

THE FEIRING LINE ZINE

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KENJIRO KAGAMI



The hour drive to the southern Jura from Beaune became progressively quainter as urbanity melted into the tiny stone villages. Finally, it opened up into fields, cows and a few vineyards. The last time I was in those parts, the lanes were sheeted in black ice. Snow coated the hills. But in July of 2019, in the valley between two mounds of heat waves, all was brilliant with lemony sun and puckery blossoms. With me in the car were the **Chantrevés** winemaking duo, Tomoko Kuriyama and Guillaume Bott and a long-time friend, Paul Wasserman, of Becky Wasserman Selections. We were headed to visit Japanese expatriot vigneron, Kenjiro Kagami. I was extremely happy about this outing because after three failed attempts, I was finally due to visit the elusive vigneron at 3pm.

We were early. To avoid being rude we parked a few minutes away and stretched out on the tender grasses by the banks of the creek as the fluorescent blue dragonflies hovered. “I worry about him,” Tomoko said, looking out at the pristine babbling water, “Kenjiro is very committed to no-till,” she said, mentioning what might be the most talked about trend in farming vines. “It works quite well of course. But the last time I was there, that piece

of land, up near the forest, on a steep slope, really looked sad. I just don’t see how he’s going to get any grapes off of that section if he doesn’t turn over the land. He needs to make money. Well, we’ll see!” With a clap of her hands as a signal, we brushed off our pants and headed back to the car.

Even before *Domaine des Miroirs* debuted with the tiny 2011 vintage, Kenjiro was practically mythical. The ex-Hitachi engineer took an interest in wine in the late 90s and followed his heart to Beaune to study winemaking. He longed to work with grand cru vines and especially lusted after Musigny and limestone. He landed his dream job for de Vogüé as his *stage* and worked there almost daily, as school was merely once a week. His resumé evolved into stints with a trio of natural legends: Thierry Allemand in Cornas, Bruno Schueller in Alsace, and Jean-François Ganevat in the Jura. It was Ganevat who found him his land in nearby Grusse, a village with the same number of residents now as in the 1700s: 185.

I drank my first *Miroirs* in about 2014. It was most likely that initial 2011 vintage. Although I didn’t love the chardonnay with its acidic, milky reduction, there was something in there that just didn’t let

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me forget it. I went out of my way a few years later to meet the vigneron at a tasting in Paris. Formal, dapper, a silk scarf tied deftly around his neck, he put up with my French. It was there that the wines grabbed me as being somewhere between heaven and earth, between wine and the rain, between there and not, some sort of blindfolded trust of balance. I came away wondering whether it was wine or something else entirely.

We pulled up to a rundown farmhouse right on the road and pushed in the weathered doors. Inside there was a pre-harvest mess: a small pneumatic press, barrels, bottles and not much room to move around. We opened another door to find Kenjiro in a brick-arched long and narrow barrel room. A slight, bearded man in clothes a size too big, he reminded me of a high school kid cleaning out the garage. His treasures



Kenjiro Kagami in his petite cave in Grusse.

were fermenting and aging in two large, red-banded barrels as well as old barriques stacked two and three on top of each other. The barn was leaky and a little warmer than optimum for natural winemaking, I thought. After the hellos and the immediate distribution of INAO tasting glasses, a shyness settled over the room. But as soon as French was swapped out for Tomoko and Kenjiro's native language, animation kicked in. All of the sudden Kenjiro smiled broadly. "What makes you smile?" I asked and Tomoko answered, "The cuverie is filled with wine for the first time."

It must have been a remarkable feeling of relief and perhaps a bit of triumph. Usually Kenjiro's yields are terribly low with no more than 25 hl per hectare. This adds up to maybe 10,000 bottles a year if he is lucky. But in 2018 there was the potential for more than double that. Finally, there was some wine to sell around the world, not only Japan, Denmark, France and England.

The vigneron scampered up the barrels with a pipette. He drew out the wine and then silent and cat-like, he jumped down from the top, landing thudlessly, spilling not a drop. He started to explain his methodology. The first few vintages he used to start fermentation by making a pied de cuve. This, a little test batch of natural yeast ferment is one way traditional winemakers kick off fermentation. Now, he just waits until each of his vats take off. "The wine just cooks," he says.

I instantly imagined a great iron cauldron filled with wine boiling away. But what he was trying to tell me was that he employs no physical means of extraction, no punch down, no press. He really does nothing—or near nothing. It's the gentlest of infusions. Surely he had to use carbon dioxide to keep the wine safe from fruit flies before fermentation was active, I asked. He shook his head, no. It's often that the wine stays fermenting for 45 days this way. Fermentation happens and that's all.

As is customary in the Jura we started with red. He squirted the 2018 Poulsard, destined to be his Ja-Nai (meaning 'yes-no' in Alsace dialect) into our glasses and oh, joy. It was intense, vibrant, electric. Then came the 2018 Trousseau. He rarely makes one. It was licorice and had a raspberry-like purity. "It has some mouse," I remarked. Usually I'm timid about this thing with a winemaker unless they bring it up first. It's the same way I feel uncomfortable telling someone they have bad breath. But there wasn't a whiff of bullshit in that cellar and I knew it would be ok. "Yes," he said. He had no doubt it would resolve. It is his personal opinion that one reason for its prevalence of late is climate change.

The whites get a different treatment, pressing slowly over a day. No skin contact here. He lets the wines settle for two days and then puts them into old barrels where they rest for two winters. He scampered up again to get the 2017 savagnin, he would do this several times through the visit, always gracefully landing as if completing an elegant échappée. The savagnin in my glass was almost ready for the bottle. I looked at Paul, a skilled and focused taster. The eyes, flashed, right, this was a magnetic wine. It tiptoed on that tightrope between nut-like oxidative and smoky reductive. There were the elements of beauty: ginger, lemon confit, salt, a dusting of hazelnut and almond and so much intense salinity it was hard to believe it was topped off. "It's ouillée," he said. He paused as he saw we noticed the pronounced sherry-like qualities usually associated with the flor that develops when the wine is left exposed to the air. But then he added with a laugh, "But not that much ouillée."

By that he explained that he only tops off his barrels about 5-6 times over the two years élevage. Which is, as he said, not much and without a doubt a flor developed to intensify the flavors.

When I asked about tasting the 2018 whites, he demurred. They were still fermenting. And so, we dove right into the 2016s. Those were the wines on the market. He pulled the cork out of the Ja-Nai 2016 and wiped the bottle drips on his plaid flannel shirt sleeve. "I don't do analysis beforehand because the dark side of me and my training will come out," he said, referring to his time in Beaune and working with more conventional winemakers.

The wine was muted raspberry purity, yet it was iron-laced. Then there was that subtle balance between the fruit and the savory. We fell silent in appreciation. Then Tomoko with her nodding head

and beatific smile said, "You know, there's a reason we are here." She was hinting at a motivation for those Japanese people who moved to France to make wine. In that moment, I felt I understood her, but then chided myself for not pressing her to elaborate. When later I asked her to clarify, she said, "It's true of course. In Japan it's not always easy



Mayumi (left) and Tomoko (right) talk shop in the vines.

to get to the point straight away. You are obliged not to disturb *Wa* (circle=harmony).”

In other words, France offered freedom of uninhibited expression, at least in wine.

The vineyards were a quick drive away. Kenjiro’s 4 hectares started just below a forest, then slanted southwest. It stretched down to his latest addition; a hectare that used to be Ganevat’s. That’s the one he handed over to Kenjiro and told his former employee, “Pay me when you can.”

Upslope sat the red grapes. The white varieties include a few rows of an Alsatian tribute—riesling. Thankfully for those devoted to the savignin more vines are also going into the ground. We started to trek into the lively vineyards. Kenjiro’s wife Mayumi was working the vines. As we approached her, the energy from the vineyard made my feet tingle. In the fading afternoon, bees buzzed, wildflowers grew, grasshoppers bungee-ed *en masse* from one sprig of grass the other. Tomoko’s eyes immediately went to the top of the vineyards, where although it was difficult to farm without plowing, Kenjiro had persisted. Tomoko was relieved. “It’s looking so healthy and beautiful up there, he made it work.”

Kenjiro might have made more wine than usual in 2018, but in 2019 he was back to 22hl per hectare, under 1000 cases. He was disappointed, but accepting. So, we’re back to scarcity once the 2019s come out. Considering the whole picture, at about \$45 a bottle (in France) they are remarkably cheap. For now. It won’t stay that way for

long. The market will accelerate, especially with the wines showing up at auction. And regrettably, with the way it goes, very little of that rise in bottle cost will go into his and Mayumi’s pocket. Thinking about this injustice, the difficult life of transforming land and vine into something equally profound, I asked him what he wanted from the next ten years. He didn’t have to think. He told me, “I want to find the balance.” I asked him what kind of balance and expected him to say that between life and farming, which can often be taxing. “No,” he said, “the balance between the vine, wine and the land.”



Months after my visit, I keep returning to his answer. It’s a kind of memory that I will keep with me and take out and hold up to the sun when I need to feel the light of beauty. He hit a rare spiritual nerve, the kind of walking-dream-like feeling that escapes articulation. Was it that *Wa*? Maybe it was indeed.

THE WINES

And so, it is true. Most of you might not ever be able to find the wines. And sometimes if you do, they might be disappointing, as was the 2011 chardonnay that I had at Noma in 2018. But mostly if

you have the opportunity, pounce. And in that service, I give you my tasting notes. Not to make you go “Oh, woe is me” and lament what you cannot drink, but to be prepared for when you can.



Kenjiro Kagami works on 4 hectares and makes white with no skin contact, all pressed full cluster and that’s a slow press but there’s virtually no skin contact and have two winters resting up in old oak of various sizes of rest before bottling.

Chardonnay Cuvées

Cuvées made from either a blend or individual parcels:

Mizuiro (Les Saugettes)

Sonorité du Vent

Mon Rythme, son Rythme (makes this very rarely)

Berceau (only made in 2011 and 2015)

Savagnin

Entre deux Bleus

Rouge

Ja – Nai: Poulsard

Que Sera Sera: Trousseau (rarely makes this)

Ja Do: Poulsard and Trousseau blend (only made this in 2015)

SELECTED TASTING

2015 Berceau

The chardonnay is creamy and easy, volatility on the nose more than on the palate. The VA works here to deepen the complexity.

2016 Mon Rythme, son Rythme

The chardo here is from marl soils. Depth, broad, celery root, yellow plum. Volatile and electric, riveting wine.

2016 Entre deux Bleus

The savignin is completely gorgeous. It had a complex mélange of citrus that ranges from kumquat to orange to lemon to lime, on a wet spring day. The wine has depth, electric peach-fuzzy textures.

2015 Entre deux Bleus

I was lucky enough to have this with Doug Wregg at Scarr’s Pizza in NYC. And it just stunned. The intensity and salinity on a whisper of a dream-like wine.

2012 Entre deux Bleus

Kenjiro let us taste this wine that had been opened for a few days, and it was pretty impressive. It was fresh. Fierce. Reduced with a thread of salt air, the wine was creamy and completely vertical, warmed by textural, raspy acidity.

2016 Ja Nai

Muted from raspberry purity, iron fisted reduction with a nuanced, balanced savory quality.

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A WHITER SHADE OF PALE: FILTRATION IN WHITE WINE

By Aaron Ayscough



Explaining why he preferred white wine with oysters, the influential Beaujolais oenologist and négociant Jules Chauvet once reasoned, “Oysters are easily eaten, white wine is consumed that way too. They are in the same line, if you will. Both of them have no body.”

The same absence of body makes it more difficult to discern, in white wines, what in red wines is apparent to experienced tasters: fining or filtration or both. These processes, which on a red wine leave an indelible trace on its profile, often pass unnoticed on white wines.

In the natural winemaking community, where the ethos of ‘add nothing – take nothing away’ ostensibly reigns, filtration of white wines is a subject on which many winemakers turn out to be surprisingly agnostic.

“I quite like filtration, on the whites,” says Bertrand Jousset, whose natural Montlouis chenins are mainstays at many Paris natural wine bars, from Septime La Cave to Café de la Nouvelle Mairie.

Jousset filters with pink diatomaceous earth, which is generally more severe than white diatomaceous earth. He says that after fifteen years of experience, he manages nowadays to vinify certain cuvées entirely without sulfur. But he doesn’t seek to forgo filtration.

“I find it cleans them, before bottling,” he explains.

Nor is he alone in the natural wine scene in employing filtration for white wines. I daresay he’s in the majority. Guillaume Lavie’s chiseled, lithe Roussette de Bugey? Filtered. The intense, high-acid Vouvrays of Michel Autran? Filtered. The glimmering, sought-after savagnin and chardonnay of Domaines Les Bottes Rouges in the Jura? Filtered. None of the aforementioned domaines filter their red wines.

I like all these winemakers; I am happy to drink their wines; I support their work.

But I can acknowledge that filtration of white wines comprises a double standard that is problematic for the ideology of natural wine. Depending on when it is enacted, and how, filtration can represent either a light insurance of stability, or a stylistically transformative intervention, as depressing, in its way, as heavy sulfur use.

Generally speaking, among conventional winemakers, white wines are filtered sooner than reds, and more often.

“It’s not sufficient that a wine be good, it must be limpid and without deposit,” wrote the renowned French oenologist Emile Peynaud in the 1982 edition of his book *Connaissances et travail du vin*. “The severity is still greater for white wines, housed in transparent bottles, in which the least deposit is perceptible when we turn the bottles...

In commerce, it is not possible to not take into account this demand of the clientele.”

Peynaud prescribes an aggressive clarification regimen: fining with bentonite or caseine even before fermentation, coupled with at least one filtration before bottling.

The trend towards greater tolerance for turbid wines (whites and reds) among natural wine drinkers would seem to permit natural winemakers wider leeway to avoid filtration.

However, the high overhead of organic farming and natural winemaking means that natural winemakers are often under exceptional financial pressure to release wines early. This is a recurrent problem in cooler regions where alcoholic fermentation and malolactic fermentation can take years, or become blocked entirely. Filtration helps assure the stability in white wines bottled with some residual sugar, as well as those that have not undergone malolactic.

“The idea is to one day no longer have filtration on my whites—to do very long *élevage*, so the wines have the time to stabilize, so at the moment we bottle, nothing else will happen,” says natural Vouvrays winemaker Michel Autran. “But for the moment, it’s not possible.”

Autran’s wines are subject to the two factors that can naturally block malolactic fermentation: low pH (high acidity) and, thanks to his ultra-deep chalk cellar, extreme cold. So he filters both of his still whites with diatomaceous earth; one undergoes an additional cartridge filtration before bottling. It permits the wines to be released sooner, by removing dormant yeasts and bacteria, including, in the latter category, malolactic bacteria.

“Still, it harms the wine,” he admits. “I’d quite like to no longer filter someday.”

Autran wishes his white wines would complete malolactic fermentation, but refuses to intervene to speed up the process, and finds himself obliged to filter. Who can blame him?

But in more southerly regions, where white wines are perceived to lack acidity, many winemakers instead employ filtration long before bottling expressly to prevent malolactic fermentation, thereby preserving a white wine’s more crisp, if less complex, malic acidity.

At a time when estates with no ties to the natural wine community—and no compunctions about exploiting it—are beginning to produce low or zero sulfur cuvées to respond to the popularity of natural wine, the question arises: how natural is it to block malolactic fermentation?

After a press lunch back in May at a large conventional organic domaine in Provence, I approached the oenologist by the charcuterie stand. He’d just declared the domaine’s barrel-aged role to have been vinified “almost naturally, almost without sulfur entirely.”

“If you’re not sulfuring,” I ventured disingenuously, “I imagine the wine must undergo malolactic fermentation?”

“No,” he responded, just as disingenuously. “The malo just doesn’t happen.”

Speaking with French oenologists is like dialogue in a John le Carré novel. Misdirection abounds. In the French south, and in particular where we stood in the Var, none of the conditions obtain for malolactic fermentation simply not to happen. Malolactic fermentation, in this case, “just didn’t happen” because the wine had been sterile-filtered to prevent it. This is not at all uncommon in Provençal whites; it is the nearly unanimous norm.

For natural wine drinkers, the *how* of white wine filtration—whether it be performed via diatomaceous earth, membrane cartridges, pads, or cross-flow—is arguably less important than the *when*. Filtration just before bottling merely stabilizes a wine. Filtration before alcoholic fermentation is a precursor to artificial yeast insemination; filtration just after alcoholic fermentation is intended to block malolactic fermentation. These latter two procedures have no place in the repertoire of conscientious natural winemakers.

One begins to suspect that the near-universal acceptance of filtration in white wines—even within the natural winemaking community—is an alliance born of convenience between winemakers in cool regions who require filtration to assure stability for timely release, and winemakers in warm regions who feel filtration necessary to preserve acidity. It comprises a system in which the appealing economics of early-release of white wines supports a consumer aesthetic that favors young, fruity, crisp, limpid white wines, and vice versa.

Peynaud himself predicted this, writing in 1982, “The need for the rapid use of wines, and the more and more widespread usage of high capacity vinification recipients, oblige recourse to efficient procedures of clarification.”

A statement like this raises the question: what were white wines like before “efficient procedures of clarification” became an economic obligation? Estates practicing mixed agriculture in a bygone era presumably had more financial leeway to allow for longer *élevage* if fermentations were slow. The prevailing ideotype of most white wine today—young, crisp, fruity, and limpid—was probably rare to nonexistent. In warm regions as in cool regions, it is a style entirely dependent upon filtration.

Rare is the winemaker—even the natural winemaker—who manages to rebel against this system. Among the most radical stands I have encountered is that of veteran Alsatian natural winemaker Christian Binner, who practices long *élevage* of unsulfured white wines, bottled without filtration. His reasoning is holistic in nature.

“It’s important to eat food that is varied in bacteria and yeasts, because it permits us to digest. For me it’s just as important to drink wine when there’s all that inside it, despite the deposit and the little sparkle,” he explains. “When you drink a wine—even a natural wine without sulfur—that is sterile-filtered, you drink just alcohol which will exhaust your liver. It’s just a stone that falls to the bottom of the stomach.”

Occasionally he’ll find himself with tanks that refuse to finish their sugars, even after years of *élevage*; he bottles such wines with the inventive suffix “*qui gazouille*,” or “which murmurs,” added to their *cuvée* name, e.g. his 2010 Riesling Kaefferkopf L’Original Qui Gazouille. It is a cute, slightly euphemistic way of warning consumers the wine will probably possess a light sparkle. Rather than filter, Binner prefers to bottle a vastly more challenging style of white wine—one that harks back to a time before filtration became the norm for all white wines, natural or otherwise.

“The cloudy apple juice passes fine,” he jokes, by way of comparison. “You just need to explain why it’s cloudy.” ☺

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THE REBIRTH OF PIPEÑO



The summer sun was strong as Mauricio Gonzalez Carreño hacked through his unruly país with his machete. Those vines were in Yumbel, which lay in the bowl of Bío Bío of the Southern Chile region. Framed by the looming Andes and the volcano that made his soils, it had been abandoned for a quarter of a century.

While he’s bringing back cultivation, many grapes still ran wild. And so did the other fruit. The place seemed to have been blessed by the Chilean Persephone; there was so much abundance. There were plums, sparky cherries, and snappy apricots. His wife pointed out maqui, one of the world’s most intense super antioxidant berries that put gojis to shame. Stuffing myself along the way, we circled back to the cantina. It was immaculate and spare. No pumps. No tricks. It was the opposite of the nine years of corporate winemaking he left behind in Mendoza to come back home and make a simple wine called pipeño.

Mauricio is part of the Asociación de Productores de Vino Campesino de Chile, organized by natural wine advocate and sommelier Macarena Lladser. Their group of four all practice within the wine regions inside of the Secano Interior. They dry farm their organic land and mostly old ungrafted vines. Devoted to low intervention winemaking, they are committed to revitalizing the local heritage of pipeño, a refreshing wine low in alcohol, made from the **disrespected** grape país, raised in pipas (get it?)—barrels made from local beechwood called raulí. While the press often describes them as Chilean Beaujolais, I find the best are thirst quenchers but with the backbone of mencia. Very easy to love, they are far from the Chilean wines I rebuffed for a long time.

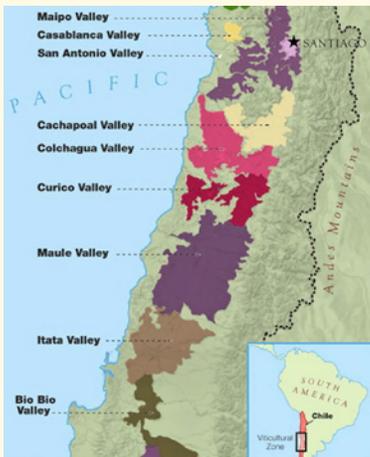
What didn’t I like about Chilean wine? The use of irrigation. The flat lands instead of the slopes. The embracing of the grapes of Bordeaux and Burgundy. A pandering to commercial taste. I knew there was terroir—the country was under the influence of the dramatic Andes and the salty air from the Pacific. The old vines were impressive.



The brilliant brick-colored granite-based soils of Roberto’s vineyards.

Yet, look at any Chilean wine promotional website, and you'd believe that the country never had much of a taste for wine until new invaders from France, Spain and California showed them how to treat their grapes. No mention of país for that matter. Even if you look at Jancis Robinson, you'll come away with the same conclusion. That is enough to get the Asociación angry as hell. Because país once ruled the Chilean hills.

Also known as mission or listán prieto, it arrived in Chile with the Spanish conquistadores, possibly through the Canary Islands. And while they had been making wine for hundreds of years, like Etna, their country didn't have a tradition of bottling wine, though drink they did. But with Pinochet, wine was suppressed, and that's not something often talked about outside of Chile.



I was determined to get someone to talk to me about it. Upon arrival in Concepción, the city five hours south of Santiago, Roberto Henríquez, the adorable man-bunned winemaker, picked me up. With the cool Macarena holding on in the backseat, her cigarette dangling out of the window, we headed out to see his vines with a tour of the remaining hiding vines in backyards and patches.

I asked what the Pinochet effect was on the region. Roberto's jeep jiggling along the terrible roads that led to his país vines, he pointed out the carpet of pine trees and eucalyptus. Eerie in its monotony.

In 1974, the "forest development" law 701 offered incentives for replacing native trees with invasive pines and eucalyptus for the paper industry. In particular, the eucalyptuses were water hogs and in the brittle heat of the summer increased the impact of fires. The direct effect was the retardation of the wine industry, shrinkage of vineyards and the vanishing of indigenous animals. The remaining patches of vines hid up the new trees or grew in backyards as head-trained globes. Yes, those trees were trouble. Roberto, and just about anyone I met who cares for the land and vine, hated those trees with nationalistic passion. They were a threat not just to the autochthonous animals, but to the region's cultural identity. "They will create a disaster," he said presciently.

But to go any further in the exploration of the renaissance of real Chilean wine and pipeños and not bring up French ex-patriot Louis-Antoine Luyt would be colluding with more revisionism. Many years ago, on a besotted night of wild dancing in Tribeca, the lovable man, and a veritable pogo stick, shared with me the story of the pipeño renaissance.



Those are Roberto's vines struggling for their future under the pines.



Sometimes it takes an outsider. Louis-Antoine, the French force who first championed the real local wine.

In his pre-heroic days, Louis-Antoine at 22, decided Chile looked like his next home. His three-month visit became permanent. He worked his way up the restaurant ladder to sommelier. In 2001, he returned to his native Burgundy, France to work harvest. Philippe Pacalet led him to Marcel Lapiere

and the groove with all of the other local natural wine guys. When Louis-Antoine returned to Chile, the wines he brought to the capitol were influential. Tastes started to change. But more importantly, he decided to make wine. He looked around him and said, país? Is there a problem with the grape? He knew there wasn't.

Louis-Antoine gave Chile its first exported natural wine in 2007, Clos Ouvert. He started to make wines under his own name from rented vines. But then, impressed by the work of the campesinos, he sought to preserve their traditional methods of fermentation. The first commercial export of pipeños was born, and the world slowly started to get used to the idea that Chile wasn't all about heavy, syrupy cabernet. The wines first made a market in the States and in Europe and laid the path for Roberto and the others coming back to tradition.

The week after I arrived home, on Instagram I saw a terrifying picture of Roberto's vines with crimson shadow of fire, encroaching on his país. The legacy of Pinochet revisited, just as Roberto had feared. But who knows, perhaps one day, along with the país and the pipeño and the real wine, the forests, too, can once again become real. 🍷

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WAITER, THERE'S A CIDER IN MY WINE: PART 1

By Deirdre Heekin

The criticism goes, some natural wines taste like ciders. Indeed they do. Something the matter with that? Read on to find out why to Ms. Heekin the problem is with the question and not with the answer.

On a gray, bone-cold day at the end of October when the apples in our orchard were still hanging red, golden, and heavy on our trees, Alice F. asked me what I thought about when people say a natural wine tastes like cider, and they aren't being complimentary. Of course, I had heard this correlation before, sometimes in relation to my own wine. But my experiences had largely been positive, and the wines received responses more of amazement and intrigue rather than derision.



I grow wine grapes in the northern clime of Vermont. I also grow cider, the more historically traditional fermentation of New England. This year when we began to harvest our apples in late November, biting into fruit that had been frozen then thawed by rain and warmer temperatures, the juice floral, sweet and heady, I found myself thinking about this question more and started looking up articles online using the search words “natural wine” and “cider” and “bad.” I was soon plunked in a pool of bald statements.

A *Newsweek* article by Bruce Palling was entitled “Why ‘Natural’ Wine Tastes Worse Than Putrid Cider”. Occasionally, journalists or critics wrote in acceptance of the comparison, as in the June 2017 article in *The Skinny*, “WTF is natural wine?...And why are so many millennials buying it?” written by Tom Ingham in which wine buyer Katy Saide of the café Trove in Manchester, England says, “Some natural wines have a more fermented taste, a bit like cider, others don’t taste much different than commercial wines.”

There was even a piece in the April 27th, 2017 edition of *The Economist* called “Hipster Plonk: What’s Behind the Fad for Natural Wine?” Embedded in the piece with the catchy subtitle, *Overtones of youthful rebellion and a hint of pseudoscience*, was a bashing of natural wine, the assumption that people were drawn to it because of the woo woo of biodynamics and foot-stomping (all of which I do, by the way), and the taste, “which ranges from cider-like juice to something resembling conventional wine, but with a trendier label and a bigger price tag.”

So at the end of devouring these articles, I found myself knee-deep in cider-wine-analogies, that more often than not, felt like attacks. I was puzzled by the negativity. Two or three of my white wines often get compared to cider by professionals and neophytes alike. Someone recently asked me if this bothers me. According to much of what I had read, it should have.

But it didn’t. And even after wading through all those articles, my answer remains emphatically no. Quite to the contrary, I am pleased when connections can be made between these two different kinds of fruit that I grow and ferment. What does bother me is the assumption that any similarity between this natural sisterhood is, in fact, a fault.

The grape and the apple have long been compatible bedfellows. These two harvests born of my own particular alpine terroir—

climate, plant varieties, history, and culture—are not unlike that of the Piemonte, Val d’Aosta or Alto Adige. They earmark the rhythm of our four seasons. To me, both cider and grape wine are *wine* and any differences in one inspires me for the other. In some cases, I blend the two together, or ferment ciders on grape skins, both antique methods borrowed from alpine regions in Europe, a happy and delightful marriage of fruit and place.

My biggest question for all the naysayers, was honestly, why does any of this critique matter? Why is it so often that this natural wine-to-cider comparison is even considered a negative? 

WAITER, THERE’S A CIDER IN MY WINE: PART 2

By Deirdre Heekin



The argument that wine can possibly taste like cider leads us back in history, much like the conversation reminding us that natural wine is nothing new. Fermentation’s purpose was for survival through transformation. Kimchi, cheese, wine, cider, beer, sake, and eventually distilled beverages were all happy results.

With a similar process, one can expect similarities in flavors, textures, and scents between all fruit wines. However there may be specific reasons—many of them—for the noticeable connections between wine and cider. Two in particular point to the result of oxidative fermentations, long and short, as well as the presence of malic acid.

Natural cider typically takes longer to ferment, due to lower sugars, cooler winter fermentation temperatures in the cellar and high malic acids. This tart acid was first isolated from apple juice in 1785. It is also the primary acid to be found in many fruits and is present in grapes and in most wines, though the concentration decreases with the ripeness of the fruit. Its fermentation converts its harshness into the much milder lactic acid which produces more milky, creamy, cheesy flavors and is the primary acid of yogurt and sauerkraut.

When Alice passed over this story to me she sent along some correspondence she had with Rhône vigneron Eric Texier. “Apple juice (because of the malic),” he wrote, “is a very tough place for yeasts. Usually *saccharomyces* ferment sugar for months in cider, compared to days or weeks in wine.”

Now, when wines take longer to ferment (also at cooler temperatures) and are exposed to more oxygen, they may be open

themselves up to more varied yeast and bacteria activities, some similar to cider processes. There can be similarities in taste profile. But even short fermentations done in an oxidative manner are also prone to these cidery elements, especially, I'll posit, if the wine goes through malic in the bottle and creates CO₂ and more appley flavors.

Also from Mr. Texier's notes, "So if *saccharomyces* are weak or in competition with the spectrum of other yeasts present during fermentations (*kloeckera*, *hansenula*, *brettanomyces*, *schizos*), the potentially complicated *lactobacillus* (which can turn a wine into vinegar) will be responsible for metabolizing a slew of aromatic components, much more than if they just fermented malic acid. Some of those are typical of 'gout de cidre' or lactic tastes you find in beer, cheese, sauerkraut, kimchi, so popular among Nordic hipster somms."

These cidery notes, for whatever the many reasons, are not limited to whites. As noted above, there are also red wines bottled young that have heightened apple or even orange citrus flavors and a little CO₂ that accentuates the nervousness, unsettled quality of the acidity. These are often referred to as 'crunchy,' a very in-vogue way of talking about snappy red wines.

Texier who also, by the way, is cider obsessed and looking at making it his next act, suggested that the bruised apple or apple notes may also come to the bottle due to intensive farming—plowing too much. This decreases the availability of nitrogen which, he theorizes, opens the door for cidery aspects. "In my opinion," he wrote, "this has almost no or little impact when the practice is conventional winemaking. Sulfur, additives (like nitrogen) and killer yeast would put back things straight."

As a winegrower, this attempt to solve a mystery about scent, flavor, and texture in order to understand more about what is happening in the field and in the cellar intrigues. But as a wine drinker why does this matter? After all, isn't what matters the open enjoyment of a wine, the intuitive or studied understanding of balance, the appreciation of what is unique? *~*

WAITER, THERE'S A CIDER IN MY WINE: PART 3

By Deirdre Heekin

As a winegrower, this conversation is intriguing, the attempt to solve a mystery about scent, flavor, and texture in order to understand more about what is happening in the field and in the cellar. But as a wine drinker why does this matter? After all, isn't what matters the open enjoyment of a wine, the intuitive or studied understanding of balance, the appreciation of what is unique?

I probably have spent far too much time reading the multitude of negative commentaries, the natural wine and putrid cider comparisons, the questionable queries, the reasons for flaws, but when people taste our La Garagista wines and say things like, "Oh! that reminds me of cider", it is their surprise that moves me, a connection to something they intrinsically know but may have forgotten, or have been re-acquainted with because they are trying cider again.

As Bradford Taylor, co-owner of Oakland's front-running natural wine bar Ordinaire says, "I think of the production of cider as...trying to recover something from our past, an act which is both historical and cutting edge. And this is what natural wine is doing too."



While the naysayers are still out there, there is another movement percolating and embracing these connections, using them to advantage. They take every wine at face value rather than trying to put it into the theoretical boxes built by critics. This new school of wine educators wants to impart joy, curiosity, history, human connection. Quinn Kimsey-White, once

behind the bar of Ordinaire and now opening the LA outpost *Psychic Wines*, says, "When conveying to a customer the characteristics of tannin and acids in a macerated white, it helps to have cider as a point of reference. Fine, subtly structured tannins and piercing, tart acidity. These are things people recognize in cider, whether they can articulate it or not, so it helps to use that for comparison when trying to turn someone on to a white wine that has seen some maceration." He also notes, "It's an achievement if a white wine carries the turbid effervescence and low-alcohol quaffability of a natural cider."

For me, fermentation is fermentation whether it is grapes, apples, quince, pears, blueberries, rhubarb, or barley. When fermentation is raw and down to the bone, without smoke and mirrors, there are bound to be connections because of yeasts and other elements of terroir, connections between flavors in the fruit and the natural processes of fermentation. If we had the opportunity to travel back in Time before the conventional use of cultivated yeasts and sulfur at every turn during fermentation became popular, I imagine wines and ciders would have tasted typically much more similar—and no one would have found the connection distasteful. The faster fermentation rates provided by lab yeast and the erasure of flavor esters when you add higher dosages of sulfur—pre-fermentation, at the end of fermentation, at bottling, and anywhere in between—homogenize the wine and remove the components that may connect it to fermentation outcomes reminiscent of cider.

Everything in wine, and especially natural wine, always seems to be divided by conventionally leaning critics as black and white, good and bad, cider or wine. People take sides where there are no sides that should be taken, but instead, merely observed. There is a need to explore so that the drinker (and critic) can understand which styles of wines they enjoy and to comprehend the chemistry and physics of what's happening in the cellar or in the field, in the bottle and the glass. Why denigrate natural wines or ciders because they don't fit a preconceived notion of what wine is, what wine should be. This seems to me a rather impoverished way to taste.

So while others might deem these connections as flaws, I celebrate how these beautiful nuances connect us to other fermentations, not only to the glorious apple, but to the broader history of our deeply complex human condition. *~*

All three parts originally published in Issue No. 41: March 2018

A MAGA DONE RIGHT



Spirits were high at the café table outside of the now defunct Bar Stella in Verona. It was about two in the morning, when any normal person would be drinking angular white wines or even better, the fizzy stuff. But not this night—a bottle of the 1996 Barbacarlo was what appeared. The label was impeccably old world and the wine grabbed me. It was tannic, rustic and volatile. Pure old Italy, packed with charm. Made by Lino Maga. I had never heard of him.



That's why a year and a half later, when I was meeting Elena Pantaleoni of **La Stoppa** to explore Emilia and she suggested we make a short detour to visit Maga and the Barbacarlo, "Because to understand Emilia, that's the place to start," I said, sign me up.

Maga lacks the star status of Bartolo Mascarello, the rakishness of Lorenzo Accomasso, or the

established sanity of Emidio Pepe, but he should be up there for those who seek out the most profound traditionalists. And there he is, ensconced in the Oltrepò Pavese region in Lombardy. Tucked into the northwest of Italy, south of the river Po, it's a prime example of a fabulously destroyed region. If known for anything, it's for their riesling and pinot noir. Pathetic. I mean, when was the last time you drank a bottle of wine from the Oltrepò?

Elena picked me up at Malpensa and in under an hour later, we arrived to the town of Broni, where Maga receives guests and lives. His yard was filled with old equipment, almost like a wine museum. We parked under a majestic persimmon tree, heavy with not-quite-ripe fruit. We walked into the receiving room, littered with upright bottles, typewriters, meat slicers, knife blocks, all framing the long wooden table which could have seated over twenty. It had to have been the centerpiece for parties and serious tastings that stretched into the night. Now, it was mostly collecting bottles and books. The winemaker was wearing that standard issue old-Italian-man cap, mismatched plaids and argyles with a moth hole here

and there. Between his fingers was the never-extinguished cigarette. Maga shook my hand, kissed Elena on the cheek. We sat down. He grabbed the 2015 Barbacarlo from the collection of open bottles in the middle of the table and proclaimed he had just finished his 80th vintage. He poured and brought the glass to his nose. First he sniffed with his left nostril then immediately switched to the right. I wondered, did he learn that from his old friend, the late and very great wine writer, **Luigi Veronelli**? Then took a slug. "Wine is a serious thing," he commented. "It is food."



Lino Maga at his table, with his plaids and cigarette and poker face.

Preach, I thought, and he did. "In Italy, government forgets the farmers. More people are working well today but the government is against us." Satisfied with his sniffs, he passed the wine our way.

He spoke slowly. He was guarded, but stories started to flow. Maga left school when he was 13 to become a vignaoli, he told us in dialect. You could say that about his wines as well—the dialect part. His methods haven't changed over the generations; viticulture is still organic. The grapes are destemmed, crushed, put into 3000L tini. There's pigéage. He doesn't use his press wine except to clean his tanks. Like many who make wine the same way as their ancestors, he watches the moon. "I rack during the old moon," he said. "I do it about six or seven times, quite a bit to avoid filtering," he added. Then he bottles early—the spring after vintage, and keeps the bottles for fifty days before he releases them. As of 2005, when the government insisted on labeling for sulfur, he began sulfuring. He lists the total content on the label, but in truth, the wine acts as if it has none.



I admit that the 2015 was not thrilling. It showed the difficult dry and hot vintage. Tannic as well as stuck with a good deal of residual sugar.

The 2016 Barbacarlo, however, was classic. Plenty of tannin and bubble but with enough stuffing to forgive it. Finally there was the Montebuono 2012 with a full throttle fizz. Who knows what it will be like when it finds its way. Bottling that early and then taking it to market that soon, anything can happen in a Maga wine.

In any event that fizzy wine was the opening for Maga to hold forth about the bubble wine history and the decline of Oltrepò Pavese. His attitude was one of derisive helplessness.

“There was a cooperative, Santa Maria,” he said in a deep voice. “They made spumante. It was a big success. After that, everyone planted grapes that didn’t belong in the area. Like pinot noir. In the 1980s they planted riesling.”

“Pinot grigio,” he said with disgust. “They all wanted spumante.”

To be fair, sparkling does have some history in the region: back to the 19th century Oltrepò Pavese grapes provided others with a base for sparkling, so you couldn’t blame them for wanting to make their own. However, the newfangled grapes are more recent interlopers.

“But Broni was always known for black grapes,” he said, referring to croatina, vespolina (here called ughetta), uva rara with some barbera. “The warmth from the limo makes the area good for it.” To make his point he presented us with a chunk of rock, a heavy chunk of very messy, hardened sand, as if dragons’ teeth were embedded in it. It didn’t look like any limestone I had seen.

During the rush to bubbles, he was loyal to his red wine from his famed hill. He actually has two plots that he vinifies separately. Four hectares on Montebuono go into that wine. The other four are on the monopole Barbacarlo. And even though plenty of others fraudulently bottled their own wine as Barbacarlo, it was his family’s thing, named after a long dead uncle. ‘Barba’ in Pavese dialect means uncle. Carlo was the man’s name. Their hill is ‘Uncle Carlo’. He fought for twenty plus years to earn the unique right to use the name. It was awarded in 1983.

Having won battles, with his 80 vintages behind him, he acts as if he’ll live forever. Or rather that his precious hill will live on as his extension. He talked of replanting, as a young man would. The future.

But the whiff of anger and dejection clouded the room as Maga continued on with his story. Luigi Veronelli tried to champion the wines and had plenty of them in his private cellar even as the world forgot Broni and Maga. For decades there were few visitors. Then in the hot year of 2003 he failed to get the DOC, “The wine had more than 12 grams of sugar.” His response was to be an IGT. “I’m out of the law,” he said and blew smoke in my direction. “Does this bother you?” he asked, perhaps a bit slyly.

I suppose that was traditional, too. But I was in his home, not mine. He could do whatever he wanted with his cigarette. “I’ve made it this far with smoking, so there’s no need to stop.” He didn’t. And his son, who now has taken over the cantina and had slipped in after a nap, lit up as well.



Giuseppe, Maga’s son, working in tandem with his father, continues the tradition.

And what about that vineyard that he fought for years to claim the right to its name? “Can we go to see it?”

“No, it is too steep.”

And as if to make the point that he wasn’t going anywhere, winemakers and importers came through the door. Pilgrims are coming to pay their respects, just as they do with the other greats, quick before he disappears.



VISITING THE BARBACARLO

Elena and I stood under the persimmon tree, she had a cigarette. And we talked. I was dejected about not seeing that steep hill. That’s when a young woman in sweats came around to rev up her scooter. Elena had an idea. “Do you know the way to the vineyard?”



“Sì. Sì,” was the answer. We hit the ignition and followed her behind Broni, past the vines, and climbed up high. And higher. We arrived. I thought, this wasn’t steep, it was positively child’s play compared to some spots in Cornas, the Mosel, Ribera Sacra. And the planting, it was a crazy cross-hatch of exposures as if many different plots

had been crammed into that one hilly vineyard. It’s as if I, with my crazy sense of organization, had been in charge. We walked to the top. The soil was parched white. “Elena,” I asked. “What is limo, it’s not limestone, right?”

She pulled out her iPhone dictionary and she showed it to me. “Silt?” This vineyard was loam and silt. I never took silt seriously and would realize in the coming weeks as I experienced the profound silt of Emilia, that I would need to update the *Dirty Guide* to fix that hole. It would become a theme over the next days. So, I looked over those vines with their roots in the silt. They showed the difficulty of the vintage and every grape that could be picked, had been. We trudged behind the girl who lead us on her moto. “There,” she pointed when we got to the top. She was indicating the hilltop across a deep valley, on the other side. It was only then I realized that we were standing in Montebuono. The slope on the other side held the vineyard we sought.

There it was. And sì, sì, Uncle Carlo was an impossibly steep slope. There were plenty of holes in the vine lines, from the wild boar, showing the need for replantation. There were the abandoned terraces from an attempt to rebuild them a decade or so ago. I could well imagine the kind of wine that could be made from there. Better

than Maga is making today? Perhaps. But what still is squeezed out of that land is a wine that looks so far into the past, with its charms and difficulties, that it demands and commands respect. If you get a chance, the wine comes in at times to the country. The Montebuono might run about \$50 or so. The Barbacarlo runs between \$70–\$120 or more, depending on vintage. Right now, unless it's already been snapped up, Astor Wines has some items from Luigi Veronelli's cellar. The **1979 Barbacarlo** is one of them. Grab it if you can. ♪

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REDUCTION REDUCTION WHAT'S YOUR FUNCTION?

By Sophie Barrett

They say that you can fix a reduced wine by dropping in a copper penny, which may or may not work. Sure, try it, but meanwhile, come along as ex-New York wine personage Sophie Barrett plummets down the rabbit hole of reduction.



This mega-reduced Dirupi, from the Valtellina. Love it or hate it, reduction is a force to deal with and think about.

Once upon a time, I was at dinner with two biodynamic growers in the Haute-Savoie. Tasting Chasselas from the French side of Lac Léman, I noticed a familiar aroma of freshly lit match on a stone. Alpine mineral wafted from my glass. “*C’est réduit*,” one of the growers commented, “*mais c’est la réduction du vigneron!*”

He was talking about the familiar sulfury stink we normally associate with a wine that needs airing, that hasn’t been racked, or is closing in on itself. Reduction shows itself as aromas generated

by sulfur compounds. General descriptions include rotten egg, burnt rubber, skunk, burnt match, asparagus and the mercaptan smells of onion and garlic. But I’d never heard it expressed as “winemaker’s reduction,” something a vigneron would actively cultivate.

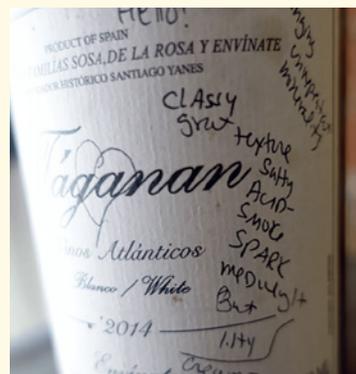


Well, that’s not totally true. I had noticed sommeliers referring to the struck matchstick smell that would appear in certain vintages of the renowned Burgundian domaine Coche-Dury as “Coche reduction.” But this was a wine that was unobtainable and out of my price range, so never having experienced it, it wasn’t much on my mind when I first heard the phrase *la réduction du vigneron*.

This statement of winemaker’s reduction, however, was very much in my mind when, not long after, a situation arose with a customer that made me look deeper into the idea that not all reduction is the same and some types can actually be positive.

The situation was this: a customer, a well-regarded sommelier, returned his allocation of **2014 Envínate Táganan Blanco**, saying the wine was too reductive, that he couldn’t serve it, and would have to send it to the kitchen to cook with. Questions came up for me: would the reduction eventually recede? If so, when? Was there a problem in the winemaking that perhaps, the well-worn salvo, a well-timed racking would have fixed? It puzzled me that reduction could be a flaw, a pesky byproduct of natural wine *and* a virtue actively cultivated by star winemakers. In **Coche** it was good. But in the Táganan it was bad? Did folks realize that the lofty Coche Dury Effect was really just reductive winemaking—and not some magic genie in a bottle trick that made it somehow worth \$700/bottle?

And with that, I plummeted down into the deep rabbit hole of reduction.



For sure, that 2014 Táganan Blanco is amongst the most reductive wines I’ve encountered. Yet at the same time it was brilliant. I’d decant it 30+ times then leave the decanter for hours trying (without success) to air out the matchstick smell. But here’s the thing, it didn’t carry through to the palate, which was gorgeous. For me, it was a wine clawed

from the earth with vivid yellow fruit. For my customer, it was unacceptable.

Turns out that Envínate’s Roberto Santana is actively trying for reduction in the wine. While he’s looking for it as a byproduct of grape and soil (“For us it is very important to see the potential of reduction in the wines to be sure that our wines are protected of oxidation.”), he’s not forcing it in the cellar via sulfur additions and inert vessels, such as stainless steel. He’s adopted a style of reduction management that favors terroir expression alongside ageability.

I tried the question of good reduction and ageability out on another great wine brain: Chad Stock of Craft Wine Co. in Oregon (Minimus, Omero Cellars, Origin). Chad has played with reduction, he even named a wine after the process, his 2011 Minimus Wines #5 Reduction. “There are certain forms of sulfide reduction,” he wrote, “that manage to undergo a transformation process in which they resolve themselves over time, and during that time of resolution consume large amounts of dissolved oxygen in wine, which slows down the oxidation of fruit and other aromas that we associate with youth and freshness.” Essentially, a healthy sulfide reduction, when coupled with slow, controlled oxidation creates “a long haul wine, something that will age, a winemaking holy grail.”

Subsequent vintages of Táganan Blanco have been less reductive than that 2014. Curious, I asked Roberto what he’d done differently and his answer was as thought-provoking as the wine. He talked about carbon dioxide.

With the 2015 vintage, they began to measure the amount of dissolved carbon dioxide in the wine before bottling. (CO₂ is a byproduct of fermentation and is another “natural tool” that protects the wine against oxidation and fosters long life.) Based on this number, they’d make the decision to aerate (rack) the wine before bottling or not. Thus they were playing with levels of two natural



The windswept, difficult volcanic terrain of the Táganan vineyard in Tenerife. Photo: Amanda G of *Blonde de Blancs*.

protectants, dissolved CO₂ and reduction, to create wines “with good potential of aging, but also wines of pleasure from the beginning.”

Going further down the rabbit hole, I learned from Johannes Weber (of Hofgut Falkenstein) that there’s a clear rapport between spontaneous fermentation and reduction. Spontaneous ferments use a larger number of microorganisms than cultured yeast ferments. These microorganisms require nitrogen to reproduce. Nitrogen and sulfur are among many molecules found in amino acids. When yeast metabolizes certain amino acids in search of nitrogen, it “sets the sulfur free,” Johannes said. “It can then react with other components in the juice/young wine and starts to smell like burned rubber, egg or even worse.” These sulfuric compounds are unstable; if exposed to oxygen, they react. This is why winemakers rack or pump-over to aerate a reductive ferment. This is also why when you get a stinky wine you swirl or decant. It helps. At its most basic level, reduction is a lack of oxygen.

If the stainless steel tank is the poster child of mediocre reductive winemaking, **fine lees** are the heroes of the good version, notably because lees-aging is generally used in tandem with oxidative processes (like barrel aging) to promote balance between the two forces. Utilizing lees to protect against oxidation is an age old practice. It’s become increasingly fashionable and is now widely considered to be beneficial. These days winemakers favor long, tranquil periods of lees-aging (no stirring), Sleeping Beauty awaiting the bottling.

While winemaker’s reduction tends to be about choices in the cellar (Tank or barrel? Lees or no? Stirred or not? To rack or not?), there are other factors: grapes, and even soil.

Grapes themselves can have different proclivities for reduction, which dictates, or at least suggests, how to handle them in the cellar. Reduction helps build structure for the future. Eric Texier says it’s folly to vinify syrah or ct in an oxidative way. Reduction is a necessary—but by no means sufficient—quality for aging. On the other hand, reductive grenache ages “very badly.” Is this a chicken/egg conundrum? Are some grape varieties inherently reduction prone, or are they vinified reductively because that’s what works? In the case of the following varieties, many (perhaps the majority) of the best examples are reductive when young: Syrah, ct, mourvedre, carignan,

poulsard, trousseau, gamay, chenin blanc, listans negro & blanco, the list goes on.

While we tend to think reduction is born and bred in the cellar, the more winemakers I spoke to, the more convinced I became that reduction is born in the vineyard. As I learned from Chad, “poopy” reduction, the kind that leaps out of a fresh bottle of poulsard or ct, is directly linked to spraying sulfur on the vineyard too close to harvest, or an amino acid imbalance in the juice: “Elemental sulfur plays a

large role in reduction during fermentation so spraying too close to harvest is never a good idea especially in dry arid climates.”

Picking choices factor in as well, especially now as climate change provokes winemakers to pick earlier in search of higher acidity in the grapes. Early picking seems to result in more reduction. Chad’s theory on this is two-part: grapes picked earlier have less nutritional value, meaning less yeast-food, thus greater chance of yeast gorging on sulfur-containing amino acids. Also, an early pick may mean less time between sulfur spraying and harvest, therefore more elemental sulfur in the juice. Is it coincidence that high acidity and reduction have come into fashion in tandem? With early picking, a winemaker can have both!

Having noticed reduction in many of my favorite Canaries wines, I asked Roberto Santana if he thinks soils play a role. Táganan Blanco is a field blend, so we’d be hard pressed to pin the reduction on a particular grape. Roberto’s response: “For us the volcanic soils at Canary Islands have a lot of personality and for us have more tendency of a little reduction. We think it is more related to the soil than the grape variety, and of course in the cellar—if you work with products (commercial yeast, enzymes, etc.), reduction should disappear but along with it the personality of the terroir. That’s not the deal for us!!!” This is to say that when reduction is an aspect of terroir, let it live on in all its sulfuric glory!

I passed this question along to Chad, who reported similar findings amongst the terroirs he works with. “Granitic and volcanic soils in my experience present the most reductive expression in the Willamette Valley and in the Applegate Valley. The basalt in Oregon is particularly intense but its generally noble reductive qualities increase the life of a wine.”

Johannes sited rocky soils as more likely to give a reductive wine because “they lead to a grape juice that is lacking nutrient for the yeast to ferment that juice. The yeast metabolizes everything it can, also amino acids with sulfur components. And we are off to a reductive wine again.” Chad echoed this sentiment almost verbatim, adding that this type of H₂S specific reduction is more common in inoculated wines “due to lack of proper nutritional value matched to the yeast chosen for fermentation.”

Digging deeper into reductive soil types, I sought out Benoit Courault in Anjou. Benoit works several plots of old vine chenin on schist that were previously farmed conventionally. I was certain he’d

tell me these particular soils were nitrogen deficient and yielded a more reductive wine. What he in fact told me was, sure, nitrogen can play a role, but thanks to elevelage and racking, reduction disappears.

Benoit, though, went ahead and made this trenchant observation: limestone has a very aromatic side; it's a flatterer amongst grapes. Next to it, more austere soils such as granite and schist can make us *think* of reduction. It's easy, even for experienced tasters, to conflate aromas of terroir with aromas of reduction, especially if the two appear hand in hand (Táganan Blanco, anyone?). As this "catch-all," reduction is grouped together with all the different off aromas trapped in the bottle, as well as the deliciously musky, sulfurous smells of certain more austere soil types. And then there's also the hand of man, especially when man aids in depleting the nitrogen. In Texier's words: "Crappy farming helps (with reduction)! High pH + bad work with lees = high reduction."

Complicating all of this was, and always will be, fashion; from the lees-stirring that made so many 1990s white Burgundies undrinkable, to the lean, matchstick, 'sleeping beauty' style that followed it. Blindly following fashion never seems to work out. Learning from the trend is quite another matter, such as when the winemaker separates the good bits like native ferments and lees-aging, from the less good bits like inert aging vessels and screw caps.

Recently I opened one of my remaining bottles of 2014 Táganan Blanco. Anticipating the matchstick, I popped it in the fridge, cork out. An hour later I nosed the wine...not a hint of reduction, just porous, soil-y notes, preserved lemon, and a whiff of smoke. I pondered the wisdom of winemaker Roberto Santana followed by the folly of my customer who returned the wine. Emerging from the rabbit hole for a draft of fresh air, I sipped from the glass with renewed wonder and admiration. 

REDUCTION REDUX

By Sophie Barrett



Chad in Oregon, June 2017.

Sophie Barrett recently had an email chat with Chad Stock, the grand experimenter over at Omero and Minimus on the relevant topic of... reduction.

Is there a difference between the matchstick reduction of white/sparkling wines and the poop-y reduction of natural reds?

Yes there is a difference. Sulfide chemistry is incredibly complex and although there are known paths of chemical reactions,

think domino effect, there are many unknown paths, which are indirect and/or not understood. In the case of both the matchstick and the poop, you are talking about understood direct reactions that are well documented.

Matchstick reduction is formed in wine when too much sulfur is added to the fermenting juice. In the case of highly protective winemaking used for white wines, high sulfur additions in the juice during fermentation are common so this is generally the cause. Some winemakers try to induce this quality in their wines. It's quite common in chardonnay made in many regions across the world because small amounts of matchstick in the wine profile can appear mineral-like or flinty, but it's just a winemaker trick to make you think you're experiencing mineral terroir.

Poopy reduction is directly formed from the development of H₂S during fermentation. This can happen in any style of wine if the fruit is compromised with elemental sulfur sprayed in the vineyard too close to harvest. It can also happen due to an amino acid imbalance in the fruit that can cause certain less desirable amino acids that contain elemental sulfur to be consumed by yeast during fermentation, releasing the sulfur of the amino acid in the form of H₂S as the yeast dispose of the sulfur. The H₂S can then shift its form into stinky poop-like aromas if the fermentation and resulting wine are handled too anaerobically when the H₂S is present. This is the form of reduction that I'm pretty sure no one appreciates, not even me, which is saying a lot, and what I believe most professionals have on their mind when they are thinking of the bad form of reduction.

Are there grape varieties and soil types that are inherently reductive?

Syrah and tempranillo are known for being highly prone to complex reduction. This is what we commonly see as bike tire, electrical fire, charred meat, and smoke aromas. Granitic and volcanic soils in my experience present the most reductive expression in the Willamette Valley and in the Applegate Valley. I'm not sure why these soils are prone to this, I can only comment based on experience. The basalt in Oregon is particularly intense but its generally noble reductive qualities increase the life of a wine.

When is reduction a sign of long life?

I believe, and have observed, that there are certain forms of sulfide reduction that manage to undergo a transformation process in which they resolve themselves over time. During that time of resolution they consume large amounts of dissolved oxygen in wine, which slows down the oxidation of fruit and other aromas that we associate with youth and freshness. In the cellar, a conventional winemaker would likely try to give the wine oxygen in barrel if they saw any form of reduction, and large amounts of air in a short period of time are usually devastating to the wine unless it is used to battle H₂S during fermentation. Slow controlled oxygen seems to be the trick to managing a balance with the more noble forms of reduction, which can occur in bottle under natural cork, or in large older barrels that breath slowly. The formation of these noble reduction compounds do not come from the H₂S pathway and generally present themselves as umami notes both aromatically and on the palate. When they appear I know I will have a long haul wine.

When is reduction related to sulfur in the vineyard/depleted nitrogen?

If you are referring to the specific amino acids generally documented, I believe we would be focusing on a lack of Cysteine and Methionine. These are the two primary sulfur-containing amino acids that make up proteins. When these amino acids are consumed by yeast in large amount due to lack of proper nutritional value

matched to the yeast chosen for fermentation, you can develop a lot of H₂S specific reduction issues. This is an issue that can apply to both non-inoculated (native) and inoculated yeast fermentations but is much more common and severe with inoculated fermentations.

Can racking get rid of reduction and if so, when should you rack and when not?

For me, the only reduction I am afraid of is during primary fermentation. If I detect an issue with a white wine in barrel that is reductive, the cause is usually due to having too high a level of press solids in the barrel which acts as an oxygen sink and in combination with a saturated CO₂ environment from fermentation trapping the gas in the barrel. In this situation racking to remove some of the solids in the barrel can be an effective tool. Racking can also refer to removing wine from a red fermenter to splash it around in a different open top tank to blow off CO₂ and cool down the fermenting juice. When the aromas come back into balance the fermenting wine is then returned back to its skins, which is what we call this a “rack and return”.

Racking in barrel when a wine is finished fermenting is a different story. It really depends on the form of reduction you are working with. I have generally found that reduction aromas in young wine are in the wine itself and not in the lees. Lees are the healing source for most things in wine so I am hesitant to rack off finished wine. I like to sample the lees on the bottom of a reductive barrel of wine and taste them; if they are clean smelling and tasting then I will stir the wine in barrel because I have found in this case the lees will clear up the wine. If the lees are reductive then it may be the cause of the reduction and removing the wine from the lees could be a good thing. If I rack I will replace the lost lees with clean healthy lees from another wine to maintain that relationship. Conventionally speaking, a wine would be racked off its lees based on sending the wine to a laboratory for testing to identify what the specific sulfide form is, which can inform you whether racking will be smart.

Does stainless steel promote reduction?

Yes, stainless steel definitely promotes reduction. The lack of oxygen transfer through stainless steel contributes to anaerobic conditions for fermentation and aging. Most stainless steel tanks are also large volume, and in the case of white wine tanks are very tall compared to their width. The electrochemical potential (ECP) of wine changes with the height of the vessel, the taller the tank the greater the potential so the wine in a large tank must be redistributed regularly to rebalance the wine. In small vessels such as barrels, amphorae, and cement tanks the ECP is very low and usually does not contribute to the issue. So material of the vessel is important, but the dimensions must also be considered.

I've heard that Richard Leroy in the Loire—who encourages a certain amount of reduction (even though he uses no stainless)—finds that slightly early picking has an impact on this. The reason is that the grapes are less oxidized. Thoughts?

Yes, picking early has an impact on increasing reduction, at least in Oregon I can say it does, so in other regions it must as well. The oxidation part is a new concept to me; I'm not sure what that means. It would be a local knowledge thing that applies to his ingredients and his terroir. I can't explain his theory without speaking with him directly. I could contribute that early pick fruit may contain less nutrient which may increase reduction. There may also be less time between the last sulfur spray so there could be residue present.

Does spraying, particularly Bordeaux mixture/sulfur, close to the time of harvest have an impact on reduction?

Yes, as stated above elemental sulfur plays a large role in reduction during fermentation so spraying too close to harvest is never a good idea especially in dry, arid climates. Bordeaux mixture, which contains copper, brings in a whole new level of chemistry and discussion. Copper will counteract the reduction caused by the elemental sulfur so if both make it to fermentation it gets really interesting. Copper is a strong oxidizer and it's nasty stuff to be adding to a fermentation ever in my opinion, but to have it make its way into your fermenter from vineyard residue in an uncontrolled and uncalculated amount is a stupid idea. Another critical time to not spray this mixture is during bunch closure to avoid residue being trapped inside of the clusters, which may not weather away before harvest.

How do you play with reduction and why? For flavor? Longevity? Do you find certain soil types or particular vineyards tend to be more reductive? If so, why?

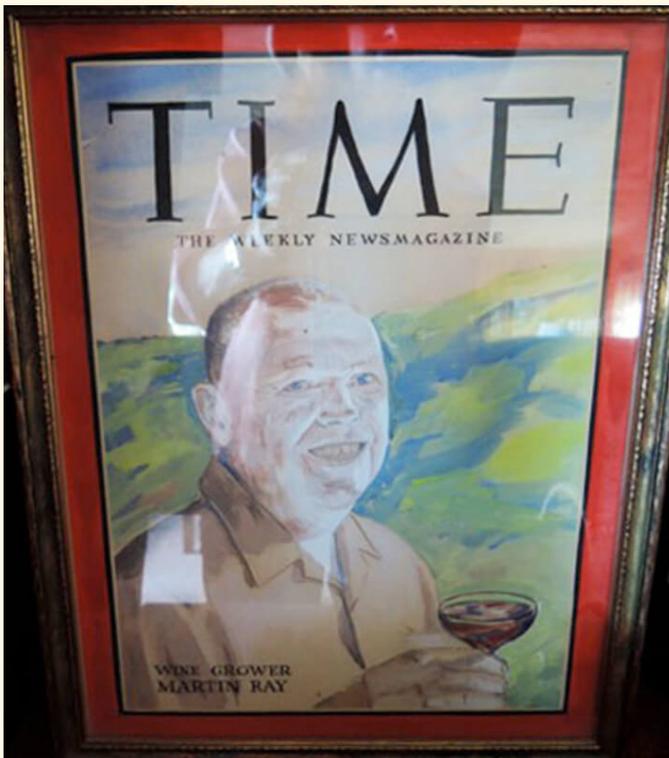
It's mostly about flavor for me, I believe that reduction is an important element to wines that pair well with food. I suspect that the presence of umami in wine is directly related to complex sulfide chemistry and amino acids, so I'm willing to go further down the rabbit hole than most. Longevity can be a bonus, Minimus #5 “Reduction” is only getting fresher and more fruity as it ages and it's now 7 years old. DMS is Dimethyl Sulfide, the sulfide compound most commonly associated with Burgundy and creates the mushroom and forest floor aromas in the wines. The precursors to DMS smell super savory, gamey, umami, like fish sauce or some kind fermented asian food condiment. I believe the DMS in #5 Reduction is responsible for its longevity. This statement of winemaker's reduction, however, was very much in my mind when, not long after, a situation arose with a customer that made me look deeper into the idea that not all reduction is the same and some types can actually be positive. 

“Reduction Reduction What's Your Function?” and “Reduction Redux” originally published in Issue No. 42: May 2018

CHANNELING MARTIN RAY

In case you think Martin Ray is the name of an avoidable winery in Sonoma, stand corrected. Martin Ray is California history and the reason there's the current lust for domestic pinot.

Martin was an iconic visionary and an advocate for 100% varietal wines from worthy vineyards. He railed against manipulation and begged for appellation designation. Like many of the passionate and opinionated, he was a pain in the ass, a loner and generally viewed as a difficult nutcase. His first vintage from his Santa Cruz vineyards was 1935 and his last was 1974. While he yeasted he never added a drop of sulfur. “We add nothing to our wines, nor do we take anything from them,” he said in an interview before his death in 1976. The real Martin Ray was a legend and an American wine hero. My kind of guy.

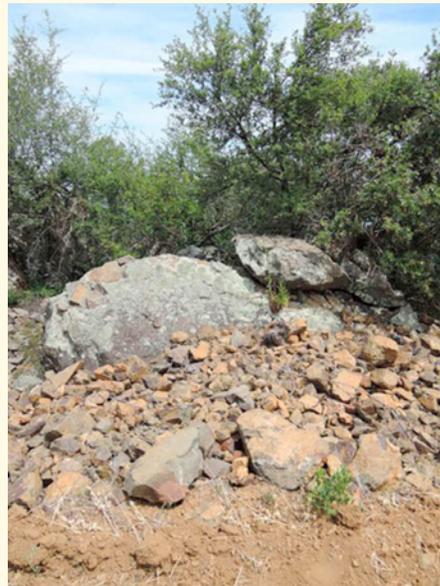


His wines were rumored to be unpredictable; some said one out of ten were drinkable, though that bottle might have been sublime. I yearned to taste, but had given up hope that a kindly collector would make that possible. That's okay. In 2011 Martin's heir and stepson Peter had given Duncan Meyers and Nathan Roberts the great honor of buying the grapes from that very vineyard. I could make do with the lovely Arnot-Roberts pinot. In addition, this May, Duncan and Nathan made good on a promise to take me to see the piece of land in the sky that started it all. Eager to see this slice of American wine history, I eagerly set aside the day. If I couldn't taste a Martin Ray original, I'd channel its spirit.

Twisting up the mountain, past some of the newest McMansions that had invaded the peace, we arrived at 1400 feet to step out into the freshly tilled, garden-like Peter Martin Ray vineyard planted to Cabernet and Pinot Noir. Peter had just been in town to disk and plow the land. Around 80 years old, and living in Washington State, he insisted on traveling to the mountain yearly to do the job himself. "A horse would be gentler." Nathan commented wishing the organic vineyard was less compacted, but Peter was attached to his tractor.

I stood with my hands on hips, the wind blowing, and looked down at scalloped vineyards. The perfume from the vine in flower teased my nose. The dry-farmed grapevines stood up individually, like soldiers. Each had been tied to a single stake, like the northern Rhone echalas but with a floppy, top heavy, California sprawl. The soil was broken reddish soil, Franciscan shale, the kind that Martin Ray referred to as "rotten rock." I could almost feel Martin, whose ashes had been scattered in the soils in 1976.

"This 2.8 acres only gives you three tons?" I asked, envisioning the three tubs of fermenters in their Healdsburg winery. "There's virus," Nathan explained, referring to leafroll virus which reduces ripeness and yield, causing panic among so many winemakers looking for greatly developed sugars, "We actually think loss of ripeness is not such a bad thing," Duncan added.



Martin's rotten rock.

It was hot out there and conventional wisdom would say far too hot for pinot, yet the wines had never been acidified. The new A-R Martin Rays are zippy as well. Something about the place defied wine logic. It was a mystery or was it merely those deep roots through the rotted rock, or the schist/shale's air-conditioning ability? We were hot too, and thirsty so we retreated

for a snack on the porch outside the humble ranch where Ray had staged legendary parties. Duncan and Nathan pulled out a small picnic, crumbly cheese and lentil salad and an assortment of new vintages. Then came the not quite released 2013 Martin Ray. The pinot was respectful, full of spicy stems, foresty rich and pretty. That's when another bottle was extracted from their magic wine box. The men had brought along a dream of mine, about to be fulfilled, the 1962 Martin Ray pinot noir. Martin sat right down next to me. I know he did.

"Maybe it will be good, maybe not," Nathan said and then Duncan tried to snaggle the cork from the bottle as I said to myself, thank you Duncan and Nathan. Thank you. Thank you.

There's not a lot written about the way the wine was made. I could ascertain through Martin's interviews that the wine would have been crushed and fermented on the seeds and stems, poured into 200-gallon wooden fermenters, half-filled. Inoculated with Montrachet yeast (he was convinced that he needed to) gently punched down every three hours. Then pressed off in a basket. There was no sulfur at any stage. The reds aged in barrel for about three years until stable in from what I could tell was a relatively warm cellar.

Duncan worked the cork. He cursed. We held our breath. Finally with some difficulty and fracture the cork came out, wine poured. I wasn't the only one quivering. It was alive.

"That's legit!" declared Duncan.



Duncan inspecting the vines.

The color was like tomato water. The taste ping-ponged from bright to leather to Band-Aid to delicate to intense to gorgeous, to alive to electric and mushroom power and back to Burgundy and then to the moon and then to the umami of Japan and the acid was out of control. This was the kind of moment we all chase. That moment of greatness when the history, place, and power come into the glass. Without that wine, Duncan and Nathan would not be making the wines they do today. Martin may have been difficult, he may have been mad, but there was conviction and genius in that glass. 



Looking down from the PMR vineyard.

Originally published in Issue No. 14: June 2014

HIROTAKE OOKA, A VISIONARY IN CORNAS



Beneath the suave cravat of a Parisian from the 16th is the hardworking, determined Japanese vigneron ex-pat, Hirotake Ooka.

So, how did a nice Japanese boy like Hirotake Ooka get to Cornas, a secluded, almost xenophobic place with steep hills and hardworking vignerons, about as far away in aesthetic as you can get from Tokyo? As *Oh* means big and *oka* means hill, it's easy to think there was some karma going on. He was fated to it.

In 1997 Ooka left his Japanese city for Bordeaux to learn winemaking. The

impetus for change was a bottle of Allemand. Having sniffed that wine truth, he headed to the northern Rhône in search of work with that winemaker. Rebuffed, he landed a vineyard management job with Guigal—not exactly a bastion of the natural wine world order, but at least he was in the right neighborhood. In time, Allemand relented and there, in the hills of Cornas, Hirotake worked. He made

his first wines under his own Le Canon label in 2001. In 2002, 19 virgin hectares in Cornas came up for sale. It was within sight of Allemand's vineyard and winery on the splice between Saint Peray and Cornas. This preceded the region's huge uptick in prices (which could now run almost a million a hectare for cultivated land). Beyond the price benefit, the soil was chemical free. This was the beginning of his Domaine de la Grande Colline, which of course means big hill.

We were late when we drove into his driveway off the main drag in Saint Peray. And as I got out into his yard, in front of a colorful vegetable garden I had to wonder what did Franck Balthazar mean when he snickered, "Ask Hirotake about his 2013."

Ooka was ready. I had to delay our visit for a bit to pee. I headed into his home. There, his wife nearly had a stroke as I attempted to set foot on her floors without removing my shoes. I corrected the situation (she was right, and I was an idiot. My shoes were a muddy mess.) and was utterly charmed by the nest of small naked children running around the house while fresh sushi perfumed the air with umami. An interesting image to have in mind as we drove a short distance to his wine cave, over which hung an almost obscured sign, "Caveau du Cressol."



Inside we shivered next to the stone weeping with the cold and humidity. All bottles and crevices were clad in darkened fur balls of mold.

"Never above 11 degrees," Hirotake said. [That's 52 degrees fahrenheit.]

The cold helps with natural winemaking, something he says at least for the reds, "I've mastered." He said this with such humility, it didn't seem like bragging. His reds for the most part are vinified with a few days of carbonic

maceration, then punched down for the remainder of fermentation until finished, then racked off into old barrels.

Part of his practice which adds to that mastery is to never move a wine until it's stable. For example, his 2011 Saint Joseph had 36 months of elevage. His 2006 Saint Joseph is just being sold now. The exception, however, is his bread and butter wines, the less expensive (though delicious) Le Canon, released as a relatively fresh wine. He also makes a nouveau-like bottling for the Japanese. All are under synthetic cork. "That way, if there is something wrong, it is my fault. Not something out of my control."

His dinner called him, but I begged to see his land. He agreed and we headed back into the hills, and turned through a neighbor's backyard, to vines



hiding in the shadow of Allemand’s cuverie. A secret place. Ooka only farms 3.5 hectares out of all his land. There are 12 different parcels. The one we walked out to see was a ridiculously steep vineyard, far steeper than anything I had seen before in Cornas. His name now made complete sense.

The vines stood in a romp of weeds and plants and vines planted to high density at about 8,000 plants per hectare. The air was gorgeous. Crackling, fragrant with the surrounding garrigue released after the recent spot of rain. “So,” I finally asked, “what did happen in 2013?”

It turns out he wanted to follow an extreme version of Fukuoka and not treat but trust that the natural environment would be all the protection he needed. However, nature wasn’t kind: in 2013 he lost everything to rot. It was devastating, but he didn’t seem perturbed. “I was prepared for the risk,” he said. And now he’s learned. He will spray when he needs to.

THE TASTING

Currently he only makes one wine from his own vines, the Cornas. The others are négoce, bought from biodynamic properties under the Le Canon label. 30,000 bottles in all. He hopes one day to get rid of the Le Canon and concentrate on his Cornas. As you can see



from the tasting notes below, this would be a tremendous shame. Our palates (and pocketbooks) would be sad to see the label disappear. I’ve been in love with these wines since that first Le Canon vintage of his, I first tasted in 2003. It just seemed so very Cornas, animal and lively. Today, I still adore exploring and drinking all of his wines. But often my adoration is more passionate in France. I am on the fence about how well these wines handle travel to the United States. Here, at times, their 100% gorgeousness seems impaired. But even at less than 100%, they are worth the exploration if you can find and afford them.

2013 Le Canon Rose

Made from Muscat d’Hambourg, with almost no color yet powerful with the Muscat perfume. Oddly disturbingly beautiful.

2010 Saint Joseph

From vines near Condrieu, elegant and modest. A gentleman of a wine.

2011 Cornas

This is currently available and it’s a conundrum. Tasted in France. Loved the shit out of it. Lovely. I wrote, “Go and buy!” It was stony, licorice, wildly complex, and classic. Tasted twice in the states. The first time it was immediately seductive, almost slutty. Juicy, sure. But sloppy. The second time, the structure held to its perfume. It argued. I argued back. I have one more bottle and I’m going to keep it cold and hang on for a year to see how it evolves.

2006 Grenache

Whoa. This is sound and drinking. I swooned over a really grenache spicy nose. Precise. Elegant with such lovely refined tannins. 

Hirotake Ooka has since left Cornas for his native Japan where he is making wine and is still involved with projects in France.

Originally published in Issue No. 16: October 2014

THE SHIT ON SCHIST

I never thought about the different soil types of the Anjou until a recent diatribe by the French wine critic Michel Bettane entitled “The Tragedy of Chenin.” Sure, I’ve heard tell that dry chenin blanc grown on limestone was described as a pure, bright expression of high acid and “minerality,” and chenin on schist as a more austere, powerful, bitter “intellectual” wine. But Bettane went several steps beyond and likened chenin on schist to, “stale choucroute, old cheese rind, rancid butter, moldy dough.” Rancid and moldy? Up went the blood pressure.

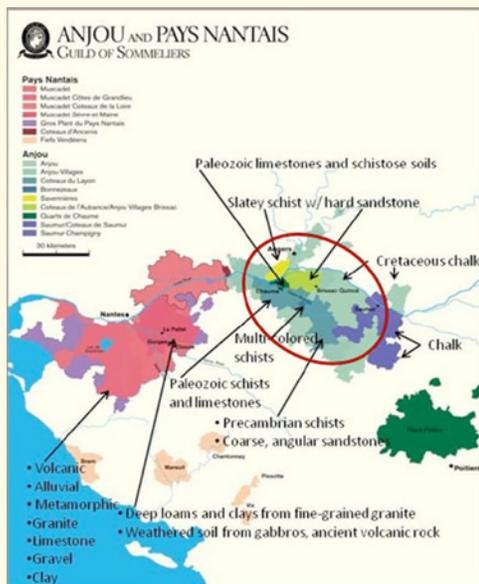


There’s the evidence of Anjou Noir and Anjou Blanc, limestone and schist in the Chateau d’Angers.

Instead of getting angry, I decided to get informed. Trying to get to the bottom of it turned out to be more complex than just “black and white.” Underneath the layers were issues of tradition, desire, dirt and reality.

But first a little background. The Anjou region which hugs the town of Angers is made up of two distinct soil types. Anjou Blanc is simple: that’s largely the kind of limestone in Saumur and Saumur Champigny. Anjou Noir, which includes the sub regions Bonnezeau

and Layon, has blacker soils of decomposed metamorphic rock, mostly schist. There is sandstone schist called Brioverian. That's a mongrel containing plenty of quartz, mica, and feldspar. There's also volcanic soils of reddish oxidized schist and greenish rhyolite, prevalent in Savennières.



Plunk a little volcanic into the map of the anjou and you get the idea.

vins liquoreux. Another factor was situational and climate. “We have more humidity in the mornings (helped by the two rivers that run through the land) allowing for botrytis,” he said. While good news for the sweet styles, when going dry, the winemakers need to keep an eye on the sugar level and not harvest when it's too high.

But the most contentious point from Bettane was the issue of malolactic fermentation. He seems to view this as a choice, but in the hands-off practice of the naturalists, if the wines want to go through malo, the wines go through malo. In the Noir, they usually do. In the Blanc, they mostly don't. Chenin without malo is angular. Chenin with it is more lush.

Kenji Hodgson who makes wine around Faye d'Anjou, the little area once known exclusively for its sweet wines, wrote to me his thoughts on the malo subject. “The Saumur whites don't go through the malo. This is possibly because of the cold cellar temperatures of the troglodyte caves inhibit it.” Another reason is that limestone soils are lower in pH, higher in acid and that can be inhospitable to malolactic bacteria. Then he posited that perhaps some of the Saumurois actually choose to block the malo (with SO₂ of course) in order to give the wines the impression of minerality and tension. This is something natural winemakers in the area (among them Patrick Baudoin, Mark Angeli, Benoît Courault, René Mosse, Richard Leroy) would never do. “So,” he said, “we are left with a softer acidity (lactic) rather than a tangier one, or mineral or tension or whatever you might call it.”

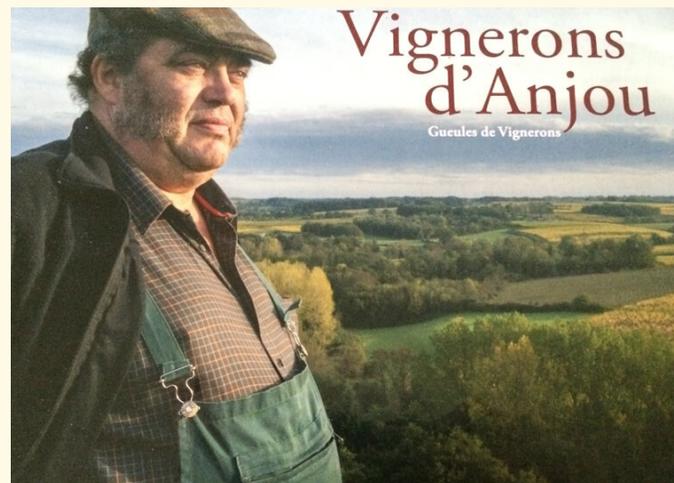
So, in the end is it Bettane's preference for an angular wine that got him so angry at the schistic dry chenin? Or is he just a staunch traditionalist who wants the wines of that area to stay sweet. Whatever the reason, I remain grateful for him opening up the door. The more research I did, the more controversial this whole issue became. Stay tuned for part #2. 

Historically, the Noir was famed for its sweet wines, and yes, even Savennières was a sweet spot. But the dry chenin of today, (as a strong movement) is only two decades old or so. According to Jo Python of Python-Paillé (who makes both sweet and dry wines), the schist wasn't the only factor to help create *les*

THE RETURN TO SCHIST

To recap from last month: The penultimate white grape of the Loire, contrary to popular belief, is not sauvignon blanc, but the other blanc: chenin.

That late ripening grape flourishes in Anjou's two habitats: the white (limestone) and the black (schist). If you're like Michel Bettane you might despise the ones from the schist. If you're more like Pascaline Lepeltier and myself, we go equally for both. Those from limestone seem more angular—because the soil may help them resist the edge-smoothing malo. On schist, where the wines tend to naturally go through the malo, the wines are rounder. But that's a simplification and the other nuances need to be examined.



Jo Python graces the cover of Rigourd's new book.

So, based on a conversation Pascaline had with her mentor, **Patrick Rigourd**, we revisit the topic this month. Sitting at my table she shuffled through her extensive notes, pulling out the nuggets. Basically there are three issues besides the malo: water stress, reduction, and botrytis. (Put your science hat on—things are about to get technical.)

Water stress: Where there's more clay mixed with the schist there is more water stress drying the soil, making the vine struggle, concentrating the flavors, sometimes resulting in higher alcohol levels and thicker skins. The phenolic maturation of skins and seeds is speedier and riper on slate than on limestone. The resulting wines will show more varietal characteristics, which they call *Chenais*. That means they'll show more straight grape flavor and bitterness, rhubarb and quinine.

Reduction: You know the way syrah can have notes of animal and rubber? That's what is referred to as reduction, or the appearance of 'reduced' aromas associated with sulfur (rotten eggs, burned rubber, etc). Chenin (like syrah) is particularly prone to it, resulting in aromas like a certain cheesiness or maybe even what Bettane called sauerkraut. But chemically this reduction is terrifically protective. This is why, Rigourd said, it's a great grape to work with naturally, with no or little SO₂—it can protect itself. But this reduction might be one reason chenin on slate can get a bad rap. He said, “People don't know how to differentiate reductive characters from added sulfuric compounds, from minerality to varietal.” He cautions that when it

comes to natural chenin, not to judge too quickly whether you like it or not, and be sure especially with a natural wine to give it a lot of air, allowing it to resolve with the oxygen.

Botrytis: Sure Vouvray (on the limestone) has botrytis but it's mainly only found in the sweet wines. It's not like on the slate in the Anjou, where it's a constant issue. That slate promotes humidity which, combined with that soil's heat retaining properties, leads to more botrytis pressure. So in wines from that soil, a little bit of that desiccation and sweetening is a pretty common issue. For a lot of people it diminishes purity. "Oh, it's got some botrytis," and up goes the nose in a sneer.

"People shouldn't be so closed minded," Rigourd said. "It is part of the DNA in the Anjou Noir." A lot of people also confuse the honey and straw from botrytis with oxidation. Why this tradition of allowing the botrytis to happen? "We were not rich," Patrick said, "So people harvested everything, including the grapes with botrytis. Making dry wine without botrytis is a very new fashion."



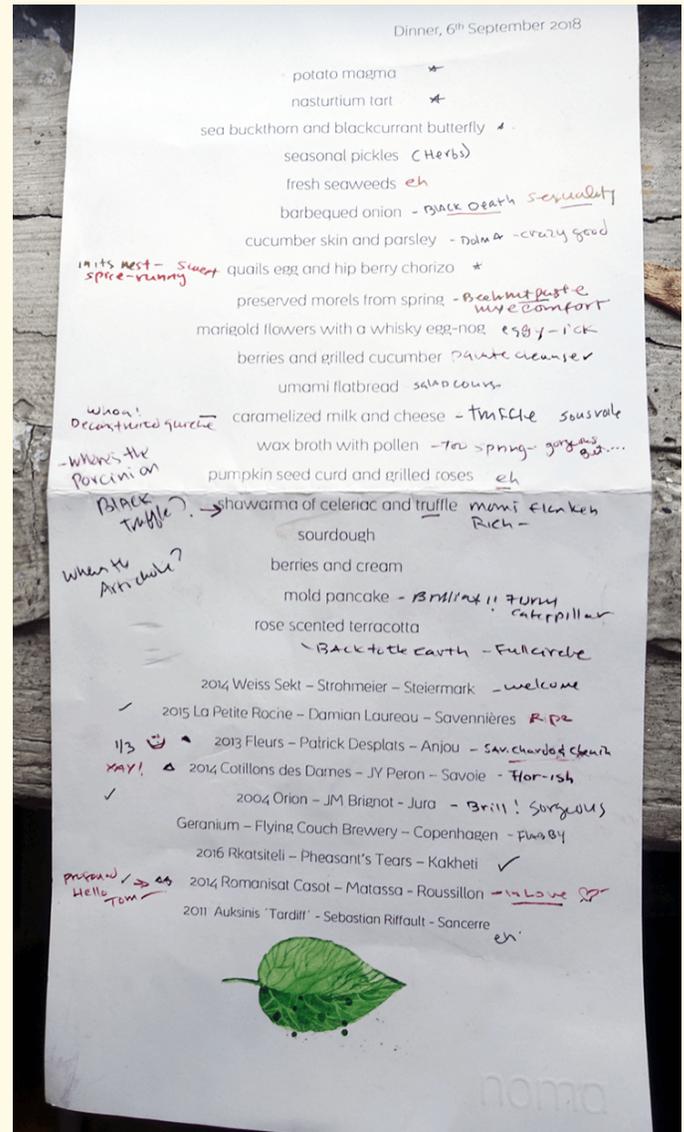
Slate and clay in Ben Courault's vineyard.

So, where are you in the debate? Try picking up a couple of whites from Saumur and taste them next to a bottle from Eric Morgat in Savennières and Didier Chaffardon's La Mentule Matagrabolisée from the Anjou Noir, both in this month's recommendations, and let me know what you think.

Additional reporting by Pascaline Lepeltier. 🍷

"The Shit on Schist" originally published in Issue No. 14: June 2014 and "The Return to Schist" originally published in Issue No. 15: August 2014

NOMA



The idea for the dinner at the world's most watched restaurant was hatched this summer when I felt trapped in my living room. I was finishing up my next book and extremely isolated, claustrophobic and anxious. Over Messenger, I confessed it all to my friend John Wurdeman while he was showing students from the Slow Food Academy the charms of his adopted country, Georgia. "I need an adventure," I typed out.

He wrote back, "Let's meet in Copenhagen. Go to Noma. It's the vegetable menu."

I was thinking more along the lines of Ayahuasca, not exactly a meal.

Anyway, could I really drop nearly \$400 (DKK 2,250) on a dinner, and that was before the wine? I was a writer in a tenement not an investment banker in a penthouse. Yet, having been a vegetarian for most of my life I had drooled over the Instagram photos, especially those of the celery root shawarma. Brilliant. The stuffed morels had me scattering heart emojis. That weird ass mold pancake with plum kernel ice cream? Had to have it.

I started to rationalize. The restaurant, four times awarded the top spot by the World's 50 Best Restaurants, was uniquely committed to natural wine. It was a professional obligation to go. And, for once, I wouldn't have to worry about being in a fancy pants restaurant where there was nothing I wanted to drink or wonder what weird animal parts would show up unbidden. In truth, experiencing René Redzepi's vision was a box on my list that needed ticking. Fortified with an arsenal of perfectly valid reasons, I wrote back, "Yes!!!" Then I promptly had a panic attack.

By the appointed night in early September I was resolved. The sun was still high in the Nordic sky and we—John, who is something of a pack animal, had invited two eager women from the Slow Food Academy—arrived at the retrofitted munitions factory in Copenhagen's dodgy, druggy Christiania neighborhood. We neared the large wooden door, as imposing as a Viking church entrance. There a raft of staff welcomed us with a communal, "Hi guys." Like the booming "Yes Chef" that echoed from the open kitchen, this theater was a bit much. The airy dining room was Danish modern without being retro. We took our corner table, near the framed pinned butterflies. I imagined the lepidopterist Vladimir Nabokov was watching me throughout the meal.

A reservation at Noma earns bragging rights, but it's not for everyone. There might be fermented squirrel in the soup or crickets in the mole sauce. Some diners might be wearing jeans. And then there are those pesky natural wines. Some reactions on the internet are less than enthusiastic. While the Noma program's ethos was aligned with mine, I could almost sympathize with the complaints because I too like to drink what I like to drink. That's why I usually shy away from a sommelier's pairing. But John told me that was our plan, and that was it. So in exchange for an additional \$200 (DKK 1,350) per person, Mads Kleppe, our friend and head sommelier, was going to be in charge of our drinking for the night.

The first course arrived, it was a terracotta potted herb. We were instructed to suck through a bamboo straw jammed into the soil. I'd heard that Redzepi had been experimenting with fox (or so my in-house sources said—gross) and there was that squirrel. With the spirit of Nabokov upon me, I thought of the letter in 1924 he sent to his wife Véra. "In everything enchanted there's an element of trust." So, I tucked my head into the plant and reflexively braced myself for a mouthful of dirt. Instead I was rewarded with a most intense chunky potato soup, layered and complex, an amuse that amused, that engaged the senses, even the one to flee, and reminded that food comes not from the head of Chef, but the earth. That potato magma set up the meal with a taste explosion.

Mads served nine wines, a few at a time to stretch through the courses, each one served with a Mona Lisa smile. He wasn't going



to give us their names, origins or any identifying clue. Now, the first wine, the Alpine-like one that wasn't. Was it Basket Range or Styria?

The women from Slow Food looked on with curiosity as John and I started the what-are-we-drinking game. The second wine, now that had to be chenin. We agreed. A completely charred onion arrived on a flax napkin, its layers were so slick and visceral I blushed eating it.

The wine it coupled with was also chenin-like, but not really. Seaweed green Nordic dolmas arrived on a similarly colored plate. These were of rehydrated cucumber skins rolled around cucumber crème with thyme. Artichoke has nothing on a cucumber when it comes to difficult wine pairings. But Mads' nutty counterpart was the yin to its yang, even if it had us stumped. It wasn't concentrated enough for the Jura, so from where?

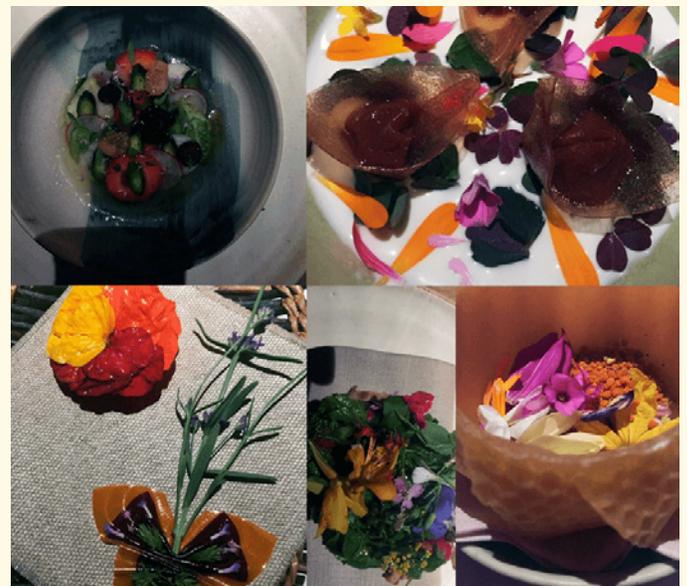


During the meal's half-time break, a walk outside next to the greenhouses and baker's lab.

Over the next hours and nineteen mini courses, there was a mix of the humble and the profound—and such a profusion of edible blossoms I began to feel like a bee.

By the time the fried marigold flowers with a splash of whisky eggnog came along, we were

at half game. This wasn't my favorite course. Some other dishes also didn't hit the delicious mark. The gorgeous honeycomb dish called 'wax broth,' which looked like a Gauguin still life? I could have swum in it for hours—a sentimental farewell to summer—but eat it? A sip of the broth and a munch on one of the flower petals was all I needed. But it didn't matter because I took it as the adagio before the vivace. This was a meal that was even greater than its parts. And to drink? Was that really old beer?



Some grumpy reviewers also have decried the lack of perceived luxury ingredients during the meal. But they were there—the plant kingdom’s equivalents to lobster and caviar. Thin slices of porcini on top of the black truffle chip. Deeply wrinkled, preserved spring morels stuffed with beechnut paste on a bed and broth of matsutake. The technique to perfect those adorable oozy quail eggs offset by the rosehip chorizo.

Let’s talk about that truffled, smothered caramelized milk skin, a dream for anyone who has ever picked off the cheesy, crusty bits of a gratin. The accompanying ravishing oxidative wine had to be from the Jura. Vintage? And who was the producer? Then we arrived at a wine that we knew without a doubt. “Pheasant’s Tears Rkatsiteli. 2016,” John said, recognizing his own.



The celeriac beast. Courtesy of Scallion Pancake.

The final savory dish was the one that had magnetized me on social media, that celeriac shawarma. With great pomp—I almost expected a brass band to march behind it—a monstrous celery root mass was paraded about the dining room to the table. It had the conical shape of a carcass at a gyro shop, but dressed up for Christmas with pine branch antlers. Minutes later the slaughtered vegetable arrived, as thinly sliced as carpaccio.

I’m not sure whether the decadent root tasted like shawarma, I stopped eating meat long before I knew kebab shops existed, but it did transport me back to my mother’s Coca-Cola basted, roasted flanken that took her all Friday to bring to perfection. Mom served it with Manischewitz. Mads also went with red, but with something like a pousard, as intense as a Chateaufneuf with a slicing acidity to cut the richness. Grenache from...Pifferling?

Who cared if it was Overnoy, or Pifferling, or Mondavi? Noma’s food isn’t about the expected, so why should the wine be? To willingly sign up for the possibility of squirrel but insist on Napa Cabernet or Bordeaux or really any pre-determined wine seems to defeat the purpose.



The molded barley pancake was as soft as a neonatal caterpillar. Swaddled in its grips was a startling barely sweet, plum kernel ice cream.

I could see only two reasons to opt out of Mads’ tastings; both come down to money. If I had to flash it, there is an extensive selection of Domaine Leroy to choose from. If I needed to save it, there are several options for bottles under \$100. But I, who came here to start saying yes instead of no, who started out resistant to wine pairings began to wonder why Mr. Kleppe offered a wine list at all. I’m taking the radical stance and suggesting he abolish it—after all Chef doesn’t offer à la carte. The wine and its discourse was a revelatory part of a meal built on trust.

The bill arrived and I happily extended my card. But my money was no good there. John insisted. This was a huge gift and I wasn’t sure whether I could allow it but I know better than to mess with John. The last time I had seen him was in Georgia and I was hauled away in an ambulance. Yes. He insisted on paying and I, touched, accepted the message from the universe and said thank you.

Walking away from the restaurant, through the slice of nature outside, the smoke stacks from the industrial plant across the water lighting up the sky, even that was enchanting.



noma

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Tuesday – Saturday 5:00PM – 12:00AM

Students! Please note there is a special student price at DKK 1,000.

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