



## Natural Born Thrillers: Meet the next wave in wines, made by the simplest of methods and tasting almost shocking.

BY ALICE FEIRING

**T**he Loire region of France can be a bone chiller in winter, especially in a limestone cave. So one February day not long ago, I made sure to slide on long underwear and cashmere socks because, even when warmed by exciting wines, I'm prone to ice cold toes. Thus prepared, I walked up the snow-dusted lane to the annual tasting called La Dive Bouteille, an event that originally started when 20 Loire makers of the most natural kinds of wines invited 20 of their most like-minded winemaking friends from other regions. I heard the words of natural-wine pioneer Joe Dressner ringing in my ears: "Every hipster in Paris is going to be there." As I walked past motor-cycles and shaggily handsome men, I saw that he was right. Too bad more men didn't look like that at tastings back home.

I bought my glass, picked up the program, and sidled past those taking a break while slinging back oysters at the cave's mouth and slugging some muscadet. Inside I saw happy mayhem. It could have been a music fest in the 1970s, but instead of a rock concert everyone was here for the love of wine. Not just any wine, though: *vin naturel*.

*Vin naturel* isn't merely a kind of wine but a wine movement, and a highly celebrated one—at least in Paris and also by a certain kind of wine nut worldwide. Proof of the latter was in the jumble of accents and languages around me. While the definition of natural wine can be controversial (just how natural is natural?), I like to think of them as wines on which no technology has been deployed to dictate the aroma, color, texture, and taste. The winemakers crush the grapes (sometimes using feet), then all fermentation happens naturally. Aging occurs in a neutral container—the wine should never show the woody flavors so popular today. Next come fining and filtering out the impurities as needed, and finally bottling.

Every movement has its moderates and its radicals, and in this one those furthest to the left shun stainless-steel receptacles as soulless, choosing old wood or glass-lined cement, and a few go so far as to commit to amphorae much like the ceramic jugs the ancients used. Those on the far left also forgo what most winemakers (even some natural ones) feel is absolutely essential: sulfur. Just remember what dried fruit looks like when it has none of this preservative, and you'll get the idea why even some of the naturalists prefer a tiny spritz—way smaller than the normal amounts—just before bottling.

By contrast, most of today's wines are made with a slew of technologies and additives, such as flavor- and aroma-changing yeasts, enzymes, bacteria, acid modification, tannin addition, irrigation, grape concentrate, oak chips and other oak products such as dust, machines that perform reverse osmosis for alcohol and water removal, micro-oxygenation for tannin polishing, highly toasted oak barrels, sulfur from start to finish, and God knows what else.

The first time I attended the Dive, I was shocked. As a wine writer, I was used to drinking wine in all its klutzy stages of development, but many *naturels* that I tasted were bubbly, fuzzy, cloudy, and showing high-toned notes of nail polish and apple cider. I found them confounding. Because of the lack of sulfur, many of the wines tasted oxidized even though they were only a few months old. I didn't have a tasting context for them. I didn't know what the hell was going on.

Joe Dressner, who through his company, Louis/Dressner Selections, imports a spectacular array of the best of these wines to the United States, believes some of the new winemakers are too eager to bring their labels to market; they bottle them too soon, making them unstable. Chalk it up to inexperience, because though winemaking is an art, its science needs to be mastered even at the low-intervention level. Care must be taken so bottles don't explode on the shelves.

The wines also need a certain attention and feeding, such as careful, cool shipping and storage (for the most user-friendly sipping, I often dump them into a widemouthed,

open pitcher to accelerate aeration). It's easy to see why some people call these wines real, authentic, or alive: Every sip often brings another taste, another impression, another nuance.

When a wine is in the hands of masters who take their time and make sure it's stable before bottling, it becomes obvious where the movement gets its dynamism. Many of these winemakers are extremely environmentally conscientious, yet the movement isn't primarily about being green or organic. Last year, at the eighth Dive Bouteille (alas, a less countercultural affair than the early gatherings, with 100-plus winemakers in a fairly sterile environment, grafted onto a food festival called the Omnivore), Dressner put it well: "No one believes this is a fad. It's a sensory preference, which favors nature over technology. This is not about being a purist. We simply feel the wines taste better."

Increasingly, drinkers agree. Places that list natural wines are spreading beyond the 30-odd Parisian pioneers to Tokyo, the U.K., and the U.S. Some of them, like Terroir in San Francisco and Le Garçon de la Vigne in Tokyo, are modeled after Parisian wine bistros, serving lovely yet simple food with natural wine at moderate prices. And then there's New York City's Bette, a tony spot that breaks the mold.

Bette's sommelier, Byron Bates, is devoted to these wines. He says he wasn't enthralled with wine at all until 1998, when he had his first taste of a *naturel* Dard & Ribo syrah, and his world changed. One night when I was there, George Clooney and his entourage showed up for dinner. These are people you'd expect to be drinking flashier wines, like a cult cabernet or Super Tuscan, instead of a geeky, insidery wine like the Domaine Peyra gamay. Peyra is one of the hard-core *sans soufre* (entirely without sulfur) winemakers. Its gamay is whisper-soft but heavy-duty in intensity. The color is pale and transparent, and the aroma has hints of animal fur, twig, cherry, and cinnamon. I watched as Bates swirled the gamay in a decanter to oxygenate it. I eavesdropped. Clooney and friends swooned over the wine.

This past June I took a Parisian friend to a wine tasting in her city. The wines were unsulfured examples from the Loire and the Jura. Most of them had an element I often find in the no-sulfur category: an aftertaste of "puppy breath." I watched as she tried to make them out. Afterward, over a coffee, she said: "I feel like these are what wines used to taste like. It's something we're just not used to anymore. It's as if we've gone back in time."

The next time she and I hung out, at another natural-wine place in Paris, we ordered a wine from Philippe Pacalet, one of Burgundy's naturalists and a nephew of movement founder Marcel Lapiere. As my friend took a sip, then another and another, I realized she was a convert. Now that she wasn't expecting a thick and fruit-heavy wine, the kind most celebrated by modern critics, she smiled and said, "It's hard to drink anything else, isn't it?" ■

*Alice Feiring's The Battle for Wine and Love will be published in May by Harcourt.*

ICI, LE COMPTOIR DU RELAIS.

## COMPASS: Finding Naturals

### Brussels:

#### À BOUT DE SOUFRE

This one enjoys a solid reputation in the food department, too. RUE TASSON-SNEL, 11 322/537-2700

### Copenhagen:

#### LÊLÊ NHÀ HÀNG

The food at this Vietnamese restaurant is uneven, but the list is stellar. VESTERBROGADE 40 1620 KBH V. 453/33-22-71-35

### Paris:

#### LE BARATIN

After 25 years as a top address, this is an institution. The food is pure, and it's a wine-maker favorite. 3, RUE JOUYE ROUVE 331/43-49-39-70

#### CAVE AUGE

One of the oldest, quaintest wine shops in Paris, it's full of great wines and amazing finds. 116, BD. HAUSSMANN 331/45-22-16-97

#### LA CAVE CAFE

The wines are on tap and *sans soufre* in a lively if boozy atmosphere. 134, RUE MARCADET 331/46-06-29-17

#### CAVE DE L'INSOLITE

It's untidy, but there's lots to discover in this wine shop near Oberkampf. 30, RUE FOLIE MERICOURT 331/53-36-08-33

#### LE CHAPEAU MELON

One of the co-founders of le Baratin opened this spot around the corner, in his cozy wine store. 92, RUE REBEVAL 331/42-02-68-60

#### LE COMPTOIR DU RELAIS

Among the most celebrated new places; when such a restaurant goes all natural, you've got to take notice. 90, CARREFOUR DE L'ODEON 331/43-29-12-05

### LE DIRIGEABLE

Imaginative food is several notches above most *bars à vins*. Try pairing herring and potato salad with the Philippe Pacalet burgundy. 37, RUE ALLERAY 331/45-32-01-54



Brooklyn's own Ici.

### LA MUSE VIN

Near Bastille, this place was my first *bar à vin*, so it's a sentimental choice. 101, RUE DE CHARONNE 331/40-09-93-05

### RACINES

In Pierre Jancou's new tiny, scruffy resto-cave in Paris's oldest *passage*, find hearty, delicious organic food, and the most radical of wines. 8, PASSAGE DES PANORAMAS 331/40-13-06-41

### Troyes, France:

#### AUX CRIEURS DE VIN

The older vintages make this medieval city in the Champagne region worth discovering. But stick to the charcuterie. 4-6, PLACE JEAN JAURES 333/25-40-01-01

### Montreal:

#### BU

Bu's list isn't exclusively *naturel*, but it does offer Vouette et Sorbée, a singular champagne. 5245 ST.-LAURENT BLVD. 514/276-0249



Newly natural: Le Comptoir du Relais in Paris.

### Los Angeles:

#### LOU ON VINE

An oasis in a strip mall! Lou always has something special, and the small-plate food is delish. 724 N. VINE ST. 323/962-6369

### New York:

#### BETTE

Watch stars and models sipping ultra-natural wines—like the Jean Marc Brignot PP from the Jura—with truffle-dusted fries. 461 W. 23RD ST. 212/366-0404

### LE PERE PINARD

I just love the atmosphere here. The large-format bottles (a.k.a. magnums) are rustic, and the bar is user-friendly. 175 LUDLOW ST. 212/777-4917

### ICI RESTAURANT

This cozy French bistro has brought a bit of wine sanity to Brooklyn. 246 DEKALB AVE. 718/789-2778

### San Francisco:

#### TERROIR WINE BAR

Terroir is hardcore about *vin naturel*, especially given its location in such a wine-centric city. There's not much in the way of food, though. 1116 FOLSOM ST. 415/558-9946

### Tokyo:

#### LE GARÇON DE LA VIGNE

The sommelier modeled this great place after a Parisian *bar à vin*. 5-17-11 HIROO SHIBUYA-KU 81-03/34-45-66-26 -A.F.