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Unnatural Reactions to Natural Wine

Intemperate responses to low-intervention wines are tiresome, a fan of natural wine insists.

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© Pixaby | There is arguably no other wine category that comes under attack more often than that of natural wine.

Yes, dear reader, I was triggered.

It's not really Jay Rayner's fault – I know his shtick (I quite like his shtick) – but it was getting alerted to this that got me: "This means we must be alert to the risk of honking, farmyardy "natural" wines with the ripe tang of festering bum," said Rayner in a recent restaurant review. And there I was: angry – frothing, even.

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So let's have an honest chat about the "natural wine" thing, shall we? But let's make sure we put it in context too.

Festering bum

I get it. Honestly, I do. I was at a natural wine tasting (several years ago now) and I remember going through the white wine table and beginning to wonder how individual each wine could taste if they all had prominent levels of the spoilage taint *brettanomyces*. The wines were interesting, for sure. But they were starting to get quite samey. I will defend slightly Brett wines almost until the cows come home – after all, you don't get to praise a lot of great [Bordeaux](#) and [Burgundy](#) without having to co-exist with Brett – but too much and there's not a lot to enjoy. It's just that no-one can quite tell you where that threshold is.

So, yes, natural wine does have a spoilage problem. But a lot of it doesn't. We'll get onto that a bit later. But I'd argue that this is the price one pays for the level of experimentation that is occurring in the only vibrant wine scene the world has got going on at the moment (more of that later too). I'm not saying it's ideal – it isn't – it's simply the corollary. If you're completely averse to faulty wines, by all means spend your time in the supermarket aisle.

I haven't been in the wine industry a very long time (just shy of 20 years), but you don't have to go back very far to bring up the same "you have to go through a lot of wines to find a good one" discussions all about Burgundy. I remember when cashed-up wine lovers were bemoaning the fact that you had to really work hard to find a decent bottle of Burgundy. This was due, not primarily to faults, but to quality. Faults were there (are they still? Do you trust wine critics who are tasting Burgundy nowadays to tell you all about the faults they come across?) and the "10 bottles for one decent one" was an accepted trade-off (the reality was an even bigger ratio) for French [Pinot Noir](#) lovers a decade ago. But all that's forgotten now – Burgundy's where it's at. We're all really into Burgundy now, right?

Honking

So what of taste? Do these wines taste "bad"? Yes and no. Some natural wines are simply gone. There's a wonderful scene in the French comic strip book *Mimi, Fifi et Glouglou* where two wine tasters are discussing a natural producer saying things like "wow, he's really pushing the envelope with his wines, etc", only for their friend to turn up and say: "Hey guys, don't drink that! It's been open three days and I forgot to put it back in the fridge."

Sure, there's a lot of that in the natural wine scene. But you can't simply focus on that. How, for instance, do you talk to consumers about oxidation versus oxidative winemaking? If you think [Bonneau du Martray](#) can steer close to the wind and still produce great [Chardonnay](#), why not others? If oxidative winemaking is bad in Bordeaux, why is it okay in [Jerez](#) or the [Jura](#)? Surely how it tastes, irrespective of what it "should" taste like, is the main thing?

After all, the whole point of aging wine (other than showing off; a legitimate love of history; or a twisted, puritanical obsession with delaying pleasure – as if wine collectors are masters of edging) is that it gains different and less primary flavors. I spent [a whole article](#) pointing this out but no-one really got it. People cellar wines for decades, only to find release in the overtones of sous-bois and tertiary, animal characters. How is this any different from natural wines you can enjoy now? It's just flavors.

Wine tasting, despite its oft-proclaimed good intentions ("there are no wrong answers", "taste is personal", etc.), tries to introduce concepts of objectivity (tannin level, acidity, even balance, etc.) but these often mean nothing. Great Bordeaux young is not balanced but it can still be judged, apparently. [Riesling](#) is not balanced. [Madeira](#) is not balanced. Old-school English wine trade types who bemoaned California Cabernet or rising alcohol levels in Bordeaux still collected Port. People who laughed at [Poulsard](#) paid out of the nose for Gevrey-Chambertin. There was no self-reflection. It was good or not so good, and we'd worked all that out 100 years ago, with a minor update in the 1970s. Try doing anything different and the computer said "no".

So now we've polarized ourselves. It's them versus us. I want to say it's classist (as in the [Bourdieu notion](#) that it is the upper classes that define good taste) and while this still holds true, it's not the whole answer.



© Wales Online | Jay Rayner, the food critic who incurred the author's wrath.

We must be alert

I was sent the Jay Rayner quote because it was (very reasonably) assumed I'd take umbrage. I did, but not at Jay Rayner so much as the wider situation. Even sending me the quote shows a tacit understanding that I'm on one side of the fence and I'll react, so it's not as if the fault is entirely with "them".

What the wine world does need to understand though is that the natural wine scene is entirely of its own making. I often decry the out-of-reach prices of great wines only to be told platitudes like "there's more than enough wine to go around", etc. But when just that happens; when a group of people find a scene that they invest in and enjoy (the latter irrespective of someone else's personal taste), they are immediately castigated, belittled, cast out, etc. Which, sure, always helps a movement but seriously? Writers would genuflect in front of [DRC](#), tell the plebs there's still some cracking Bourgogne rouge and when the plebs took a spin on the Bourgogne rouge (now declassified as Vin de Table because Marcel had a block of Gamay in Beaune he wanted to chuck in) and made the whole thing without any additions in the winery, they'd got it all wrong again.

What else has the wine industry had to offer? Most of the time it's the same names, the same producers and the same wines that get all the attention. What was the alternative if the great wines of the world were out of reach and you really loved wines? The supermarkets were out on both taste (most of the categories are priced the same and, basically, taste the same) and moral (supermarkets aren't known for their benevolence towards wine producers) grounds; and the kind of people who were running the wine shops in your home town were drinking [Barolo](#) on the side while flogging [Pecorino](#) or "some little producer I know in Saint-Romain" while trying to stay afloat; others had hammered the winemaker-as-personality thing, the genius winemaker, winemaker as four-hundredth generation of whatever, and so on – and nine times out of 10, you had to pay more for that personality.

Furthermore, while the \$20-30 bracket was where to go, where do you begin? The only place to begin (outside of the winemaker-equals-genius line – a trope the natural wine movement isn't immune from either) is with the producer's story and if they were holding on to the basic tenet that wine was made in the vineyard, not the winery, how long before natural wine took off anyway? How was any other situation expected to capture anyone's imagination?

Don't get me wrong – many writers are doing the hard graft (Asimov, Robinson, and others) – but so many established wine names are either (a) spending their time ensuring the remarkably well-off feel comfortable about their choices of claret and the like (which, let's be honest, isn't a hard ask, it's like trying to rank Ferraris in order of most pleasurable – with half a brain you can't really go wrong and you don't really need to drive them, but, hey, let's do a Top Gear for the wine collector); (b) they're on social media, pumping people's timelines with the runoff of a sizeable producer's marketing budget; or (c) are making a profile from opening wines for rich people dining out (hey, check out the Krug clos wines I get to open for other people)... Maybe its just the people I have chosen to follow, but that's my vinous doom-scroll.

The risk

It's just a risk. One group declaims another for buying a wine that has the risk of smelling like bum. I declaim another group for paying ludicrous amounts of money for wine that risks tasting like wine (sometimes it too smells of bum, especially if you cellar it for long enough). And sure enough, because it's the wine industry, some people are dicks about it all.

I love both. I have to say I've had more pleasure and inspiration from natural wines in the last decade than I've had from any other category (I don't have the finances to drink or cellar Burgundy, etc. in any great volume). I've also hit a lot of bum notes. But then there's the breaks. I've had so many great experiences of drinking natural wines that I happen to think the journey's worth it.

I've had some absolute honkers too. Honkers where I and my companions have queried whether some people should be allowed to release (and sell) people such wines. But value for money works both ways: I also think a great many "conventional" wines are ridiculously overpriced and that, no matter how much a wine writer tells you a grand cru is the equivalent to tasting a supernova, it just isn't.

If people claim that the buyer sets the price, then that has to apply to natural wines too, and they just have to get over it. Everything else is just taste, and that's personal – no matter what anyone (anyone) tells you. Your festering bum is someone else's perfectly hung pheasant is someone else's perfectly aged 1970s claret is someone else's Slovenian orange wine.

To return to earth, is natural wine worth the "risk" in a restaurant setting? I'm not so sure – maybe Rayner has a point. Also, natural wine should be questioned as much as overpriced wine.

But the truth is that a good number (better than the old Burgundy ratio) of natural wines don't have a spoilage problem, are well made and provide huge drinking pleasure. They tick a variety of taste experiences for people who, if they were as open-minded as they were tasting aged wines, would derive great pleasure from them. Furthermore, the category does a great, although accidental, job of expanding reference points better than most have managed (from Georgia to Slovenia to Friuli, etc.), it is probably one of the few areas in which flogged regions (Beaujolais, anyone?) can begin to revive some of their reputation.

See us right

At the risk of Fisking him, Rayner continues (following the "festering bum" bit) with: "I express my terror to [sommelier Katie] Seward who sees us right: a bright dry rosé, the pleasing colour of cough mixture is followed by a brisk white from Piedmont."

I'm happy for Rayner. But here's the thing: isn't he better focusing on the rosé and the Piedmont white? Again, I'm personally not so fussed with Rayner's opinions (after all, that's a critic's prerogative and he writes bloody well), only that if the same people who constantly banged on

about how much they hated natural wine would actually spend their energy pushing something else we might all move forwards.

I actually want to know what the rosé and the Piedmont white wines were, and I'm surely not alone. But, of course, it's better to waste the opportunity of talking about them in favor of having a crack at an entire category. Why aren't natural wine haters seeing us right?

If you're going to have a crack at the scene, at least have something to come back with that's of interest. Because if you don't, I'm going to begin to wonder if you might be protesting a little too much.

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