

Natural Wines

Lance Cutler

WHEN THE CALIFORNIA WINE BOOM began in the 1970s, very few people knew anything about how to ferment grapes. The books available on the subject were old. UC Davis had an enology department and several well-respected professors, but research and information were skewed towards large-scale wine production, possibly because so much of the department's funding came from E. & J. Gallo Winery. General winemaking regimens of the time included adding SO₂ at the crusher, using tartaric acid to lower pH, vigorous pump-overs of red wine and filtration before bottling.

Over the past 50 years, winemakers have been flooded with new technical information on every aspect of wine production. Grape growers studied clones, rootstocks, pruning styles, trellis systems, drip irrigation, and discovered effective pesticides and herbicides. Winemakers learned about commercial yeasts geared toward specific aromatic and flavor profiles. New oak barrels were used to flavor wine, giving way to oak substitutes, along with micro-oxidation. "Real time" phenolic assays allowed winemakers to track the extraction of anthocyanins and tannins, along with other compounds at various stages of the winemaking process.

Winemaking evolved into a multi-billion dollar industry. Wineries needed to protect their investment. Armed with a wide array of technical knowledge, they took fewer risks, carefully controlled fermentation temperatures and maintained higher levels of SO₂ to protect their wines from microbiological activity. Filtration and fining agents were used to polish and stabilize wines.

Winemaking had become a very technical process, and winemakers were attempting to control every aspect of wine production. Like most things in the wine business, this created a backlash. Some winemakers felt technology had gone too far. They advocated less intervention, allowing wines to ferment and develop on their own.

These low intervention concepts have been around for quite a while, but they started picking up steam in Beaujolais, France in the 1980s. Four winemakers; Guy Breton, Charly Thévenet, Jean Foillard and Marcel Lapiere, advocated returning to the way their grandparents made wine. They resented the intrusion of pesticides and chemicals in the vineyard and winemaking. Influenced by Jules Chauvet, they started making wine with no SO₂ and fewer additives. This shift back to traditional methods has spread around the world. It ties in nicely with trends towards natural foods, healthy living and leaving a less impactful imprint on the planet.

The movement back to traditional, low-intervention winemaking has created a new category known as "natural wine." Although it accounts for just 1 percent of the world's wine production, it is already the fastest-selling category among Millennials. There is no legal definition of what comprises a natural wine, but most practitioners agree that nothing should be added and nothing

should be taken away. They refer to this as 0/0 winemaking. It means that no SO₂ is added. Native yeast will carry out the fermentation, and neither acid nor nutrients will be used. Wines are not filtered nor are they fined. Because these winemakers are concerned about minimizing chemical intervention, they choose to work almost exclusively with organic or Biodynamic vineyards.

Wine Business Monthly felt the natural wine phenomenon would be perfect for our Varietal Focus series. We started with Eliza Frey: While not technically making natural wine, Frey pioneered organic techniques in both the vineyard and the winery, many of which have been adopted by natural winemakers. Jack Sporer operates a custom crush facility called Magnolia Wine Services that specializes in natural wines and has his own wine company, Fres.Co Wine. Dan Marioni is the owner/winemaker of Marioni Wine and has been producing natural wines since 2016. Martha Stoumen has a degree from UC Davis and still respects the science but opted to pursue natural winemaking with her brand. Ancient winemaking techniques practiced in Georgia seduced Caleb Leisure into starting Caleb Leisure Wines. Chenoa Ashton-Lewis and partner Will Basanta started with one barrel of wine from her family's organic vineyard and established Ashanta Wines.

FRES.CO WINE

2021 "FIRE FUEGO" SAUVIGNON BLANC

13.9% abv, 280 cases, \$25

Jack Sporer made wine in five different countries before starting his Fresh Wine Co. brand in Sonoma. He also owns and operates Magnolia Wine Services, a custom crush facility that caters to natural winemakers. His goal is to support local grape growers and encourage them to switch to regenerative agriculture.

According to Sporer: "One inalienable tenet of this movement is that natural wine can ONLY be made from grapes grown with organic practices. Agriculture is usually a large source of carbon emissions, but farming for soil health can store carbon in the soil and provide a myriad of other ecosystem advantages, like increased water storage and enhanced biodiversity. By focusing on regenerative agriculture, natural wine becomes an expedient and poignant way to address the climate emergency.

"I don't have any ethical issues with most commercial additives, but I do think hiding the fact that you are making these additions is problematic. Customers should have a right to know what they are consuming. I am proud to say this product has only one ingredient: grapes. Natural wines make up one of the fastest growing premium wine segments among Millennial consumers. They are roughly my age, and in large part, we share the same ethics regarding

varietal focus

safe, healthy food products and working to reduce the effects of climate change on the planet.

“For this wine, I was shooting for a light, fresh, clean and stable 0/0 Sauvignon Blanc with topical notes and enough phenolics to carry the wine through spicy foods. I wanted a fun, dynamic, interesting wine that you can comfortably drink out of a Solo cup or a Riedel glass.

“I think it is critical that we work with growers to convert conventionally-farmed vineyards to regenerative organic. That informs everything I do with my growers. These grapes came from Eric Clouse’s Denmark St. Vineyard. The soil is Huichica Loam. It is 25-year-old 5C rootstock that was grafted to Sauvignon Blanc using Clone 1. Elevation is 200 feet, and rows are using 5 x 10 foot spacings.

“We use organic practices for regenerative farming. We have eliminated herbicide use and started a diverse cover crop mix, utilizing every-other-row tillage and moving towards no-till. We have been early irrigating three to four times, mimicking spring rain. We do not irrigate later in the season. We do a sucker pass after budbreak and a leafing pass to increase sunshine on the shady side of the row. The only spray used was sulfur dust at 20-day intervals. We planted a fall cover crop and tilled every other row, focusing on no till in the future. Production has been around two and a half tons per acre.

“With natural 0/0 wines, the harvest decision is all about pH. My goal is to pick at a time that will yield the easiest native fermentation and the most stable finished wine. For this wine, that translates to pH of 3.1 to 3.25 with 21° to 23° Brix. I track the fruit as we approach harvest, looking for the bitter components to soften and turn fruity.

“Grapes are hand-picked to bins. The bulk of the grapes went directly to two stainless steel tanks and were covered with CO₂. A smaller portion was whole cluster-pressed and pumped over the tops of the tanks in a method known as ‘reverse saignée.’ My goal is for the fermentation to initially progress carbonically and avoid having space between the clusters because there is some evidence that this can cause increased ‘mouse’ fault. Fermentation ran around 75°F. Tanks were sealed and dry-iced daily. On day four, one tank was uncovered and punched down twice daily. On day nine, both tanks were drained and then whole cluster-pressed directly to tank, combining free run and press juice. Wine continued to ferment in tank until 5° Brix when it was racked to neutral barrels. We stirred the lees every two weeks until dry, and natural malolactic finished in the barrels.



JOSEPH DANIEL

Jack Sporer unloading fruit at Magnolia Wine Services.

“The wine fermented on native yeast with no nutrients added other than those extracted naturally during skin contact from the grapes themselves. Wine was only racked from barrel to tank for bottling, and we left 1 gallon in each barrel to make sure we weren’t dragging lees to help with clarity. We performed no heat- or cold-stability procedures, nor did we use any SO₂ during the process. All barrels were neutral French oak. Wines were sealed with conglomerate corks and bottle-aged for one month before release.”



Dan Marioni, Maroni Wine

TASTING NOTES:

Sporer: A touch of green bean but not over the top. There is a tropical fruit note, kind of salty too. On the palate it has a nice weight to it. It is really satisfying and thirst-quenching, which was the goal. There is a nice texture, like orange cream, which comes from the skin contact.

Others: Definitely some influence from skin contact but still remains classically Sauvignon Blanc. There is lemon, kiwi and a bit of nuttiness on the nose. Nice weight and texture on the palate, moving to a green olive oil-like finish. It is round and smooth with a touch of saltiness. Lovely acidity and mouthfeel and not super tart. Thirst quenching and really blossoms with a bit of time.

MARIONI WINE

2021 CHARDONNAY

12% abv, 180 cases, \$34

Dan Marioni graduated from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo with a degree in mechanical engineering that led to a job at Tesla for five years. In 2016, he started working with Nic Coturri, making wines under the Sonoma Mountain Winery label. His experience there convinced Dan that if he were to make wine, he would make it as naturally as possible, which demanded working with the best vineyards to assure starting with the finest fruit.

According to Marioni: “Natural winemaking is the only winemaking I have known. The wonderful thing about natural winemaking is that we are creating healthy vineyard space for everyone. I’d love to own a vineyard and control everything all the way to the bottle, but that is not realistic in this area without substantial funding. It’s also not sustainable with multiple vineyards, so for now, I must heavily vet and trust what the farmers do. I am making



Dan Marioni, Maroni Wine

natural wines to prove that it is possible to make wine without manufactured additives. To achieve this, you must work with the best vineyards. Best means bio-diversity and healthy soil with plenty of organic matter.

“The challenge with natural wine is that it is hard to make sound wine consistently. There is less room for error because you are not using protective chemicals, manufactured yeasts or filtration to stabilize the wine. On the other hand, I am not busy in the cellar, making additions, filtering and manipulating the wine. Instead, I am making something clean and honest. I am only sampling, racking and blending the wines to make something fun and sometimes quite different from what people are used to. This also means you must be creative with co-fermentation and other proprietary secrets to get the healthiest fermentations.

“When it comes to wine varietals, Chardonnay is my siren song. I am trying to make a Chardonnay that reflects its Sonoma roots, but that is leaner with brighter acidity and lower alcohol. I want it to be fresh, light and with some mineral character along with the acid. The grapes for this Chardonnay come from Marymor Vineyard on Sonoma Mountain. Grapes were planted in 2012 at 550 feet, using 6 x 10 foot spacing. Rootstock was 1103P and Clone 4. The soil is gravelly loam, and the vineyard has irrigation.

“It is organically- and sustainably-farmed using cover crop, and single row tilling or no-till. We use minimal irrigation, depending on the year. We leaf the west side. Fruit is only dropped if damaged, stunted, rotten or infected with some other disease. Production is 3 tons per acre.

“I determine when to pick primarily by Brix because I am targeting lower alcohol, around 12.5 percent. From working with this vineyard in the past, I know that this Chardonnay will have great aromatics at 21° Brix. The question becomes pH, and I like for that to rise above 3.0. I look for browning of the seeds, and I want the acid to move away from sour candy to something a bit rounder. I also want the grape tissue to begin to soften.

varietal focus

“We always pick in the morning so the grapes are cold. We do not sort. One half of the grapes are whole cluster-pressed. The other half are foot-tread. This portion soaks less than a day before getting pressed. The batches are combined in a jacketed Porto tank to ferment at 78°F. We use native yeast, no SO₂, and make no acid or nutrient additions. Around 10° Brix we rack off the gross lees by gravity-fed waterfall which also oxygenates the juice to help finish the ferment. At 0° Brix the wine is racked to neutral barrels and topped. We neither cold- nor heat-stabilize the wine. After four months in barrel, we rack again for bottling. We use Twin Top composite corks and bottle-age for three weeks before release.”

TASTING NOTES:

Marioni: There is some reduction on the nose, which comes from it being so young. Underneath that is some herbal lemon tang, like lemon rind, and a tiny bit of earthiness. Nice acidity, shimmers on the palate and stays nicely on the end. There is a bit of lactic quality to it, a bit of buttered popcorn hidden in the wine's freshness. It has lemon and lime with a mineral feel. It is young, fresh and stable now, and should improve with some age.

Others: I like the reduction on the nose. Some herbal character in the nose, with green apple and a bit of matchstick. It has vibrant acid, like vitamin C, leading to stony minerality followed by some creaminess. Fresh and lightweight, but with malic character which I like. It has nice texture and a long finish, and nice restraint on the oak. It is young and fresh but should improve and may have a long future.

Frey Winery

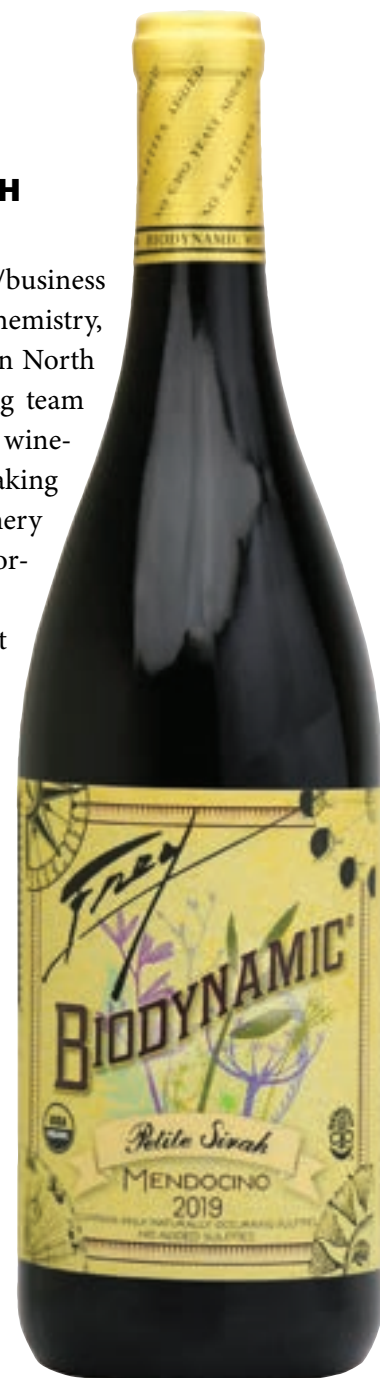
2019 BIODYNAMIC PETITE SYRAH

14.8% abv, 250 cases, \$21

Eliza Frey is a third-generation family/business member. She has a background in chemistry, having studied at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina. She joined the Frey winemaking team in 2005. She has assisted in all aspects of wine-making and works closely with the winemaking team and outside growers to assure the winery is receiving the highest quality, certified-organic grapes.

According to Frey: “While we are not technically ‘natural’ winemakers, we are the largest and oldest organic winery in the United States, founded in 1980. All Frey wines are certified-organic with no added sulfites, and we were the first in the United States authorized to use the Biodynamic designation on our labels in 1996. My parents and extended family were early believers in organic farming. It was an ideological tenet to which they adhered. They applied those principles to our original 15-acre vineyard and have extended it to our current 325 acres of vineyard and the 50 grape growers who sell grapes to us, all of whom are certified-organic.

“We see our farm and vineyards as a self-contained piece of our local



varietal focus

environment. Our organic and Biodynamic farming methods encourage care for the soil, groundwater and wildlife, providing rich bio-diversity in the vineyard. To that end, we compost all grape waste and return it to the vineyard. Farming organically allows us to grow superior quality grapes that make excellent wines; and because our winemaking is additive-free, it becomes a healthy way to make wine. Premium organic grapes, a thorough understanding of wine chemistry and careful attention, during the winemaking process, are the foundation of our wines.

“Our goal with this wine was to produce a wine unique to the site and vintage. We want the wine to be supple and balanced with full fruit expression. Because most of our wines are sold in retail outlets and usually consumed shortly after purchase, our wine must be smooth, integrated and ready to drink.

“Grapes for this Biodynamic Petite Sirah come from two vineyards in the Redwood Valley AVA: our Home Ranch vineyard and Milani Ranch. The soils are gravely loam and well-drained. Elevation is 900 feet, and vines were planted in the early '90s. The Home Ranch uses 5BB rootstock. We don't know what the rootstock is at Milani, and we have no records of the clones at either site. Vine spacing is 6 x 8 feet, and this vintage was dry-farmed, and the grapes are certified-organic and Biodynamic. We use vertical shoot positioning, and we pulled no leaves this year to protect fruit from the heat. We practice under-vine cultivation, dust mulch, plant a cover crop in the fall and mow for green manure tillage. We thin fruit only in years with danger of mildew. Yield is 4 to 6 tons per acre, depending on vintage.

“To pick, we look for physiological ripeness. We like nutty brown seeds and no bitterness, along with a tannin drop in the skins. We usually pick in the 23.5° to 25° Brix range with 3.2 to 3.4 pH and .65 to .80 TA. When ready to pick, we need to work around the logistics of man-power and tank space to get the grapes into the winery.

“We do no cold soak, but we crush and destem all grapes. Must is pumped to stainless steel tanks where native yeast ferments the wine. We keep temperatures in the 70°F to 80°F range if possible. We deliver a filtered air blast through the racking valve twice a day to mix the juice and break up the cap. It is very efficient and effective, like pulse air, but using larger volumes of filtered air. After one to two weeks on the skins, we drain the tanks and use a Wilmes bladder press to press the grapes. We prefer to press at dryness but will go earlier, depending on extraction. Free run juice and soft press get mixed and sent to a tank where French oak chips are added.

“We rack one month after pressing, again in the spring and once in the fall. We blended 24 percent Cabernet Sauvignon into this Petite Sirah to bring up the complexity. The wine was sterile-filtered at bottling and then aged four months before release.”

TASTING NOTES:

Frey: The wine is fruit-forward with bright brambly character and spice. There is some green pepper and spice, maybe from the Cabernet. A bit hot but not unpleasant. Oak does not overpower, but some vanilla is there. Long finish with a slight tannin lingering in the back of the palate.

Others: Nice dark berry fruit and some cassis, even some blueberries. The fruit is concentrated, typical of Northern California fruit, with nice, soft tannins and decent acid. I get black pepper spice with underlying red fruit. There is some vanilla from the oak, along with a bit of herbal, green pepper character from the Cabernet. There are dusty tannins that remind me of cocoa powder. It has a nice, long finish that clings to the acidity and makes for great easy drinking.



ANDREW THOMAS LEE

Martha Stoumen does a pump-over for her Nero d'Avola.

Martha Stoumen Wines

2019 NERO D'AVOLA

13% abv, 504 cases, \$44

Martha Stoumen studied environmental agriculture, and those studies led her to Tuscany. She worked with olive trees and in the vineyards where she got her first experience with winemaking. Fermentation fascinated her. Sandwiched around a master's degree at UC Davis, she apprenticed in Australia, Germany, Sicily, New Zealand, Germany and France. She also worked at Chalk Hill and Broc Cellars in California. Already enamored with traditional farming, she was first exposed to natural wines in Sicily. She made the first Martha Stoumen wines in 2014, and case production now stands at 9,000 cases annually.

According to Stoumen: “I found that commercial wines were all starting to taste similar. It's as if they try to plan and control everything. Where is the fun in that? There is a real excitement to be found in discovery. Wines are made in the vineyard, so we farm for healthy soils and vine longevity instead of high yields. Getting healthy grapes into the winery is the best way to make flavorful, honest wines. Wine is an agricultural product, and no two wines should taste the same, so we embrace native yeasts and interfere with the process as minimally as possible.

“I worked with Nero d'Avola in Sicily. I'm trying to bring out its chiaroscuro-like nature, including brightness from its ability to hold onto acidity and darkness from its characteristic forest fruits. The fact that Nero d'Avola even exists in California—AND that I get to work with it in both the vineyard and cellar—makes my heart happy.

“Nero d'Avola does well in a hot climate; so while other winemakers clamor for cool-climate sites, I am perfectly happy to look for hotter climates. I still want to make elegant wines, so it requires thinking outside the box when choosing



ANDREW THOMAS LEE

Martha Stoumen pursued natural winemaking with her brand, Martha Stoumen Wines.

my varieties. Bricarelli Ranch provides 75 percent of the grapes for this wine. Elevation is 700 feet, and it consists of sandy loam soil. Vine spacing is 8 x 8 feet, rootstock is 1103P, and the clones are unknown since these were suitcase cuttings from the 1970s. This ranch is dry-farmed and produces 3 tons per acre.

“Fox Hill Vineyard is the source of the other 25 percent for this wine. It has sandy loam, gravel and some sandstone. Elevation is between 600 and 850 feet. Vine spacing is roughly 8 feet. It is also from suitcase cuttings from the 1970s, but rootstock is 5C, along with a mixture of other rootstocks throughout. It is dry-farmed most years, but drip is available. It is farmed organically (non-certified) and produces 4 to 5 tons per acre. The two lots are kept separate until the first racking.

“Both sites are farmed without the use of pesticides, herbicides, chemicals or synthetics. Bricarelli is head-trained, spur-pruned and cross-cultivated to limit soil compaction. Cover crop is grown at Fox Hill for weed control. We will use elemental sulfur dust to control mildew; but since this is a hot, dry area, that rarely is necessary.

“To pick, we seek balance, using both analytical measurements and taste. Acidity is especially important, and these grapes are fast to ripen. If we see a sugar spike, we must pick at once. Ideally, fruit character develops, and we can leave the green tannin flavors behind. We also prefer to make wine at less than 14 percent alcohol if possible.

“Grapes get field-sorted and are destemmed but uncrushed. There is no cold soak. Wine is fermented in 1 to 1-½ ton tanks at ambient temperature. We use a combination of punch-downs and pump-overs when more aeration is needed (usually in the beginning of fermentation). Native yeast carries out the fermentation with no acid or nutrient additions. Fermentation lasts about two weeks, and we determine when to press according to tannin levels. We combine press and free run juice. Pressed wine sits in a stainless tank overnight and gets racked to 100-percent

neutral French oak cooperage, mostly 225L and 228L barriques, with some large-format 500L puncheons. We top regularly throughout barrel aging.

“The wine undergoes natural malolactic and is aged on lees for 12 months. If necessary, we will spot sulfur barrels, using minimally effective amounts. Total sulfur was 21 mg/L. Components are racked, blended and returned to barrel for an additional six months. We rack, as little as possible, to preserve CO₂ produced during fermentation which acts as a natural preservative.

Wine gets racked for bottling. There is no filtration. We use an agglomerated cork to seal and age the wine for seven months before release.”



Martha Stoumen's Nero d'Avola

TASTING NOTES:

Stoumen: This wine is representative of Nero d'Avola. It tastes like versions I've had before. I get a bit of tomato bush and chalky, almost rock chocolate with dark forest fruit. It shows bright acidity, so it should go well with food. It is nicely balanced.

Others: Clean nose of big red wine with dark cherry, blackberry and dark fruits. Sort of like red fruit "concentrate." The flavor is unfamiliar with notes of sandalwood or cedar. Palate has some meaty character reminiscent of rare duck. The acid structure is good but not high. The tannin structure is solid and builds but stays soft. It has good mouthfeel. Fresh and integrated and very drinkable but holds promise for good age-ability.

Caleb Leisure Wines

2020 AH UM RED WINE

12.3% abv, 150 cases, \$30

Caleb Leisure was raised in the East Bay. He attended UC Berkeley before moving to New York to work on his Master of Fine Arts degree. While in New York, he discovered natural wines, eventually landing a job at Thirst Wine Shop. It was there he discovered the wines of Georgia. Entranced by these wines, he went to Georgia in 2016 to see how they were made. He discovered the ancient qvevri clay vessels and decided he had to have them. He started Caleb Leisure Wines in 2017, having imported 10 qvevri to use as fermenters and for storage.

According to Leisure: "I got into natural wine because it was the first wine I tasted that truly excited me. It was so different. There was a purity of fruit, and the flavors exhibited a direct relationship to that fruit. I farm about a third of the fruit I use, adhering to principles of organics and permaculture. My winemaking is guided by ancient tradition and by properly grown organic and Biodynamic fruit. No additions or subtractions are made at any point. I try to make wine intuitively and want to remain flexible with my wine style because it never turns out exactly as I had planned anyway. The winemaking I do is high risk/ high reward, which I find exciting.

"This wine is a blend of 39 percent Syrah, 40 percent Viognier and 25 percent Mourvèdre. I am trying to make a chillable red wine that is light, fresh and refreshing. These grapes come from Joshua's Starry Night Vineyard in Calaveras County and were planted 23 years ago. The vineyard is mostly gravelly



KATRINA FREDERICK

Caleb Leisure tops up his qvevri, a Georgian clay winemaking vessel.

loam and schist with some limestone. The elevation is 2,300 feet, and the vines are tightly spaced at 4 x 6 feet. The clones are mixed and unconfirmed, but we think the rootstock is 420A. There is one block that gets minimal water; the rest is dry-farmed. The vineyard is farmed organically with some Biodynamics.

"We aggressively prune the vines, use no-till and extensive mulching. We plant a cover crop, incorporate timely leaf pulling to limit mildew, minimal hedging and minimal fruit drop. We spray only with horticultural oils and teas. Weed control is manual. Yield is about 2 tons per acre. I keep a close eye on acid levels, but I am guided more by seeds, skins and taste. I want the green notes of the Viognier to evolve toward tropical notes. I look for browning of the seeds, and I wait for stiff tannins in the red grapes to begin to mellow. I also use previous years and the resulting wines as benchmarks for when to pick.

"The Viognier was harvested a week earlier than the Syrah and Mourvèdre. All grapes were sorted. It got foot-stomped, cold-soaked for 24 hours and then pressed into clay qvevri. Half of the Syrah was whole cluster, and the rest was crushed, destemmed and added on top. The Mourvèdre was pressed out as a dark Rosé and added to the Syrah to co-ferment in clay for 10 days. The Viognier was blended in, and the wine stayed in the qvevri for six months. There were no additions of any kind. I punched down twice daily or as needed. Fermentation was at ambient temperature. The wine got racked once to stainless and was bottled two months later. It received three months' bottle age, before release, although I would have liked giving it more."

TASTING NOTES:

Leisure: It is light red. I get a lot of savoriness. What I like the most about the wine is that I don't get a lot of varietal character. It's more a wine of the site than varietal. It has good acidity, despite Viognier being the largest component. I get a lot of minerality from this wine, which is also site-related. It is drinking pretty close to what I intended, which is a miracle.

Others: Light and earthy on the nose with a CO₂ bite and nice cranberry tang. There are lighter floral qualities with tea and cranberry. In the mouth there is some spritz, along with hibiscus tea and cherry cider flavors. There is a salty minerality, along with rhubarb and celery. It is refreshing, with low alcohol, just a bit of tannin and a bouncy finish. More stone than fruit-forward. Smooth with nice texture but not too grippy. Lovely.

Ashanta Wines

2020 UNDER CURRENTS OLD VINE CARIGNAN

12.5% abv, 95 cases, \$32

Chenoa (Noah) Ashton-Lewis' family had been organically-farming grapes in Glen Ellen for 50 years. In October of 2019 she got word that a small amount of grapes from the family vineyard were unsold. With help from Will Basanta and other friends, they picked the grapes and co-fermented one barrel of Syrah and Pinot Noir. That one barrel hooked them, and the next year they started their first commercial harvest for Ashanta Wines, making the wine at Coturri Winery on Sonoma Mountain.

According to Ashton-Lewis and Basanta: "We have long supported organic farmers and insisted on organic foods in our diets. Noah's family has grown organic grapes for 50 years, and she had tasted wines made from those grapes. Will traveled as a cinematographer and met several sommeliers. They were hot on natural wines and gave us the opportunity to try them. We found them unique and different. If we were going to make wine, it only made sense to make natural wine.

"We source our fruit exclusively from family-operated vineyards and work with growers who farm with organic and/or Biodynamic practices. We believe that using only native/indigenous yeast to ferment our grapes gives our wines



Ashanta Wines' Undercurrents Carignan is made from 100 percent old vine Mendocino Carignan.

the most truthful expression of terroir from the various vineyards we work with. If the grapes and vineyards are healthy and picked at proper balanced ripeness, then spontaneous fermentation usually provides all the magic needed. Our wines are unfinned and unfiltered with zero added SO₂.

“For this Carignan, we wanted to make a medium-bodied wine that went well with food. We wanted to explore this grape and this vineyard to create a wine that expressed the varietal fruit and retained good acidity.

“These grapes came from Testa Vineyard, which was planted in 1946, so we have no idea about the clones or rootstock. The soil is mostly sandy loam, and the elevation is 750 feet. The vines are head-trained with 6-foot spacings. The vineyard is certified-organic and -Biodynamic, and it is dry-farmed. We do some minimal tilling but no fruit drop. Yield is 4 to 5 tons per acre.

“We pick with an eye toward physiological ripeness while making sure the pH remains low enough for balance. Fortunately, Carignan ripens slowly. We want the seeds to brown but without the skins shriveling. We'd like the green

flavors to subside and turn into tart red fruit, like cranberry. We also like to see the acid fall into a reasonable range. We constantly monitor weather and will pick before or after a heat wave, depending on sugar levels in the grapes.

“Grapes are hand-sorted, and 25 percent of the grapes are whole cluster-pressed. The balance is gently crushed and destemmed. The must ferments in open-topped bins. We punch down two to three times daily and foot-tread after one week. No acid, nutrient or SO₂ is added. Fermentation is carried out at ambient temperature. We press combining free run and press juice then rack to neutral French oak barrels. Malolactic is natural. We rack again after six months, and the wine gets 11 months of barrel aging before bottling. We do no filtration. The wine received three months' bottle aging before release.”

TASTING NOTES:

Ashton-Lewis/Basanta: The nose shows bright red fruit, pie cherries and red currants. It has some grip, is reasonably balanced but definitely bright. It tastes of fresh tart cherries, dry rose petals and a hint of tarragon character, all typical of Carignan. There is an earthy quality on the finish with solid tannins.

Others: Gorgeous color. There is some VA, leading to bright high tone red fruit and currants. It has a dry sandy texture that settles in the mouth. I get cherry quality and some richness on the finish. Nice acidity and bright fruit throughout that lead to a savory, slightly metallic finish. Some chalk and mineral on palate. Definitely Carignan and seems to be in a happy place right now.

AS SEVERAL OF THE WINEMAKERS in this Varietal Focus mentioned, natural winemaking is a high risk/high reward proposition. Making wine with minimal intervention can dramatically increase the difficulty of producing stable wines that travel through distribution systems to consumers. The wines can be funky, cloudy or spritzy. In addition to fruit aromas, consumers may be assaulted with VA, Brettanomyces or a unique mousy character.

Then again, in the hands of a talented winemaker who is working with prime grapes, you may be treated to something ethereal, with nothing between you, the grapes and the winemaking. Natural wines can exhibit a direct complexity, not



Chenoa Ashton Lewis and Will Basanta

often found in more heavily-processed wines. Since winemakers harvest at lower sugars to retain acidity, the lower alcohols and high acidity can make for food-friendly companions at a dinner table.

Winemakers open to minimal intervention also seem irresistibly attracted to uncommon grape varieties, even if they come from vineyards in disrepair or regions not known for prime grape production. Particularly in Europe, lesser known varieties have been resurrected by the natural wine movement. Varieties like Ribolla Gialla in Italy, Rkatsiteli in Georgia, Zweigelt in Austria and Plavac Mali in Croatia are all popular with natural winemakers. In this Varietal Focus we had more traditional varieties, like Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Petite Sirah, but we also tasted Nero d'Avola, Carignan and a blend with Viognier and Mourvèdre.

The participants in this Varietal Focus were young, intelligent, enthusiastic and passionate about winemaking, but they were also deeply concerned with climate change, eating and drinking healthy foods and beverages, and rewarding farmers for using organic and Biodynamic growing techniques. They were fearless experimenters, willing to work with amphorae, qvevri and aged neutral barrels and carry out fermentations without refrigeration control. If a week of skin contact with white grapes seemed promising, they couldn't wait to try it for a month the next time. They admitted that many aromas and flavors in natural wine differ dramatically from most commercial wines, but they pointed out that among their primary consumer group (Millennials), tastes have changed as well.

This could be a key point in the success of natural wines. The Millennial generation is aware and concerned about their footprint on the environment. They don't want pesticides in their food. They willingly accept cloudy juices if they are natural and organic. Shopping at farmer's markets supports local farmers, allows them direct contact with their food sources, and reduces the need for wasteful and hard to dispose of packaging, like that found in

supermarkets. Millennials have been eating probiotic-friendly, fermented foods, like miso, tempeh and soy beverages, for years, so funky smells are something they are used to. They enjoy acidic beverages, like kombucha and sour beer, so why not acidic natural wine?

At least in this Varietal Focus, the winemakers resemble their primary consumer group. They are young, concerned about the planet and are dedicated to the safest, least destructive methods of farming. They don't mind acidic beverages and prefer to buy as much as they can directly from the source. Their taste palates have widened to include sour, earthy flavors and reductive or volatile aromas. They love what they do and are passionate about producing the best product they can.

There is no doubt that some natural wines can smell or taste awful, but the same can be said for commercial wines. Some of the wines in this tasting were cloudy. All the wines were well made; and while there might have been hints of volatile acidity, reduction or unripe fruit character, they were all controlled and could be seen as added complexity, depending on your personal preferences.

Overall, I found the wines much better than I thought they might be. The biggest drawback was the acidity and its tendency to build on the palate, but I found the same to be true of dynamic wines from the Leelanau Peninsula in Michigan and the Finger Lakes in New York. Based on my interaction with this group of winemakers, I most loved their enthusiasm and fearlessness. They had each developed a personal philosophy of winemaking and were pursuing it as best they could. They were interested in each other's wines, learning one another's techniques, and they seemed to be having fun.

Natural winemakers are the daredevils/risktakers of low intervention winemaking. Given more time and experience, natural wines will certainly improve and get more consistent. It reminded me of the old days, and it reminded me how much I missed those times. I wish them well. [WBM](#)



OREGON WINE SYMPOSIUM

FEBRUARY 14 & 15, 2023

The Northwest wine industry's premier educational event and trade show featuring sessions in Enology, Viticulture and Sales including:

WILDFIRE SMOKE IMPACT

LESSONS FROM THE 2022 FROST EVENT

STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

AND MANY MORE!

Presented by the Oregon Wine Board and
tradeshow by the Oregon Winegrowers Association

Now offering 2 full days
of **Spanish translation!**

Early Bird registration rate through **Jan. 15**
oregonwinesymposium.com

VARIETAL FOCUS
Natural Wines
Mendocino County
Sonoma County

WINERY	MARTHA STOUMEN WINES	FREY VINEYARDS	FRES.CO
Wine	2019 Nero d'Avola	2019 Biodynamic Petite Sirah	2021 "Fire Fuego" Skin Contact Sauvignon Blanc
Blend	100% Nero d'Avola	76% Petite Sirah, 24% Cabernet Sauvignon	100% Sauvignon Blanc
Winemaker	Martha Stoumen	Paul Frey and team	Jack Sporer
Style Goals	Express Nero d'Avola's Chiaroscuro-like nature: ability to hold onto acid in warm climates and darkness from forest fruits	Wine that is unique to site and season; Supple and balanced with full fruit expression that is ready to be drunk when purchased	Light, fresh, clean and stable; Fun, dynamic, interesting natural wine that you can drink from a Solo cup
AVA	Mendocino County	Redwood Valley	Sonoma Valley
Vineyard	Bicarelli Ranch and Fox Hill Vineyard	Home Ranch and Milani Vineyard	Denmark St. Vineyard
Vineyard Data			
Predominant Geology	Sandy loam at Bicarelli Ranch; Sandy loam, gravel, sandstone at Fox Hill	Well drained gravelly loam	Huichica loam
Elevation	700 feet at Bicarelli Ranch; 600-850 feet at Fox Hill	900 feet	200 feet
Vine Spacing	8 feet x 8 feet	6 feet x 8 feet	5 foot vine spacing, 10 foot rows
Rootstock	BR 1103, FH 5C and mixture	Home Ranch 5BB, Milani unknown	5C
Vine Age	50 years	30 years	25 years
Clones	Suitcase cuttings from 1970s	Unknown	Clone 1
Irrigation	Dry-farmed	Dry-farmed	Early irrigation to mimic spring rain
Farming Practices	Non-certified organic	Organic and Biodynamic	Organic practicing, regenerative
Production	3 to 5 tons per acre	4 tons per acre	2.5 tons per acre
When to Pick	Seek balance using analytics and taste; Acidity very important to avoid later additions	Physiological ripeness, seed maturity and flavor; No bitter skins or seeds; 23° to 25° Brix, 3.2 to 3.4 pH, .65 to .85 TA	Reasonable sugar (22° to 25° Brix); Low pH (around 3.2); Taste for ripe characteristics, fruity flavors and no bitter sensation
Vineyard Practices	Farmed without pesticides, herbicides, chemicals or synthetics; Cover crop grown; Elemental sulfur dust to control mildew	Vertical shoot positioning; Leaf pull in high vigor, wet years	No herbicide use; Every other row tillage; One sucker pass after budbreak; Fall cover crop; Spread clover mix under vine
Winemaking Data			
Sort	Field sorted	Field sorted	Pull leaves in bins while picking
SO ₂	Spot sulfur barrels as needed; Total SO ₂ 21 mg/L	None	None
Crush, Destem, Press	100% destemmed, uncrushed	Crush and destem	Majority whole-cluster to tank
Cold Soak/Settling	None	None	Unknown
Yeast	Native, spontaneous	Native	Native ambient
Nutrients/Acid Addition	None	None	None; Skin contact raises nutrient levels
Fermentation Temperature	Ambient	75° F	75° F
Cap Management	Twice daily punch-downs and pump-overs when needed	Airblast to break and mix cap twice daily	Tanks sealed and dry-iced daily; Then, one tank of two punched down twice daily
Tank Types	1 to 1½ ton tanks	Stainless steel	3 ton variable capacity tanks, then stainless steel
Barrel Fermentation	None	None	From 5° Brix to finish
Barrels Used	100% neutral French, mostly 225L and 228L with some 500L puncheons	French oak chips	100% neutral French oak
Malolactic	Natural	Natural	Natural
Racking	Aged on lees 12 months; Components racked, blended and returned to barrel for additional 6 months before bottling	1 month after press, another in spring and one the next fall	Rack to bottle only
Barrel Aging	18 months	N/A	6 months
Stability	None	None	None
Filtration	None	Sterile filtration	None
Closure	Agglomerated cork	Agglomerated cork	Agglomerated cork
Bottle Age	7 months	4 months	1 month

VARIETAL FOCUS
Natural Wines

	Calaveras County	Sonoma County	Mendocino County
WINERY	CALEB LEISURE WINES	MARIONI WINE	ASHANTA WINES
Wine	2020 Ah Um	2021 Sirena Chardonnay	2020 Undercurrents Carignan
Blend	35% Syrah, 40% Viognier, 25% Mouvedre	100% Chardonnay	100% Carignan
Winemaker	Caleb Leisure	Dan Marioni	Chenoa Ashton-Lewis and Will Basanta
Style Goals	Try for purest expression of the soil rather than varietal driven	Chardonnay typical of Sonoma Valley, but leaner with brighter acidity and lower alcohol	Medium-bodied wine with bright fruits and high acid, but with texture and savoriness for balance
AVA	Calaveras County	Sonoma Mountain	Mendocino
Vineyard	Joshua's Starry Night Vineyard	Marymor Vineyard	Testa Vineyard
Vineyard Data			
Predominant Geology	Gravelly loam, schist, some limestone	Gravelly loam	Sandy loam
Elevation	2,300 feet	550 feet	750 feet
Vine Spacing	4 feet x 6 feet	6 feet x 10 feet	6 foot spacings
Rootstock	420A	1103P	Unknown
Vine Age	23 years	9 years	76 years
Clones	Mixed, unconfirmed	Clone 4	Unknown
Irrigation	One block gets water, others dry-farmed	Irrigation	Dry-farmed
Farming Practices	Organic with some Biodynamic	Organic, sustainable	Certified organic and Biodynamic
Production	2 tons per acre	3 tons per acre	4 to 5 tons per acre
When to Pick	Guided by seeds, skins and taste; Browning of seeds and stiff tannins to mellow; Wait for green notes to change to tropical	Mainly Brix, usually around 21°	Physiological ripeness with low pH; Color of seeds and stems; Weather checked
Vineyard Practices	No till, extensive mulching; Cover crop; Timely leaf pulling; Minimal hedging and fruit drop; Horticultural tea/oil sprays; Manual weed control	Cover crop; Minimal irrigation; Westside leafing; Fruit dropped if damaged, stunted, rotten or has other disease	Dry farmed, minimal tilling, no fruit drop
Winemaking Data			
Sort	All sorted	None	Hand-sorted
SO ₂	None	None	None
Crush, Destem, Press	Combination foot-stomped, whole-cluster, crushed and destemmed	Foot tread and direct press	25% whole cluster; Balance gently crushed and destemmed; Foot tread after one week
Cold Soak/Settling	Viognier cold-soaked for 48 hours	At room temp after foot tread, then settles in tank	None
Yeast	Native	Native	Indigenous
Nutrients	None	None	None
Fermentation Temperature	Ambient, rarely exceed 80° F	78° F	Ambient
Cap Management	Punch-downs twice daily or as needed with occasional pump-over	Gravity fed waterfall rack at 10° Brix	2 to 3 punch-downs daily
Tank Types	Qvevri (Georgian clay vessels)	Jacketed Porto tanks	Open-topped bins
Barrel Fermentation	None	None	None
Barrels Used	Qvevri and stainless; Neutral French when needed	Neutral French oak	Neutral French oak
Malolactic	Natural	N/A	Natural
Racking	Racked once to stainless from clay and to bottle after another 2 months	Racked at 10° Brix off gross lees; Racked to barrel at 0° Brix and topped	One racking after 6 months; Another to bottle
Barrel Aging	Wine in clay for 5 months	4 months	11 months in barrel
Stability	None	None	None
Filtration	None	None	None
Closure	Natural cork	Natural cork	Natural cork
Bottle Age	3 months	3 weeks	3 months