a fine culinary conversationalist with ‘raw fish’, says Mauro.

### ...To the Deep South

Heading to the Deep South to Oenotria’s toe, I admire the capitalised, bold, retro stance of Scala’s labels. “At VinItaly, most of the good Calabrian wines were taken or lacked the quality we were looking for,” reveals Mauro. “Then we walked past Scala’s stand, where old bottles from the 1950s featuring dramatic labels caught our eyes. Fortunately, the wines tasted great, so we asked if they could replicate them going forwards, and the rest, you could say, is history.”





*Pruning at Marotti Campi, Marche*

From a parcel of a mere 2ha, *Ciro Bianco Greco* flamboyantly brims with white spice, while *Rosso Gaglioppo*, likely a relative of *Sangiovese*, rises from vines sown in a land once laid to orange trees. The result is a Sunday roast friendly, gutsy profile of berries, cherries, specialty coffee and artisan chocolate brownie, which, stylistically, harks back to wines imbibed by Calabrian athletes in early Olympiads.

Crossing to the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea, *Tornatore* tends 46ha of *Nerello Mascalese* and *Nerello Cappuccio* vines that cling to the northerly inclines of one of the world's most active volcanoes, the UNESCO-registered *Mount Etna*, rising 1,000 metres above sea level.

*Etna Bianco*, made with *Carricante*, a variety believed to have been present on *Etna's* slopes for 1,000 years or more, endears with its elderflower and honeydew notes, being, says Mauro, a "terrific match with branzino in salt cooked on a barbecue". The red also stuns. Likened by ardent fans to Burgundian *Pinot Noir*, the *Pietrarizzo* bonds ethereal floral notes in a sleek texture. "Anyone who is anyone wants to buy *Etna* vineyards," says Mauro. "And there's no need to fertilise this black soil because the volcanic ash does the job for you."

From the East to the West of Sicily, *Caruso & Minini* sees sappy, very accessibly priced wines produced from historical varieties suited for the sweltering sun, realised as classy, unfortified wines in the land of *Marsala*. The results include a vivacious local white *Greco* *Dorato*, at home with crustaceans and baked strawberry-like *Frappato del Nerello Mascalese*, which could be described as an executive melted lolly, so unstopably delicious is it, and a succulent *Nero d'Avola '15*, free from any foxy ugliness.

Next, we island hop to Sardinia. Based in the centre of *Vermentino di Gallura* in the island's north, *Cantina del Vermentino* wholeheartedly celebrates the variety, which thrives on Sardinia's granite, "giving different, amazing reflections to the sea," says Mauro. Its leaves are also conveniently "resistant to salt burn" I learn. With bitter almond hints, a clear minerality and uplifting zest, the *Vermentino* is an utterly moreish conduit to the Western Med.

Onto the modernist marvel that is the *Bisceglia* winery in *Basilicata*, built this millennium beside the remains of a Roman smithy. Here, like a microphone to the ground, mineral *Falanghina* flourishes in dark volcanic soils alongside an expressive *Syrah*, *Bisceglia* being the first producer to plant the Rhone variety in *Vulture*. "Bonkers, but it works," confirms Mauro.

My favourite wine is called *Gudarra*, meaning pleasure, according to ambassador *Michele Bisceglia*, who has a tattoo of the arrow motif of the estate on his arm. Released when deemed ready, but with plentiful life ahead, the five-year-old *Aglianico Superiore* is supple, complex and even, if you savour it slowly, pretty. "We keep it back on purpose because *Aglianico* can historically be a punch in the mouth," confers *Michele*.

Mauro and I culminate with the wines of our host venue, *Masseria Li Veli*, whose *Pezzo Morgana* is a stringent selection of *Negroamaro* sown in the rocky, dry *Salice Salentino*. The bold, dark, brooding, prune-scented pour is meditatively strong for the hot day, but rewards patient discovery. Like all of the estate's wines, it features an original quartet of little crosses on their labels – the effective and distinctive signature on the property deeds of its first illiterate owner.

Given that Italy produces a third of the globe's wines from all 20 of its administrative regions, it made sense to take time with the help of *Bibendum* and *Mauro* to look in more depth at such a vivid cross section of its remarkable viniferous heritage, beyond *Piedmont* and *Tuscany*, at wines which harbour the ability to refresh, delight and challenge in equal parts...



**Douglas Blyde** is a drinks consultant, party planner and presenter to brands, banks and a media mogul, as well as columnist for *ES* magazine. He has been recognised by *The Spear's 500* as one of the most influential wine personalities in the UK. Follow him @douglasblyde

# VOLCANIC WINES

**Explosive wines from the world's  
most hostile terroirs**

**by Jessica Broadbent**

In the UK, our perceptions of volcanoes are in the main part handed to us by newsreels. We envisage dangerous, volatile environments: hardly the obvious agricultural site, even for a plant as tough and hardy as the grape vine.

But they are the ideal environment, as John Szabo MW says in his ground-breaking book *Volcanic Wines: Salt, Grit and Power*, “Volcanism’s almighty dark side hides an essentially constructive purpose: the constant renewal of the earth and a rebalancing of the internal forces that make our planet a liveable habitat.”

The soils at the base of volcanoes are fertile. They are full of minerals, and vines that grow on them produce wines rich in texture and flavour. “Mineral salts help to transport a lot of nutrients and flavours,” explains Giovanni Riviezzo, winemaker at Bisceglia in Italy’s Basilicata.

They sell well, too. “Volcanic soils are responsible for some of the most interesting wines in our Italian portfolio,” says Bibendum supplier manager Sarah Mansourian. “Besides the common attributes they share of bright acidity, saline character and lifted flavour profile, the wines from these unique soils are made from indigenous varieties and show exceptionally-pure varietal definition. These wines aren’t just individual and awesome, but have also seen a lot of attention this year as volcanic wines have ‘boomed’ in popularity.”

## **Chasing lava: where are all the volcanoes?**

Volcanic wines speak clearly of place, but where exactly do you find them? All over the world, actually. Perhaps one of the most famous is Mount Etna, the site of volcanic producer Tornatore. One of the largest – and oldest – wineries in the region of Sicily, Tornatore owns 46ha of vineyards on the north side of active volcano Mount Etna, 1,000m above sea level. But although Etna steals the limelight, you’ll find volcanic soils all over Italy, from Soave in the north to Basilicata in the south.

Travel even further north to Hungary, and you’ll find a winemaking region littered with volcanoes. Hungary may not be as well known for producing volcanic wines, but a lot of the country’s top wine regions are in fact volcanic, like Eger, Tokaj and Balaton. “In Hungary we are still at the beginning of our journey in expressing volcanic terroir,” says Tibor Gal, owner of Hungarian winery Gal Tibor, based in Eger. “We have always been conscious about the fact that we make wine on volcanic soils, but we didn’t know until the last few years that this is something so special to the rest of the world.”

Head back towards the Greek Islands and you’ll arrive at volcanic idyll, Santorini. “The buzz around Santorini is undeniably growing,” says Perikles Drakos, export director at Tsantali. “The trademark of a Santorini vineyard is the volcanic soil, superimposing schist, limestone, lava and ferric dust. The result was the formation of a rocky, flat surrounding with limited flora, therefore with no natural shield from the strong winter winds. Since it rarely rains, the land of the island is anhydrous.”





Suavia's volcanic soil, Soave, Italy

## All about the soil

So is growing grapes in these soils different to other soils? “We can’t say that grapes on volcanic soils ripen earlier or later or differently,” says Tibor. “We see that vine growing depends on the density of volcanic soils, shallowness of the upper soil, the steepness and microclimate.” Volcanic soils are also known for cultivating phylloxera-resistant vines. “The lack of clay in volcanic soil means vines are immune to phylloxera; therefore the age of the vines can be in many cases more than 100 years for us on Santorini,” says Perikles.

Ale Tessari, owner and marketing and export manager at Suavia in Soave, digs further on the topic of soil. “Volcanic soil is one of the most interesting types of soils for growing grapes. In the Soave Classico zone – as opposed to the majority of Italian volcanic areas – the soils

have undergone a great deal of evolution and acquired complex structural features.

“They are often characterised by a marked modification of the minerals, as is evidenced by their great depth and the highly-developed structure of the aggregates, with good porosity distribution and reddish-brown colours.

“In general, very old soils are also often characterised by a certain acidity and a low nutrient content. In the case of the volcanic soils of Soave, on the other hand, one finds virtually-neutral pH values. This indicates that the cultivation of these soils since ancient times has led to a redistribution of the mineral components that are most useful to plants and therefore the modification of these paleo-soils by man has proved to be particularly appropriate and effective in ensuring an ideal nutritive environment.”

“Accentuated and protracted alteration in a pedogenetic environment that is well aerated and favourable to oxidation of the minerals, combined with a scarce presence of fragmented rock, results in a deep soil profile. The soil is therefore able to interact in a comprehensive and dynamic way with the plant and allow the efficient exchange of water and nutrients, adapting to the needs that the vine shows in the course of its various phenological stages. In particular, the high degree of water availability that these soils present minimises the risk of water deficit, to which the Garganega variety is particularly sensitive.

Ale continues: “As a matter of fact, the high levels of macro porosity in soils constituted of volcanic rocks compared to any other type of rock is a very important characteristic. These pores allow the rocks to store water resources of up to 100% of their weight, releasing them very slowly in virtue of their high coefficient of water retention. This makes them a water reserve of notable importance for the vines’ root systems, especially in years when dry or even drought conditions prevail. Moreover, the roots actively breathe and derive benefit from contact with rocks that have pores, which are filled with gaseous substances, providing these for the needs of the vines.”

## A sense of place

Place. The buzzword of quality winemaking at present – and volcanic wines are full of it, they shout their heritage from the rooftops. “Volcanic wines are unique,” says Tibor. “Each and every volcano has its own taste and the winemaker’s aim is to express the precise taste of these

## What is volcanic wine?

It’s difficult to define a volcanic wine – wines are made from volcanic soils all over the world, each with their own distinct character. So what exactly is it about a glass of wine that makes you think “this is volcanic”? We put the question to some experts:

*“Volcanic wines have a deep and ripe minerality, and they can age for a very long time. The aroma, structure and acidity content of the grapes is perfect. Not only the quantity, but also the ratio of tartaric, malic and citric acid content is really stable every year,” says Tibor Gal, Gal Tibor, Eger*

*“From a sensory and organoleptic point of view the so-called mineral hints (together with some stony and sulphurous notes) are becoming ever more associated as an identifying characteristic for volcanic wines,” says Ale Tessari, Suavia, Soave*

*“Besides the common attributes they share of bright acidity, saline character and lifted flavour profile, the wines from these unique soils are made from indigenous varieties and show exceptionally pure varietal definition,” says Sarah Mansourian, Bibendum*



volcanoes. We really believe that the volcano shows itself, so we try not to add any artificial techniques or additives, and we would like to leave fermentation and ageing to nature. We believe that this is the most sincere expression.”

Ale agrees: “We try to keep the winemaking as simple as possible to let the terroir show itself naturally. We don’t use wood (mainly stainless steel) and we filter the wine only once, right before bottling to preserve its integrity.”

Although unique, to Perikles there is a distinct mineral character that connects volcanic wines across the globe. “The (much debatable) term of minerality seems to find one of its best expressions in the case of Santorini Assyrtiko. An individual, intriguing mouthfeel that combines high acidity with savoury quality and peculiar density. A fascinating sensory association met in volcanic wines all around the world, despite the enormous variations of the soil types and winemaking traditions.”

## Distinct quality

With this strong sense of terroir and such special soils, volcanic wines exude quality. They are also incredibly age worthy. “The aroma, structure and acidity of these grapes is perfect,” says Tibor. “Not only the quantity, but also the ratio of tartaric, malic and citric acid content is really stable every year. Volcanic wines are not only drinkable when they are fresh, but you can age them for 10 to 20 years and the wine (both red and white) is still in perfect condition.”

To Ale, it is the quality that distinguishes wines grown on volcanic soils. “Soave wines produced from volcanic soils are characterised by good

complexity and balance, accompanied by a general freshness. These characteristics are the result of careful, skilful control of the vines’ vigour, because well-balanced vegetation and yields ensure high standards of quality. The predominant scents are spicy ones (cinnamon), attributable to high quantities of benzenoid compounds, enriched by notes of white fruits and almonds.

“Excellent intensity and fullness on the palate are distinctive characteristics of these wines: these qualities are not perceivable in such an obvious way in the products of the neighbouring zones, so they can be directly related to the physical and mineral characteristics that derive from soils of volcanic origin. It is evident that there exists a rapport between soils composed of basalts, tuffs and pumices, and the richness of taste and balance that one normally finds in the wines that come from them.”

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Jess cut her teeth in the drinks industry throwing muddlers around behind the bar at Be At One. After a brief stint as an education journalist she found her way back to booze in the rather more sophisticated arena of wine, and was shown the ropes by the very best wine educators at Bibendum, where she was part of the content marketing team. She has recently exchanged the streets of London for the greener pastures of Australia and New Zealand to complete her first harvest.

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# natural WINE

The great wine debate

by Willie Lebus

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I've been in the wine business longer than I care to remember and I have always considered wine to be part of the great food experience. To me, understanding wine is all about flavour. And flavour begins with two things: a sense of smell and an enquiring mind. It's important that I set the scene, because the debate we're about to have is centred completely on the taste, or flavour, of wine...

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The single greatest frustration I have had over the past five years or so, has been my reticence over the issue of so-called 'natural' wine. The reason that I'm speaking up now is because I want to try and redress the balance that has for so long been in favour of the 'natural' wine fundamentalists and zealots.

It's not my intention to get personal in this debate. However, I am keen that chefs, wine buyers and most important, customers, are given an opportunity to understand what their choices are. It's bad enough sitting in a restaurant with a wine list full of unpronounceable, unfamiliar names, but it's depressing when your eventual wine choice turns out to be barely drinkable!

For too long there has been an extremely vocal minority trying to persuade anyone who is gullible enough that weird, 'off' flavours, inconsistency from bottle to bottle, still wines tasting cidery and fizzy, and loads more faults to boot, are all acceptable traits of 'natural' wine. I believe it's quite simple – wines that don't taste good are unacceptable. Nobody should make excuses. If it tastes nasty, don't drink it! There are many restaurants where the food is delicious, but the wine lists are shocking. And the poor customers are too polite or lack enough confidence to say 'no'. I fully accept that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but what I don't accept is that we should be coerced into accepting foul flavours as 'okay'. They are most definitely not.

## From the horse's mouth

I was recently out in the Beaujolais and Maconnais, catching up with producer friends new and old. Apart from tasting some very good 2017s, we obviously discussed what's going on



Camille and Mathieu Marcel Lapierre

in the vineyards and wineries. Perhaps the most relevant conversation took place with Camille Lapierre, Marcel's daughter (the visionary Marcel died back in 2010) and Mathieu's eloquent sister. I was unaware that before committing full time to the Domaine, Camille had been a chef and sommelier. Her passionate view is that wine needs to be excellent, no matter what happens outside her control. She believes that the 'natural' wine debate has been hijacked, and considering her family has been farming organically and using minimal sulphur since the early 80s, she and her brother are keen to continue their epic journey toward excellence. Having drunk their ethereal 2016, and tasted our way through other 16s and 17s, it's hard not to see why they are keen to avoid the murkier side of 'natural' wine.

Over the last two years, I have come across many young, small-scale and enthusiastic producers in France, Spain and Italy who are dedicated, where possible, to producing wines in harmony with the land. The great majority are trying to reverse years of agricultural

abuse. But first and foremost their mission is to produce wine that's balanced; wine that tastes consistently great.

This often comes from reversing the damage wrought by the previous generation. A consistent bleat is that their parents and grandparents have been misled into practically killing the vineyards and having to rely on chemical cocktails to feed the vineyards. But there is a distinct optimism that things are being gradually reversed: vineyard soils are beginning to come back to life, the bee and insect population is now regarded as friend not foe, while the maxim that wine is made in the vineyard is once again at the forefront for many wine producers. The key is to shepherd the grapes into the winery and keep an eagle eye on the magical transformation from grapes to wine.

## What is 'natural' wine?

I quote from Monty Waldin in Jancis Robinson's phenomenal *Oxford Wine Companion*: "Natural wine is a relative rather than absolute term for wine produced by small-scale, independent growers from hand-picked grapes grown using sustainable, organic, or biodynamic viticulture – increasingly but by no means exclusively certified as such. Natural wine enthusiasts favour physical rather than chemical interventions during winemaking, and thus no additives and minimal additions of sulfur dioxide, and preferably none at all."

Producing great wine consistently takes incredible attention to detail. Yet my message is simple: I am a massive supporter of organics, biodynamics and sustainable wine production, but not at the expense of great flavour. There is so much delicious wine out there, I urge you to say no to mediocrity, whatever the zealots may tell you. Stand up for proper, and properly good, wine!



Willie has been in the wine trade for a very long time. When he started in the late 70s, nobody had heard of New World wine, let alone 'natural' wine! There was more Muller Thurgau planted in New Zealand than Sauvignon Blanc. He is entirely self-taught and has pretty strong views on everything, particularly where taste is concerned. Willie has spent the last 30 years with Bibendum where he has effectively worked in buying, sales, marketing, PR and lots more.



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