



## THE NATURAL WINE CONTROVERSY

ALLEN BALIK, THE WINE EXCHANGE, NAPA VALLEY REGISTER  
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Our earth's climate is definitely changing while the influence of vocal "doubters" is shrinking. These are facts shared by over 90 percent of the scientific community, and the big question weighing on the minds of many is simply, "Now what do we do?"

Our changing climate has brought on searing heat and drought in many areas of the globe (including California's wine country) creating some of the most devastating wildfires in history, whether measured by acreage burnt, property destroyed and damaged or lives lost.

On the other end of the scale, it has also resulted in blizzards, ice cap meltdowns, rising sea levels and floods along with massive and numerous hurricanes, tornados, typhoons and cyclones.

Due to climate change, we've had to alter the way we live and many of the choices we make from day-to-day. Among many households and industries – especially those related to agriculture – these changes have been difficult and often expensive to implement.

Earlier this month, I was invited to join a most informative webinar presented by the UC Davis Library and the Robert Mondavi Institute for Wine and Food Science at UC Davis. It was titled, "Savor: California's Vanishing Chardonnay." Chancellor Gary May and University Librarian/Vice-Provost for Digital Scholarship MacKensie Smith were hosts and Robert Mondavi Institute Director Andrew Whitehouse served as moderator.

Although the webinar subject referred to the influence of climate change on Chardonnay, the discussion quickly morphed into a far broader exploration of production, trade and world events shaping the wine industry (from vineyard to table) during this time of change.

Setting this presentation apart from others I've previously observed and written about, was its clear focus on science, practical application and consumer messaging set in a multi-dimensional discussion presented by recognized experts in each discipline.

Leading off on the scientific side was Dr. Elisabeth Forrestel, assistant professor at UC Davis Department of Viticulture and Enology, followed by practical applications from Larkmead winemaker Dan Petroski.

Concluding with consumer messaging was San Francisco Chronicle wine critic and columnist Esther Mobley. Each presentation was directed at the panelist's expertise but carefully interwoven with insightful contributions from the others.



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Dr. Forrestel quickly pointed out that 2020 is on track to rival 2016 as the warmest year in recent history and the mean-values of warming are dramatically increasing. She also referenced the wide swings of heat extremes, increasing droughts and shifts in disease pressures along with a more prolonged and intensive fire season as challenges we must meet in adapting to climate change.

Napa and other winegrowing areas of the world are experiencing increased heat waves (100 degrees for three days or more), escalating evaporation rates and drought conditions that are, “causing added stress on both organic and human systems.” She added that the timing and amount of precipitation are equally important as evidenced by decreased winter snowpack affecting water availability throughout the year.

From the 1930s to the mid-1950s, UC Davis professors Maynard Amarine and A. J. Winkler worked to develop the Winkler Index that is an expression of heat summation based on measured “degree-days” and the establishment of five climate region profiles (“I” being the coolest to “V” as the warmest). The scale was meant to suggest the planting of recommended varieties in various growing areas based on the heat index.

While the concept of natural wine is not new, it remains one of the least understood categories by the consumer who often asks, “What is meant by the term natural wine?”

Even though there are strong advocates on both sides of the natural wine movement, there is no uniform definition of the term, nor are there any binding and official requirements for its vineyard and winery practices or production standards.

In Europe, several growing areas, including several located in France, Spain, and Italy, have adopted some local guidelines. But, these fall under an array of self-regulated charters of quality established by the natural wine vigneron without formal and binding governmental regulations. As such, natural wine is generally considered a concept rather than a well-defined category with specified characteristics.

It is generally agreed upon by followers of the movement that a natural wine is produced using simple traditional methods where nothing is added in the vineyard or winery. Vineyards for natural wine are farmed as organic or biodynamic where insecticides, fungicides, synthetic growth products, etc. are prohibited.

These strict protocols carry into the winery where spontaneous fermentation is accomplished with native yeast (not lab-grown) and malolactic proceeds on its own without inoculation. All additives such as sugar, acid, color enhancers,



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fining and filtering agents, or a multitude of other available products are also banned. Advocates proudly proclaim that nothing is added or removed during the winemaking process.

Sulfites and SO<sub>2</sub> are considered naturally occurring compounds and minimal additions are permitted for their preservative qualities at bottling but far below the levels often used in conventional winemaking.

The “traditional” growing and production methods look back many centuries before agricultural pesticides became available at the end of WWII or the addition of modern-day advancements in the winery were introduced. In those days, wine was simply fermented grape juice that could be cloudy, brownish, funky, oxidized, and sometimes contained a bit of spritz.

While most of these characteristics are seen by current standards as faults, the natural wine contingent is willing to accept them at some level as long as they can identify the core fruit elements emanating from the natural process.

Last week, I was invited to join a Salon at Larkmead webinar hosted by Larkmead’s highly regarded winemaker Dan Petroski on the origins, practice and personality of natural wine. Dan’s panel was moderated by James Beard award-winning author Jordan McKay who did a stellar job of inspiring and guiding the conversation with his three highly qualified and opinionated panelists.

Alice Feiring is a noted author and natural wine proponent who wrote several of the seminal pieces on her natural wine journey that began in 1990s. Nicolas Joly is the proprietor and winemaker for Château de la Roche aux Moines in the Loire Valley and has been farming biodynamically for 40 years. Rounding out the panel was Randall Graham who, throughout his illustrious 40 plus year career, has always been known for venturing well beyond the vinous mainstream.

Feiring realized decades ago that, “The absence of wines I wanted to drink brought me to the realization that natural wines from the Loire spoke of the vineyard and not the lab.” And, she observed during the 2010s that social media accelerated the natural wine market placing it, “As an overnight success after 45 years.” Younger drinkers were looking for something different and the increased availability of natural wines paved their way.

She also sees the concept of faults as being redefined for fans looking for a more “natural” experience. “Polarization in the market is lessening, but the [new found] popularity is, unfortunately, causing some producers (for economic



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reasons) toward early releases thus [negatively] affecting quality.”

In 1977 Nicholas Joly returned to France from a successful investment banking career in the U.S. to take the reins of his family’s winery. He switched to biodynamic farming even though as he jokingly admits that, “I had no idea why.” His strong link to nature is expressed with feeling and passion in every facet of his growing and winemaking. As he said, “Healthy vines [via biodynamics] are necessary, but don’t interfere in the cellar.”

Joly likens much of winegrowing and winemaking to his love of music. “The secretive world of the vine and grape is like tuning an instrument and when things are properly tuned, pay attention to the sounds of silence... Trusting what you do leads to an expression and the sense of place.” Today, Joly is one of the leaders in biodynamic farming and sees natural winemaking as the logical outgrowth from vineyard to winery.

Randall Graham was an early California proponent of the Rhone varieties and Rhone-style wines with an eye toward, “Wines of place versus wines of effort... but striving for the expression of wines of place can be a humbling experience.”

After selling several of his brands and eventually his Bonny Doone label, Graham settled in San Juan Bautista, California, in San Benito County.

He is now growing and producing his Popelouchum brand that comprises several under-the-radar varieties as well as crossing various drought-tolerant hybrid varieties and growing them from seeds rather than cuttings to maximize root mass.

Risky at best but highly rewarding if it all works out. Graham does not place great significance in the term natural wine but rather looks at wine as, “Being articulate or inarticulate determined by its expression of place.”

The history of natural wines as a category dates back to the Beaujolais region of France in the 1960s when Marcel Lapierre, Jean Foillard, Charly Thevenet, and Guy Breton wanted to return to their families’ time-honored tradition of generations before the widespread use of pesticides and other interventionist practices.

They became known as the “Gang of Four” and were influenced by two traditional oenologists: Jules Chauvet and Jacques Neauport. Today, the influence of the Gang of Four is being carried forward by their successive generations



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and a legion of followers they inspired.

My personal experience with natural wine is a mixed bag. While I have never sought out natural wines per se, I have tasted them on several occasions both here and abroad.

One experience in Corsica was very fulfilling and introduced me to an engaging stylistic approach that was different than any I had previously experienced. Another was also in Europe where the wines seemed oxidative, obtrusive, and prematurely “over-the-hill” leading to a lesser expectation of the category.

In discussion with other wine lovers, listening to the Salon at Larkmead webinar and through further research on the subject of natural wine, I have found its proponents very impassioned on the movement and somewhat dismissive of what they repeatedly refer to as “conventional” winemaking. This is disappointing since many talented winemakers and growers constantly strive to bring their best product to market.

There is no sweeping umbrella to categorize natural winemakers as different from those more normally classified in the conventional group. Neither should be disparaged and both should be complimented for the work they do in producing the finest wine possible in each vintage.

Yes, there are many commercial high-volume wines produced in factory-like settings that strive only for simplistic consistency regardless of vintage disparities. But, let’s not forget the many dedicated and devoted winemakers and vintners who, while taking advantage of modern techniques and concepts, produce the best wine possible from each vintage and vineyard. Both should be commended for all they do.