

WINE TRENDS

Natural Wines

MINIMAL INTERVENTION VINO: FAD OR FUTURE?

Written by Donna Brousseau

THE STATEMENT WAS SIMPLE and heartfelt. “I want to grow grapes that I would feed [to] my children,” said the Italian winemaker as he walked through his vineyard. That one sentence threw Alice Noel Fabi deep into the world of natural wine. It’s a journey she’s never regretted. In fact, in her role as creative director of Bellina Alimentari, the expansive restaurant, market and wine bar in Ponce City Market, she based the *entire* wine list on “minimal intervention” wines, her preferred nomenclature.

Featuring wines from her native Italy and beyond, Fabi showcases blends as diverse as the region itself, including bottles from the dramatic Dolomites in Trentino; Friuli, where one of the “natural” winemakers, Gravner, works the vineyards according to the lunar calendar; and one from a nunnery in Lazio, where the winemaker happens to be the sole male resident. All of them have a story to tell, a history, a past. Here, Fabi shares some of her insights into the intricacies of this growing movement.



PHOTO COURTESY ALICE NOEL FABI



Alice Noel Fabi

Flavors: What does “natural wine” mean?

Fabi: It’s wine made with the minimal intervention approach, with no use of chemicals in the vineyard and no use of additives or technological manipulations in the cellar. Sulphur additions are kept to a bare minimum, if added at all. This is how these wines differ from biological wines that are only limited to what occurs in the vineyard.

Flavors: How or why did the movement come about?

Fabi: The problem was that, historically, grapes are difficult to grow. Crops are completely dependent on weather, disease, and on occasion, mistakes, leading to damaged or destroyed crops and the loss of wine.

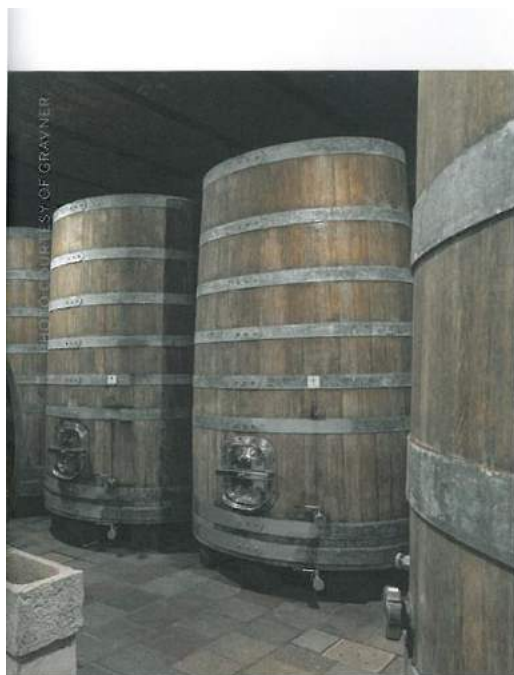
Modern oenology countered by introducing chemicals and additives, like yeast, cleansers, fining (for clarity), acidifiers such as tartaric acid, and sulfur, just to name a few. Surprisingly, these chemicals and additives don’t even have to be listed on the labels. Unfortunately, because of this, many wines nowadays are being made in the cellar not in the vineyard.

Flavors: Why is there so much controversy?

Fabi: Natural wine or minimal intervention wines are a little tough to measure. It’s more of a philosophy. At present, there are no definitive measures in place to determine what classifies as a “natural wine.” However, this is changing rapidly, and a number of natural wine events have implemented rules and regulations, such as viniveri.net. This will continue to evolve as time allows.

Flavors: Why do you think natural wines are such a hot topic now?

Fabi: It’s like taking a step back in time; winemaking is more of an art again. Culture and terroir are becoming more in fashion. The consumer wants to know about the history of the wine, the winemaker, the land and the weather. [At Bellina Alimentari] we wanted our wines to tell a beautiful story and show their true identity.



(opposite top) Aerial view of the stunning Gravner winery in Oslavia, Italy; (clockwise from top left) Wine is aged in Slavonian oak barrels at the Gravner winery in Oslavia, part of Italy's Friuli region; The Gravner winery is located in Oslavia in the Friuli region of Italy; Winemaker Josko Gravner at his winery in Oslavia, Friuli, Italy; Winemaker at Gravner winery checks on the natural wines fermenting in the amphorae pots that are buried underground; The vineyards of the Radikon Winery are located in the town of Oslavia in Friuli, Italy; A diligent winemaker tests the wine at the Gravner winery.



Natural wine ferments in these Georgian clay amphorae at the Gravner winery Oslavia, Friuli, Italy.

THE NATURAL WINE WAY

Here's what to check when you're shopping for minimal intervention vino.

- Made in small quantities by an independent producer.
- From low-yielding vineyards.
- Hand-harvested, organically grown grapes.
- Fermented with only wild, ambient yeasts.
- No added sugar, acid, tannin or preservatives.
- No micro-oxygenation or reverse-osmosis.
- Unfiltered and unfinned or filtered minimally, using organic egg-whites.
- Minimal or no sulphur (10 mg/l total sulphur in red and 25 mg/l total sulphur in white).
- No synthetic molecules in the vines.
- No chemical herbicides.

THE FLIP SIDE.

Not all oenophiles are such spirited supporters of natural wines as Fabi is. In fact, some scorn it outright. One of the most influential wine critics in the world, Robert Parker, predicted that the undefined scam called "natural" or "authentic" wines will one day be exposed as a fraud, or in his own word, "vinofreakism." Other critics simply dismiss the movement as a clever marketing ploy.

Still, others just don't like the term "natural." After all, if the wine isn't natural, what is it? A bottle full of chemicals? Additives? Not exactly appealing, either way you look at it. As Fabi noted, "minimal intervention" might be the better choice here, or at least until regulations and standards have been adopted by the industry as a whole.

Another naysayer, *Washington Post* wine columnist Dave McIntyre, wrote, "The minimalist approach of the natural-wine movement, taken to its extreme, can be an excuse for bad wine-making." In my opinion, this is unfair and has more to do with the winemaker being sloppy rather than the techniques used, "natural" or otherwise. I've had many wines that would not by any means be considered "natural," and I could hardly manage a few sips.

SO WHICH IS IT? A FAD OR THE FUTURE?

It's really too soon to say definitively, but regardless of what camp you are in, I encourage you to keep an open mind. After all, natural wine, like organic farming, has been with us for thousands of years. The first winery dates back to 4100 B.C. Back then, there was only one ingredient: grapes. These grapes were crushed and fermented into wine. That was it. Nothing else, no additives, chemicals or manipulation. Really, I don't see how can that be a bad thing.

WHAT DO NATURAL WINES TASTE LIKE?

They are different, that's for sure. Don't expect to pick up a bottle of Chardonnay and have it taste like anything you are used to. It won't. That's the beauty of it. Like most wine, you'll find some natural ones you like and some you don't, but there is no disputing that they are unique, honest and expressive. I say be adventurous and give these wines a try: You might be in for a welcome surprise.

WHAT TO TRY.

I sat down with Corey Phillips, bar manager at Bellina Alimentari, who summed up his take with these wise words: "They are doing the right thing." Although natural wines are available in red, rose and white, we chose four white (or really, orange) wines to ease you into the natural wine movement without scaring you off. Orange wines are essentially white wines that are fermented with their skins, often for weeks or months, producing an amber color, thanks to the increased tannins of the skins.

These are our top picks, and all are available at Bellina Alimentari. Check back often, since the wines available are ever-changing.

PHOTOS: HAIGWOOD STUDIOS



Corey Phillips



GRAVNER RIBOLLA GIALLA ANFORA 2005

This vineyard operates on the lunar calendar as interpreted by Maria Thun, the renowned bio-dynamic gardener of the twentieth century. This grape, Ribolla, has been grown in the Friuli region for more than 1,000 years. The juice is fermented underground in Georgian clay amphorae with wild yeasts and no temperature control. After a long maceration period (six to nine months), it is aged in large Slovenian oak barrels for four years, with no fining or filtering.

Color Deep orange-amber.
Nose Stone-fruit and apple, minerals.
Mouthfeel Great acidity, complex with elegant depth, mineralogy, richness and a lingering finish.



RADIKON OSLAVJE 2006

I am going to start by saying you simply have to try this wine! It's a delicious blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio and Sauvignon Blanc, though they have a unique taste in the hands of this skilled winemaker. Sadly, Stanko Radikon, a trailblazer in the natural wine movement, passed away last September, though his son is quickly stepping into his shoes. Radikon eschewed all chemical treatments since 1995, even when it meant losing grapes. He also stopped adding sulfites in 2002. The vines are trimmed to produce fewer grapes, generally four to five per vine, resulting in more concentrated juice. I really like his philosophy. Radikon bottles come in unusual sizes: 500 mL and 1 L bottles. The winemaker felt that the smaller bottle is perfect for one person, and the liter is ideal for two, although, I think the one liter might work for me alone!

Color Deep orange, bordering on neon with a little cloudiness.
Nose Earthy, mineral with hints of stone fruit and spice.
Mouthfeel Complex and elegant with depth, mineralogy and richness.

MONASTERO SUORE 2012

I fell in love with Giampiero Bea's wines at his winery in Montefalco. This is no exception. The Cistercian sisters in the province of Viterbo grow the grapes at their monastery and have contracted Bea, a world leader in natural winemaking and co-founder of Vini Veri, one of Italy's leading natural wine movements, to vinify them. The handsome winemaker is producing outstanding wines! The blend of four grapes (Trebbiano, Malvasia, Verdicchio and Grechetto) is left to ferment on the lees for a period of two or more weeks, extracting all of the flavors, colors and textures of its fruit. The result is a wine of often deep golden color and penetrating minerality with hints of herbs, particularly anise, and wild flowers.

Color Deep gold.
Nose Oxidative, full of herbs and minerals with a slight nuttiness.
Mouthfeel Complex, delightful great acidity, earthiness and a long, lovely finish.



FORADORI FONTANASANTA NOSIOLA, 2013

A rare and exceptional wine from winemaker Elisabetta Foradori. One of the pioneering women of the natural wine movement, she's been toiling away at her farm in the hills of Trentino since the mid-'80s. Made from the Nosiola grape, which is found only in Trentino, this wine has been aged for eight months on its skins in unlined amphorae, large clay pots nestled in the ground. This is a wine that unfolds throughout the evening, so savor it and watch it evolve. Phillips calls this "heaven in a glass."

Color Pale yellow with subtle hints of orange as you swirl.
Nose Medium intensity, green, herbal and developing as it opens up.
Mouthfeel Medium-bodied, creamy, herbal with high acidity and minerality and a long, lovely finish.



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