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DEFINING NATURAL WINE THROUGH THE LENS OF SUSTAINABILITY

MYSA

ARTICLE

Natural wine is somewhat of a controversial term, mostly due by its lack of formal definition. In this article I will attempt to provide more specificity around the term natural wine and analyze it through the lens of different sustainability standards. We'll also take a look at blind spots that should not be overlooked, and are great topics for future discussions.

At MYSA we believe that the qualifications include:

At minimum sustainable farming practices
Native yeast and spontaneous fermentation
Low sulfur usage at bottling
Equitable labor practices in the vineyard and winery
These pillars help define what's required for us to consider a wine a natural wine. Even if the winemaker is using organic or biodynamic grapes, if they are inoculating using non-native yeast, controlling fermentation, or adding significant amounts of sulfur, that is no longer considered a natural wine by most people in the industry, including ourselves.

Each of these topics could be discussed ad nauseum, but the majority of the debate around natural wine surprisingly focuses on the third category of sulfur and how much is added. While sulfur can be an important topic, we feel that it is far lower in importance than the other categories.



AUTHOR

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COMPANY SUMMARY

MYSA Natural Wine is a wine club and eCommerce platform focusing on natural wines from small producers, farmed sustainably, and made with minimal intervention. You'll find traits like organic, biodynamic, native yeasts, unfined, unfiltered and vegan in most of our wines. We're location-agnostic, and are simply looking for wines that we'd be proud to represent.

WEBSITE

<https://mysa.wine/>



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SUSTAINABLE FARMING

The first area of importance in natural winemaking is sustainable farming. This is one of the most hotly debated topics because many in the industry would like the requirement to be certified organic or biodynamic to count, as anyone could lie about their practices. While true, the scale of most natural winemakers is typically quite small, most make less than 5,000 cases a year, and paying for these certifications can be far too costly for the scale of their operation. It's a multi-year process to get this certification, which has also proven difficult for a number of winemakers we're in contact with.

In this regard my belief is that in this area (and truly all the pillars listed) it is up to the importer (or distributor if it's in the same country) to do their due diligence and ensure that these practices are in fact being met to the standard they have for their portfolio. The natural wine sector as it stands today is full of people passionate about preserving the natural beauty of the wines and I find myself generally trusting the judgement of the importers we work with like Zev Rovine, Jenny & Francois, Savio Soares Selections and many others.

In the realm of sustainability, I would say this is an area that natural winemakers typically get very high marks, as they not only practice sustainably, but many go a step further using cover crops, animals or other biodiversity to create a full ecosystem in their vineyard. Many also upcycle the fallen grapes or the pomace to make verjus and piquettes to give new life to areas of the vineyards and winerys that would traditionally be tossed out.

NATIVE YEAST AND SPONTANEOUS FERMENTATION

In my opinion, the most crucial area of the natural wine definition is use of native yeast and spontaneous fermentation. While the goal of a natural wine is to of course be free of pesticides and made without significant additions I believe most of that definition can be summed up in organics or biodynamics. Where the true definition of a natural wine lies is in ensuring that the winemaker is using ambient yeast in the winemaking process and letting the wine ferment on its own without temperature control.

This information is typically easy enough to find on spec sheets and can be very difficult to do, which is part of the reason natural winemakers make much less wine than conventional winemakers. In the realm of sustainability it is of course lovely to use as little as possible and better for the environment to not create new yeasts or waste energy on temperature control. But, in the grand scheme of environmental impact, it is likely the smallest benefit in the natural wine world.

LOW SULFUR USAGE

The most highly debated pillar of natural wine currently and, in my opinion, the least interesting is the use of sulfur. The purest goal of natural wine is to be zero/zero, meaning nothing added and nothing taken out. This is a wonderful goal and certainly applies to sulfur usage but also means no pesticides, colorants, or other additives that are legal across the world in winemaking.



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As you might expect, significant use of sulfur is not great for the environment, but even when it is in use by natural winemakers it is unlikely the amount used would be high enough for any major impact on the local climate. Whether using little or none, natural winemakers are leading the way in reducing the use of chemicals in the winemaking process. Though, on a personal level I will note that I believe using a bit of sulfur at bottling is important to ensuring stability, as I've had too many beautiful bottles taken over by mouse.

EQUITABLE LABOR PRACTICES IN THE VINEYARD AND WINERY

By far the most overlooked, yet important aspect of natural winemaking is the human side of it. While most consumers think about the winemaker and associate them with the wines, it is an agricultural product and can take a lot of people from the farming, to production, to distribution.

Last year there was a case of a notable natural winemaker having allegations of wage slavery in her father's vegetable company that she is part owner in and the wines were pulled from all three of the importers in the US over potential knowledge of these inequitable labor practices. This issue is more relevant to producers with over 20+ hectares of vines, as the really small ones typically use family and friends and that is enough to create their wines, but like with farming practices it is now the onus of the importer to ensure that the wines meet at least the basic requirements of fair wages and working conditions. In the US, where many natural winemakers purchase their fruit from other growers, the onus is also on them to ensure that the people they partner with fairly compensate the people creating the organic fruit they are using.

Regarding sustainability, we all know that the people aspect of it is just as, if not more important than the environmental impacts of the winemaking process and while most natural winemakers work hard to create equitable labor practices, the community at large should also be doing a better job asking questions and ensuring that the focus isn't just on sulfur, but also the other areas that went into the wine.

CONCLUSIONS

These are the basic pillars of natural wine as defined by us at the MYSA team. That said, there are a few areas of sustainability that were not touched upon, such as carbon emissions and transportation. Those will be for another blog, as they aren't specifically a requirement of a natural wine (though maybe they should be in the future) and we will explore the areas of improvement for natural winemakers and industry professionals to focus on to create a more sustainable product.