

Natural Born Swillers

Natural wine is all about the grape, the whole grape and nothing but the grape – just ask the two men staking their careers on it.



DREAM TEAM
Peter Lorimer (left)
and Clive Dougall
share a love of
lo-fi wine.

THE NATURAL WINE MOVEMENT can be controversial although its basic premise is at the heart of what many of the best wine-makers are working towards every day – reducing the use of synthesised chemicals and additions. The philosophy spans all parts of the grape-growing and winemaking process, from avoiding industrial herbicides, fungicides and pesticides in the vineyard to eliminating additions in the winery, including yeasts.

For fans, natural winemaking is a throwback to days gone by, allowing grapes to showcase their true characters. As there is no definitive definition of ‘natural wines’, it is up to each wine-maker as to how ‘natural’ a wine may be.

Depending on who you are talking to, natural wines are permitted to have some very limited additions, particularly copper and sulphur. These elements have long been used in winemaking, despite the fact that copper is a heavy metal that can build up in the soil harming its natural flora and fauna.

For classically trained winemakers, however, the oxidative style of wines made with minimal or badly handled sulphur additions seen in many natural wines, is criminal. To the most ardent natural wine fans, any addition to a wine in the vineyard or winery is stripping away the natural beauty of wine.

The good news is you can have it both ways – natural wines that are carefully made with little or no additions that also share much of the character found in more conventional wines.

Deep Down Wines (deepdownwines.co.nz) is a collaboration between two men on different sides of the wine trade. Clive Dougall made his name at Marlborough’s ground-breaking Seresin Estate when the winery was one of New Zealand’s early movers into organic, and then biodynamic, wines. He is joined by Peter Lorimer, ex-sommelier and wine marketer from the New Zealand Wine Portfolio, who runs the business side of Deep Down, leaving Dougall in charge of viticulture and winemaking.

At the core of the business is an aspiration to make wines with as few additions as possible – preferably none – from organic and biodynamically grown fruit. It is not a hard and fast rule. Small additions may be made, such as to ensure wines are chemically stable, but none that will break their commitment to wines that reflect the natural environment in which the grapes are grown.

It hasn’t always been smooth sailing for the pair. The first vintage of sauvignon blanc left to its own devices did not behave as hoped, and Dougall was left with a stuck ferment – every winemaker’s nightmare, especially with a single-batch wine. Rather than sell it off, he used some more modern techniques to restart the ferment and get the wine into bottle.

For their pinot noir, however, everything went closer to plan so the final wine is quite literally pinot noir juice fermented and bottled with zero additions – a natural wine in every sense.

Organically grown fruit was fermented with wild yeasts before four months’ maturation in 500l puncheons. Next came bottling without the addition of sulphur. Careful winemaking allowed the wine to retain its bright, youthful fruit without a hint of oxidation.

One unique element of this wine is how it changes in the glass, quickly evolving from bright and youthful to more savoury and earthy, in a short time. It is a wild ride with earthy, spicy fruits and a touch of mushroom supported by crystal-clear sour cherry fruits with great purity and brightness. It is delicious and unique.

On top of the sauvignon blanc and pinot noir, is a chardonnay and an arneis, both made from organically grown grapes with only sulphur additions at bottling. The arneis, of which only 80 cases were crafted, is a good varietal example in a light-weight style with pear and citrus fruits. The chardonnay is exceptional – exotic fruits well integrated with natural oak ferment and maturation to give a powerful chardonnay style that is energetic with a distinct savoury edge.

All these low-intervention wines are delicious and illustrate how – in the right hands – natural wines can absolutely have widespread appeal. 🍷