



NATURE VS. NURTURE

Do you know what's in your wine?!
(And should you care?) *By Sara Schneider*

WINEMAKING IS A SIMPLE PROCESS, right? Just crush some grapes, and the natural yeast on the skins will start eating the sugar in the juice, producing alcohol. Once the sugar is gone, press the wine off the skins and seeds, let it mellow, then siphon it off the sediment and bottle it.

I'm being simplistic, of course. There's a little more to it than that. And increasingly—given the mind-boggling technological tools available—*much* more than that.

Let's say you're a winemaker who doesn't trust the natural yeast to be strong enough to see fermentation through to the end. You can inoculate with a strain of yeast that's been commercially bred to lend a particular flavor profile. What if you think your wine is too pale? Add Mega Purple or Ultra Red; these color- and texture-enhancing concentrates are derived from grapes, and therefore natural (or so the argument goes). Acidity too low? Add acid from a bag. Alcohol too high? Take some out with reverse osmosis. Wine too cloudy? Clarify it with anything from egg whites to isinglass.

I'm only scratching the surface of the processes winemakers are using these days. And to be fair, they're turning out some decent affordable wine with these tools. But where on the spectrum of manipulation does a bottle lose its connection to a particular place and time, and become the wine equivalent of a McDonald's burger?

Voices in the "natural wine" movement, especially strong in the West today, would have it that even the first step away from basic winemaking is a violation. The geek in me appreciates the argument; I love a wine full of the nuances that come through from a special vineyard in a great year. But Mother Nature is seldom a perfect nanny, and I believe that sticking with the purists' "nothing in, nothing out" mantra is to risk making wine that goes beyond funkiness that's interesting, to funkiness that's downright revolting.

A conversation with Santa Cruz, California, winemaker Nicole Walsh assures me that I'm not alone in my position. "I'm not an absolutist," she says. "I'll make simple adjustments if I have to. For myself, I could make a completely 'natural' wine that's very interest-



ing even with huge flaws, but I wouldn't be able to sell it."

Walsh's "smart minimalism," as I call it, is the result of a decade-plus evolution at highly regarded Bonny Doon Vineyard. Collaborating with iconoclastic proprietor Randall Grahm in the early 2000s, she threw every tool in the book at their wine, which quickly grew from a 50,000-case production to somewhere in the neighborhood of 400,000 (including the enormous Big House label). "Additive city" is how she describes those days. Almost as quickly, though, Walsh and Grahm started moving away from intervention—selling the Big House label along the way—in the quest to produce true wines of place (terroir-driven).

Walsh continues to make Bonny Doon wines. But she's also bringing a gentle touch to her own Ser Wine Company. Her approach is an anachronistic mash-up of tradition and science. On the one hand, she still loves using her feet to punch down the cap on fermenting wine. On the other, when she crushes grapes, she doesn't just send a prayer to the gods that the natural yeast on them will start—and finish—fermentation. She cultures it to produce a strong "starter" to ensure success.

Wines like Ser—every vintage different, all fascinating—are the reason my hat is off to winemakers who work hard to keep their hands off their wine but know just when to step in with simple adjustments in the cause of deliciousness.



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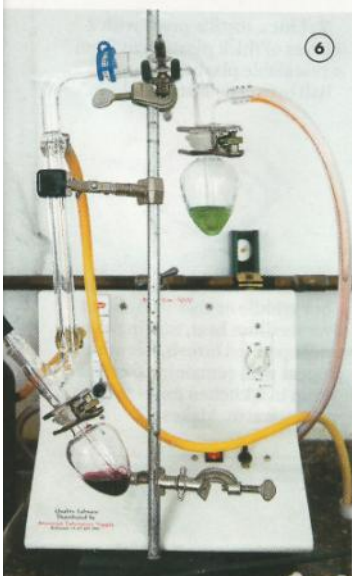
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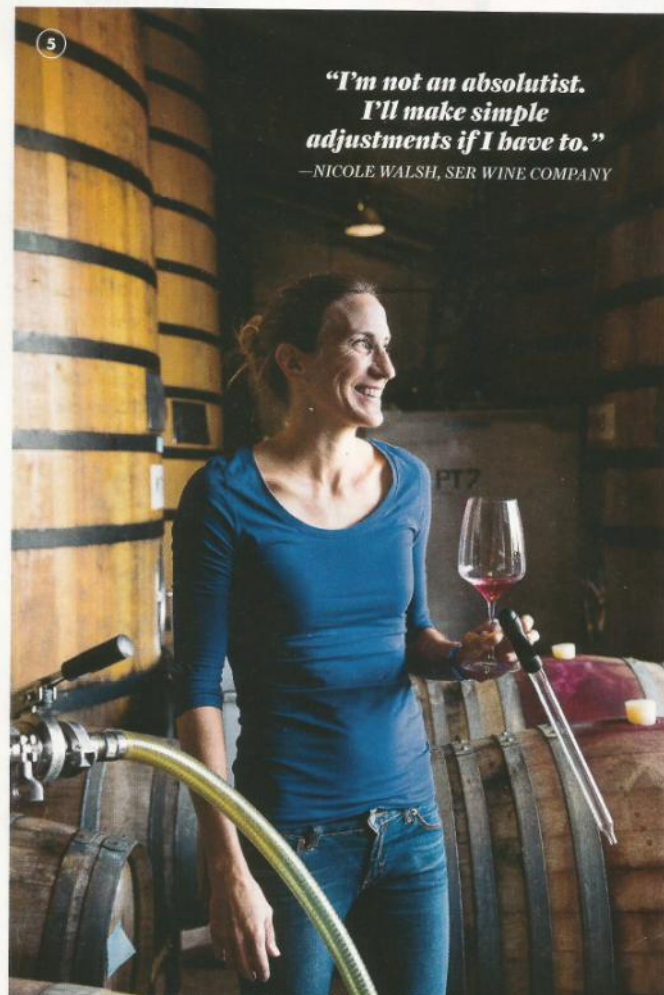
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THE WINEMAKER AT WORK

1. Nicole Walsh of Ser Wine Company shining a light on a Pinot Noir that's ready to be siphoned off its spent yeast cells ("racked off the lees").
2. Adjusting the racking arm so it's just above the lees in the barrel.
3. Stirring Cabernet Franc rosé gets the yeast up into the juice to keep the fermentation going.
4. Checking the population of an indigenous yeast colony to see if it's large enough to inoculate.
5. Walsh and her tools—a wine thief (to pull wine from the barrel) and a glass.
6. Checking sulfur amounts using an aeration/oxidation machine.



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adjustments if I have to."*

—NICOLE WALSH, SER WINE COMPANY

Six minimalist picks

Bonny Doon 2010 "Le Cigare Volant" (Central Coast; \$45). Savory and earthy (violet notes excepted); plum and dusty berries layered with pepper, black olive, and cured meat.

Cowhorn 2012 Grenache 20 (Applegate Valley, Oregon; \$45). Tart red fruit—juicy Rainier cherries—with crushed herbs, white pepper, baking spices, and mocha.

Deovlet 2011 "Sonny Boy" (Santa Barbara County; \$40). Earth, pepper, smoke, and mocha on the nose of this Merlot blend give way to cherry, violet, and fresh herbs.

Ser 2012 Cabernet Pfeffer (Cienega Valley; \$35). Forget your Cabernet reference points—this rare variety is earthy and floral at once. Bright, spicy red fruit (cranberry, strawberry) gets a hit of pepper worthy of the name.

Siduri 2012 Pinot Noir (Sonoma Coast; \$32). A velvet-packed palate of cherry, strawberry, and orange peel under intriguing cola and forest-floor aromas.

Sojourn 2012 Gap's Crown Vineyard Pinot Noir (Sonoma Coast; \$54). Loam and violet aromas lead to rambunctious cinnamon-cherry with hints of cola. 

Photographs by EVA KOLENKO