



Interventionist Winemaking

Aaron Weinkauf

Lance Cutler

THE NATURAL WINE CRAZE is spreading like crazy: new wine bars are opening in many cities across the United States and around the world; in places as disparate as Valley Bar and Bottle in Sonoma and El Huerto Farm to Table in Cabo San Lucas, restaurants are dedicating their wine lists to nothing but natural wines.

While natural wine is trending and, anecdotally, winemakers will tell you that it's the top-selling category among Millennials—in its January issue, *Wine Business Monthly* even published a Varietal Focus story on natural wines—it still accounts for less than one percent of total wine sales.

Since the basic tenet of natural winemaking is “add nothing and remove nothing,” natural winemakers are severely limited in the steps they can take to correct glitches. They have the same shed of winemaking tools available to them but have chosen to padlock the door. As natural winemakers gain more experience and are confronted with more problems, they will have to develop regimens to deal with problems if they are to make consistently excellent wines.

On the opposite end of the winemaking spectrum, Sam Coturri of Winery Sixteen 600 recently said in an interview that he is an “interventionist” winemaker, particularly when producing his *Á Deux Têtes Grenache*. “All the attention we pay to the vineyard demands that we do the same in the winery.”

Wine Business Monthly thought it would be a good idea to have a roundtable discussion with three “interventionist” winemakers. We wanted to know their underlying philosophy of winemaking, learn how they made decisions regarding their wines and ask their thoughts on non-interventionist winemaking.

We started with Sam Coturri, whose father, Phil Coturri, has long championed organic and sustainable farming. Phil manages close to 600 acres of vineyards in Sonoma and Napa. The winery produces small-batch, single-vineyard wines. Sam runs the winery with his mother and brother.

Aron Weinkauf graduated from Fresno State University with a degree in viticulture and enology. In 2006, the Novak family brought him to Spottswoode Estate Vineyard & Winery as assistant winemaker. He took over as vineyard manager in 2009 and formally became winemaker in 2011.

Kerry Damskey has more than 30 years of winemaking experience. His Terroir Inc. provides expertise on vineyards and winemaking, along with business practices and operational development. Along with wife Daisy and son Drew, the family runs Palmeri Wines, a small, ultra-premium winery that specializes in Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Chardonnay.

Is there an overriding philosophy when deciding what to do for your winemaking regimen?

Damskey: When I have a new vineyard project, it takes two or three vintages to understand it. Every once in a while, you hit it straight up on the first time, but usually, it takes at least two vintages. I make wine in Israel and India, so one question is whether to use California winemaking techniques there. By that, I mean pick ripe, use heavy extraction and, in general, be bold. I did that but found in more cases than not, it didn't work. While it might be successful in California, that style was not successful in Israel or India at all, so I had to change.

Coturri: It wasn't that the winemaking was unsuccessful; it was more that the consumers' preferences were different from what was successful here.

Damskey: Correct. In those situations, I was the lead winemaker from California, mentoring winemakers in those countries, and they didn't like the wines.

Coturri: It is a continually moving target, but you want to do the best by the vineyard as you can. At this table, we are all in the business of making terroir-driven wines that represent the place from which they come without letting philosophy or style get in the way of that. We need to apply the tools and technology that we have to make wine as good as we can for the year and the place. We owe the vineyards and the farmers that, as well as our customers. The level of intervention will change every vintage and, possibly, every vineyard. You are going to use different tools. We used different tools in 2022 than we did in 2018.

Damskey: I was giving a talk to a wine-knowledgeable group in India. The idea of adding water blew them away. They couldn't fathom that at all. They thought that if you have a target alcohol, why don't you just pick at that sugar level?

Weinkauf: That's the point. Are you targeting alcohol level or everything else that comes along with it, like the phenological aromatic components? There are lots of arguments for picking at 22° Brix instead of 19° because of how plants mature and where all the aromatic and polyphenolic components are on an upward trajectory at 19° Brix. None of them has peaked really. There is

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SAM COTURRI, WINERY SIXTEEN 600

a big argument for not picking too early. At the other end, most of them get on downhill trajectories. Now, we know there are also arguments for not picking too late, not pushing ripeness for the sake of extraction. It’s always a bit of give and take. I figure it all depends on what we are targeting.

I think we all have a concept of what we are trying to do, whether it is our own habit and skill set that create our limitations, or our knowledge of a new appellation, new country, new growing situation where it takes a few years to understand what is at the heart of what you are doing. You have to know where you are hoping and wanting something to go before you can get there. It’s all about picking at ripeness to express terroir because either side of ripeness will cause other things to become dominant in those wine characteristics, whether it is too ripe or not ripe enough.

Is deciding when to pick the ultimate driving force when you make the wine?

Damskey: It is also how the grapes and vines look at the time. Where is the vine heading in its declining season? Obviously, it is the flavor of the berries,



Phil Coturri (left) & Sam Coturri

which is super critical at the end. If you’re not going through each vineyard at least twice a week, those incremental changes are hard to differentiate. It’s hard to describe when it is there. It is the absence of sugar and water, and then this flavor just comes up, and it is a weight that’s there. Unless you’ve been tasting regularly, you won’t get it. It comes with years of doing it.

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Kerry Damskey

“I would want the winemaker to tell me what they were looking for in the way of aroma, taste and visual profiles. If they told me that didn’t matter, I wouldn’t want to work with them. If the focus is just being natural, that’s not enough.”

KERRY DAMSKEY, PALMERI WINES

Coturri: My dad calls it “the sparkle.” You need to have tasted the same vineyard several times in a vintage. I can convince myself I know when it’s time, but the more experience you get, the better chance you have of getting it right.

Weinkauf: I would only argue that in that context of picking things ripe, you still have these weird curves. You’ll have a “sparkle” at 21.5° Brix that makes a very different wine. Then that sparkle will return later. It comes in waves. Things come in and out, and you can appreciate the coalescence of those things that makes the sparkle, but it changes, and the finished wine changes, depending on whether it is picked at 22° or 25° Brix.

I started forming my winemaking ideologies in the late 2000s. Everyone was still trying to push ripeness and sugars higher and higher. By the 2010s, people started pulling back. Then there’s the context of the vintages: 2017 and 2022 were a whole different exercise in what type of wines you were going to get at lower sugars. In those vintages I saw vines that were collapsing and turning into raisins with sugars spiking quickly, or I found this weird stagnation where all ripening and sugar accumulation stopped. Nothing happened for a month.

Damskey: We saw that last year after the heat and after the rain.

Weinkauf: That’s why I think it has been a sort of fun experiment. I try to envision what a wine from a given area can taste like theoretically at its apex. Then you need to figure out how to get from A to B. With vintages like 2017 and 2022, you are not making those decisions. Mother Nature is forcing your hand and telling you when you are going to pick and at what Brix.

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Once you pick, what is your wine regimen?

Coturri: The availability of quick turn-around, broad-spectrum analysis in the vineyard and in the cellar is the first and last thing you are going to do. So much of what happens, once it hits the cellar floor to the end, is going to be determined by these lab reports. It's still about the way it tastes, but the ability to react to the minutiae of the chemistry within 24 hours or less changes the game as to your winemaking regimen.

This year it was about being able to react to VA levels quickly, to make acid adjustments when necessary, especially in years like this. The chemistry wasn't upside down, but it wasn't like anything I'd seen before. This year the VA came from the vineyard, especially in some Cabernet vineyard sites. We had days of 118°F followed by rain. Testing allowed us to deal with those issues from the get-go.

Damskey: There are considerations when you go into a vintage with issues. Do you do cold soak or do you rack it through? Do you press early or normally?

Weinkauf: And how quickly our envisioned plans for 2022 changed into actual plans. It was brutal.

Coturri: It all changed over a five-day period.

How would you work in the cellar with grapes from a more amenable vintage?

Coturri: In a perfect vintage, where you intervene is not with the fruit, it's with yourself. You need to extract yourself from the process. As a young winemaker, knowing when to do nothing is the hardest thing to learn. When not to do one more pump-over, to make another nutrient addition. You know, just put the formula down and step away. When you have a problem, you need to fix it. When you don't have problems, you need to extract your ego out of it.

Damskey: Let's say the wine has 45 grams of sugar and 15.4 percent alcohol. Do you press and say this puppy is done for fear of VA because it has done spontaneous malolactic? That would be my strategy. Another winemaker might wait it out. Those are two vastly different paths to dealing with a problem. You have sugar, and VA is just waiting to happen. It is not a do-nothing situation.

Weinkauf: I have similar experiences. Ideally, we want to get things dry on skins. Even with simultaneous malolactic, you know there is healthy yeast, taking the sugar down because once that sugar is gone, you are much more stable. As a wine finishes up, there are a lot of stress factors from a difficult growing season that just exist within the fruit or if it is high alcohol. All these issues feed in and help inform any decisions you are going to make, but you always have to make a decision.

Tony Soter said, "I like to think of myself as a craftsman, and I want to have as many tools as possible available to me to achieve my craft." The goal is to not do anything. Everyone has an investment in doing the least amount to that process. It's when things start to go haywire or you are dealing with difficult vintages or fermentations, that you want to have the tools, knowledge and skill set to react quickly to produce what you are setting out to do. We are all interventionists by the way, or we'd be making vinegar.

Damskey: I agree with that 100 percent.

Coturri: With all these tools we possess, there is the chance to make flawless wines, and the danger of that is sameness. What drives the success and interest in natural wines is that they don't have that sameness. The sameness is avoidable if you are true to terroir as opposed to using all the tools every time. You

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can avoid sameness by having great sites and doing your best to let them express themselves. Natural winemakers also make decisions, by choosing not to apply one of their tools to a situation. Their style of philosophy is intervening in their ability to make clean, stable wine.

How do you go about making your Sauvignon Blanc?

Weinkauf: We pick from quite a few vineyards. We try to pick each when we think it is ideally ripe. We bring it in and usually whole cluster press. We settle it out in tanks 24 to 48 hours before going to fermenters. We add yeast because it is such a cold fermentation. Around 56°-58°F most native yeast won't do well and will stick. It's just the nature of the beast. I've done plenty of native yeast fermentations on whites, and they are almost always problematic, so this is a layer of security. We also know that just because you've inoculated with one yeast, it won't necessarily be the one that finishes a fermentation. Most yeasts identified within wines, during fermentation, are all known genetically as commercially available yeast.

I try to take advantage of everything. There are lots of great yeasts from across the globe that are transparent and impactful because of how the aromatic compounds of Sauvignon Blanc can go very reductive or very terpene, depending on how the fermentation is managed. It can be an awesome tool for creating complexity, texture and aromatic nuance. With all the trials we've done throughout the years, we have identified certain yeasts as our favorites. Those are the general core of what we are working with. Then on a block-by-block vintage basis, we decide where we are going to use those. We have our cabinet of yeast, and we can select from those what we want to accentuate, given how a given block is performing in a given vintage. If we have a block whose sugars and ripeness are getting a little high, we might want to accentuate

a bit more reductiveness or accentuate more herbaceousness. The cool thing is that certain yeasts can do that.

We monitor Brix every couple of days, and we ferment in a variety of containers: used wood, new wood, stainless, cement and clay. Some of the regimen is inherited. A certain style was developed before me, so there was a bit of a transition and being respectful of the path that we had been on and not changing too drastically. Now, 16 years into it, it feels a bit more like me. I have a gluttonous appreciation for learning new things. I did not have access to cement tanks when I was in school. I had no understanding of what they were doing to fermentation kinetics. Now we have fired ceramics, and they are totally different from raw cement. Just for the education and to build my working knowledge of these kinds of tools, I try them out. It's nice to know more about new things. It's also part of the winemaker's spice rack. Those different components of diversity and complexity can be incorporated to bring about a more dynamic finished product.

We sterile-filter all our wines. We work hard to get wines ready to go into bottle as high-quality product. We are never working with a sterile product, microbially or bacterially anyway. There is always stuff in there. It is our guarantee that once we get it to that stage where it is ready to be bottled, from that point forward, it's going to be what we intended.

How do you make your Á Deux Têtes Grenache?

Coturri: We are working with small lots of very expensive Grenache, so our margin for error is very narrow. I would love to ferment from different blocks, using different vessels and yeasts, with and without stems, but there are only three tons: one fermentation tank. We pick ripe, especially with Grenache.

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The first choice is whether to use whole cluster—especially in small lots, whole cluster is part of the winemaker’s spice rack concept. When the stems are in the right condition with the right amount of lignification, it can help fix pH and lends structure and spice. Ironically, it can bring elegance by lightening things up if you have some green flavors in there. The 2022 vintage was not one where we wanted to use any of the stems, so it was all destemmed. We were cautious about problems with that vintage. *Á Deux Têtes* is essentially the last wine we make, so we had already experienced stuck fermentations, weird VA issues and heard from all the winemakers and growers we work with about their problems, so we were concerned that something might go wrong.

This wine is unique among our wines. It has the longest cold soak of anything we do. After we destem and crush, we inoculate with a non-saccharomyces yeast. It pulls oxygen out so we don’t get spontaneous fermentation during the cold soak. We’ll go seven to 10 days, keeping the temperature in the low 50s or lower if we can. We’ll let the temperature come up and inoculate with the strains that we are using, along with Fermaid O. The yeast is close to what they are using in *Châteauneuf* and the Southern Rhône. We are pushing the margins of Grenache winemaking in a lot of ways, including the ripeness that we are picking it at. We have to make sure it finishes and finishes strong.

We’ll punch down until fermentation gets going and we are in the high teens Balling. Then we will do a series of four to five *délestage* sessions during primary fermentation for maximum extraction. This is the formula, style, and concept that we got from Philippe Cambie. It’s wild, you get this massive extraction, using massive intervention, because once it goes dry, we’ll do one or two more *délestage* and up to 45 days on skins with light punch downs before pressing. Malolactic usually happens naturally during the extended maceration. Then we’ll have it in tank for a week or two to make sure it finishes. From there it goes to one- and two-year-old 500L barrels. We sterile filter before bottling.

How did you make your 2021 Palmeri Semillon?

Damskey: The 2021 Monte Rosso Semillon comes from 120-year-old vines. It came in, and we started it with native yeast and fermented it in all new puncheon barrels. Then for no reason, it stuck. I’m watching the fermentation, and it started to drastically slow down around 5° Brix. I figured it was time to intervene. The first step is to find out why it is slowing. Is it alcohol, VA or something else? I put it through the ETS Scorpion to check for spoilage, but there was nothing indicated. I watched it for two to three weeks. I was patient but kept an eye on key chemistries, like VA, which were creeping up.

We took the wine out of the barrels and moved it to a tank. We chilled that down to 50°F to stop everything. This was total intervention, and then we did a reset. VA was about 7 grams. I used a combination of *Vinquiry’s* cascade method and Scott Lab’s. We used yeast hulls to suck up toxins. The alcohol wasn’t too high, so I didn’t need to worry about that. I used a yeast that lent no flavor at all, and I used the equivalent of 3 pounds per 1,000, which is a higher rate of yeast than I would normally use to start primary fermentation. I started a culture, added some sugar then slowly added stuck wine back into it in 20-percent increments.

You can’t accurately check sugars at this point with a hydrometer. You have to perform glucose/fructose analysis. Once the glu/fru has halved toward the negative side, you can add another increment of stuck wine. The outcome was good. Had I not intervened in this case, there is a good chance the wine would have been lost. I racked the wine back to the puncheons once it finished fermentation. The wine was slightly fatter than the previous vintage. We even considered blending some Chardonnay into it to increase minerality. In the end, we decided to leave it as it was. We cold-stabilized and heat-stabilized, and then sterile-filtered to prevent malolactic fermentation. I did all this because I feared losing the wine and saw this as the only way to maintain quality. I had a target for what I was shooting for in this wine. In the end, this wine didn’t veer significantly from that target.



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Given your interventionist tendencies, what would you say to natural winemakers?

Weinkauf: It's funny. The couple natural winemakers I know started down that path as an ideology; but after a couple of vintages, they were completely flooded with VA. They are no longer happy with their choices. I don't think those things happen in a vacuum, whether it is naturalists or corporate, homogenized, wanting to deliver a perfect exact product every single time. I have no suggestions. When we start down our individual paths for philosophical reasons, we must reckon with those choices, and we will realize the strengths and flaws of those decisions over time. A lot of the people I know realized it quickly and started making changes because they wanted something better.

Damskey: I would spend a lot of time getting them to discuss desired outcomes, with rational discussion and support. I would want the winemaker to tell me what they were looking for in the way of aroma, taste and visual profiles. If they told me that didn't matter, I wouldn't want to work with them. If the focus is just being natural, that's not enough.

Coturri: An inherent catch-22 with natural wine is that to excel in non-interventionist winemaking, the margin of error shrinks. One way to build the margin back is to be sure that the quality of fruit that you are purchasing is excellent. The problem is that purchasing quality fruit is expensive, and at some point, you can price yourself out of the market for the natural wine sector altogether. The trick is finding fruit quality that is good enough, along with a sanitation and cellar regimen good enough to deliver an excellent product at a price point that is financially viable. It is so daunting a challenge that I personally can't imagine building a business upon it.

EVERY WINEMAKER HAS their own approach to winemaking, and they should have an idea of what they want each wine to taste like. Low intervention and natural winemakers hope that working in the vineyards to provide the best grapes will allow them to produce wines reflective of the individual vineyards while minimizing extraneous manipulation of the winemaking process. Interventionist winemakers also dedicate themselves to creating the best fruit in the vineyards, and they hope to do as little as possible during fermentation and aging, but given a difficult vintage or a specific problem, they insist it is their responsibility to step in where needed to honor the vineyard and produce the best wine.

The more vintages a winemaker has under their belt, the more likely they are to encounter problems. Interventionist winemakers are checking things from the moment grapes arrive at the winery. They have a wide range of tests to track the wine through the process, and they have a shed full of tools to help their wines through any issues. They are ready and willing to intercede whenever the wine needs help should they deem it necessary.

Everything in winemaking is a give and take situation. Natural winemaking has already influenced many high-tech winemakers and forced them to reevaluate technological convention until they intervene only when necessary. As natural winemakers encounter more problems, they likely will intercede to protect wine quality, no matter how minimally they approach it. In the end, we all get better wine, and that's the point. **WBM**



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