

HEAD TO HEAD



NATURAL WINES

When is a wine ‘natural’? When it is made with minimal intervention and, usually, served in a hipster corner of London or Manhattan.

Our experts present their cases for and against.

FOR

JAMIE GOODE

☞ I can understand that natural wine is controversial – the term doesn’t even have an official definition. And yes, it’s impossible to make wine without intervention; many natural winemakers still add a bit of sulfur dioxide; there are faulty natural wines; and many great wines are effectively natural yet aren’t labeled as such. Despite this I am still a huge fan.

Consumers apparently love natural wines. The only people who don’t seem to be self-appointed arbiters of taste with letters after their names – expensively educated experts who feel threatened because their MW studies didn’t prepare them for anything unorthodox.

The idea behind natural winemaking is to do as little as possible to the wines. Typically, winemakers add only a little sulfur dioxide at bottling (if at all). They allow native yeasts to kick-start fermentation, and the wine to settle and clarify without fining or filtration. They usually steer clear of new oak and many use concrete ‘eggs’ or clay amphorae to age the wine. Some natural wines taste fairly conventional. Others have unusual flavors that don’t fit easily into the fine-wine aesthetic. I think of them as the stinky cheeses of the wine world; they’re not for everyone. But for an adventurous palate, there’s a lot of fun to be had exploring natural wines.

For an adventurous palate, there’s a lot of fun to be had exploring natural wines.

Sadly, many wine ‘authorities’ aren’t adventurous and have forgotten that wine is supposed to be about enjoyment. I’ve served natural wines blind to critics who profess to hate them. Stripped of their prejudices, they’ve enjoyed them – until, that is, I tell them that the wine is natural.

Natural wine is not about neglect: it takes great skill to step back and only intervene when it is really needed. The best offer the sort of thrilling detail, elegance and harmony that you have to wait decades for with classic fine wines. Most importantly, the natural-wine movement has caused conventional winemakers to reconsider their approach. Do they need as many chemicals? Can they pick earlier, and make fresher, less alcoholic wines? Can they use wild yeasts? Even outside the movement, wine is more natural (and better) now than it was a decade ago.

JAMIE GOODE (wineanorak.com) is a London-based wine writer and co-author of *Authentic Wine: Toward Natural and Sustainable Winemaking*.

AGAINST

CHRISTY CANTERBURY

☞ I generally don’t like natural wine. I like delicious wine. Conceptually, I am for ‘natural’, but I have a quibble with natural wine because the term is defined by whoever uses it. It has no official meaning. Hence, I reject blanket statements about natural wine’s superiority. After all, a natural-style wine could be made from ‘sustainably farmed’ vines, which may have been subjected to non-natural pesticides.

‘Natural’ implies that other wines are not natural. In which case, what are they? Industrial? What’s wrong with making wine in large quantities? The chemicals? Every substance on earth is made of chemicals.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines natural as “existing in or caused by nature; not made or caused by humankind”. So natural wine is impossible because humans must intervene for its production. ‘Natural’ wine does not actually exist.

The natural-wine (as opposed to farming) question is about acceptable manipulations in the winery. Wine chemistry combined with technology affords ways to produce (hopefully) better-balanced and tastier wine. Do I prefer wine made without cryoextraction and reverse osmosis? Sure. I also prefer wine made without ‘watering back’, or adding water to the fermentation vat. But what about micro-oxygenation? It’s just oxygen – so it’s natural!

Perhaps the most divisive point is sulfur dioxide use. A winemaking by-product, sulfur dioxide protects wine from spoilage. Natural wines may or may not have it, but not protecting wine with reasonable sulfur dioxide levels is like refusing a vaccine. The faults that can ensue – oxidation, acetic acid, Brettanomyces infection – are often the nemesis of pleasurable flavors. Why subject a year’s work to possible ruin?

Sometimes – like a chef – a winemaker can improve upon the raw material. Some of the world’s most profound wines have a touch of added acid or a substantial amount of new oak. How many natural-wine enthusiasts object to molecular gastronomy? The natural-wine label reminds me of ‘genuine leather’ warnings that some defects may be found but are part of the object’s character. I like wine with character. I just want its character to taste good – and natural wines often don’t.

‘Natural’ implies that other wines are not natural. In which case, what are they?

CHRISTY CANTERBURY MW (christycanterbury.com) is a wine judge and educator based in New York. She writes for many leading wine publications.