

SLD

2006



NATURAL, ORGANIC OR BIODYNAMIC, OH MY!

MAKING SENSE OF GREEN WINE MAKING... AND MARKETING.

By Rob Sinskey



As the cliché goes, it's not easy being green. No matter how true the intent, someone will always find something you do, or don't do, not green enough. We might as well paint a big bull's-eye on the cellar doors.

Just in the past few months, articles on "natural wine" have appeared in the SF Chronicle (<http://tinyurl.com/yhzyest>), LA times (<http://tinyurl.com/ye9sfrm>) and the NY Times (<http://tinyurl.com/yj5jz95>). They were thought provoking, illustrating

how today's wine drinker is looking for a new definition of "luxury wine." The problem is that the four major categories, "Sustainable," "Organic," "Natural," and "Biodynamic," are ill-defined and riddled with pitfalls and contradictions. It all boils down to intent.

"Sustainable" is the most difficult term to get a handle on. In the purest sense, it covers the three "E"s: Ecology, Economy and Social Equity. Thus, a farm should remain economically viable, pay its workers a living wage and maintain a viable and healthy ecosystem in and around the farm. Unfortunately, sustainable-in-practice usually means the farmer thinks about natural methods, but reserves the right to use herbicides and pesticides when it makes

better financial sense.

"Organic" is a term governed by the National Organic Program (NOP) under the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and use of the term in any label or promotional material requires certification with an NOP-approved certifier. There are a couple of categories when it comes to organic and wine: wines made with organically grown grapes, where only the vineyard is organically certified, and organic wine, where the winery is also an organically certified

processor. Organic certification in the vineyard means the farmer only uses naturally occurring non-synthetic inputs. While this is a good baseline of purity, “organic” does not address sustainability. For example, there are only minimal requirements for soil health and tith. Also, keep in mind that natural herbicides and pesticides, like the chrysanthemum derived pyrethrins, may be used instead of synthetics. The upside is that these natural born killers are short lived, breaking down to natural elements rapidly without known carcinogenic or neurotoxic residue.

Organic wine certification is problematic. A wine can be “pure,” nothing synthetic added, yet still not merit organic status due to one little element. Fermented beverages generally contain sulfur as a byproduct of fermentation, and 99% of the world’s winemakers add small amounts as a preservative. The USDA feels the need to warn the consumer about the levels of sulfites with these confusing labeling standards:

1. Up to one part per million (ppm) - “No Sulfites” can be printed on the label. I have never had a wine that had less than one part per million of sulfites.
2. Up to 10 ppm - “Contains only naturally occurring sulfites—no sulfites added,” or no mention of sulfites at all. I would assume any wine that falls into this category would not print the warning. Again, it is rare to find wines in this category, and even rarer to find one in good shape.
3. Any wine with more than 10 ppm must have a “Contains Sulfites” warning on the label. Conventional wines are allowed to contain up

to 350 ppm, while a certified organic wine must have fewer than 10 ppm, occurring naturally. A wine carrying “made with organic grapes” on the label must contain less than 100 ppm of combined natural and added sulfites.

The contradiction runs deep. Organically grown grapes have the same sulfite warning on the label as a conventionally farmed wine, even though the allowable levels of sulfur are much less in both organic models (Organic wine and Organically grown) than conventionally farmed wine. Unless refrigerated and consumed in the near term, wine is susceptible to oxidation and spoilage. Sulfur is the most innocuous preservation method. Sulfur is, after all, the tenth most abundant element on earth. It is a part of every cell in our bodies and naturally exists in many things we consume. It has been used as a natural preservative



in food and wine for millennia. Unless allergic, most people are unaffected by sulfur, confusing reactions from histamine, alcohol and yeast, with sulfites. I am sulfur sensitive yet, at levels well below 100 parts per million, I am unaffected by sulfur in my wine. I also have allergic reactions to certain yeast strains in beer and champagne, penicillium (in certain blue cheeses) and other natural items that carry no warning. Who is being protected when a conventional wine is allowed up to 350ppm of sulfur yet carries the same warning as an organically grown wine with less than 100ppm?

The meaning for “natural wine” is unclear. The closest anyone has come to defining wines in this category follow these guidelines:

1. Organically or Biodynamically farmed
2. Hand harvested
3. Ferment with indigenous yeast
4. Minimal or no sulfite additions
5. Nothing artificial added

There is no regulatory agency or standard for “natural wine” or for the use of the term. I believe we make natural wines, yet even though our vineyards are certified organic and Biodynamic, an extremist would take issue with some of the things we do in the cellar. First, we use stainless steel tanks and control temperature. The wines start on ambient yeast, but if the fermentation sticks, or takes off in a funky direction, a non-aromatic yeast is added to regain control of the “wild” fermentation. However, if the wild fermentation takes the wine in a good direction, we let it go.



Describing yeast as wild or indigenous is imprecise. A better term would be “feral” yeast. Yeast is everywhere. It is in the air. It exists on grapes. In our little valley, populated by hundreds of wineries, most wine yeast strains escaped from the cellars as composted grape pressings and spread into the vineyards. Just over the hill is a commercial brewery that exhausts its content into the air. So an argument can be made that what we think is wild yeast is just commercial yeast gone rogue. Are you really expressing the terroir of the place by only fermenting with a feral yeast? If a packaged yeast is not an aromatic type, that is, if it does not impart a foreign flavor or aroma on the wine, then it is a natural, non-synthetic product that assures the character of the vineyard can show through by avoiding off-aromas and flavors. I think this a good, natural, insurance policy.

Finally, “Biodynamic” (BD) is the most complex and ritualistic of the methods. Biodynamic certification (and even the use of the word “Biodynamic”) is closely regulated by Demeter USA. It is also broken into two parts: Biodynamic Farm and Biodynamic Winery. The BD approach is to look at the entire farm as an interrelated, living entity. It is a holistic approach that believes the farmer’s role is to heal the damage done by farming and leave the earth in a better, healthier state. A Biodynamic farm is inherently organic, but Biodynamic certification goes much further by addressing the health of the soil, encouraging vigorous populations of microbes and embracing the natural structure of the earth. Being a Biodynamic farmer means that you are on a

“Organic” does not address sustainability.

mission to find the natural rhythm of the farm and prevent problems before they occur. The pitfall in Biodynamics is that even though there are some basic guidelines, it is more of a self guided journey.

Many people ask why we don’t state that we farm Biodynamically on the label. Simply put, we are not a Demeter certified Biodynamic winery. Even though RSV makes wine only from our certified Biodynamic vineyards, Demeter requires a winery to also be certified before any statement can be used on a label. However, being a Biodynamic winery is currently controversial. The US regulations are different from the EU regs. The idea is to make wines as “natural” as possible, but, as I discussed earlier, no one really knows what that means. For instance, some feel that micro-oxygenation of the wines is natural; we beg to differ. Because of this uncertainty, we remain undecided as to whether we will proceed with Biodynamic winery certification.

Confusing? Yes! That is why you need to know your farmer and your vintner. Here at RSV, we do our best with the tools on hand and continue to learn as we go, but we are not without some contradictions. All we can do is constantly try to improve our natural techniques while improving the quality of our wines.

Cheers,
Rob

WINEGROWING NOTES

By Eric Sothern

Just shy of five acres, RSV's SLD Estate vineyard wraps around the winery in a horseshoe shape, rising up into the Vaca range in steep terraced steps. Minimal irrigation and rocky volcanic soils severely limit yields and prompt the vine to produce a small crop of very intense, yet balanced, fruit.

Relatively cool weather prevailed in spring and almost the entire summer, but for a hot spell at the end of July and into the first week of August. The cool weather made for gentle development of sugars, extending the growing season, allowing for more time to develop flavors, all while preserving precious acidity. Harvest took place on September 28th, 2006. After completing fermentation in stainless steel, the wine rested in 45% new French oak barrels for 20 months. 4 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon and 1/2 acre of Merlot contributed to the blend. 35 barrels produced.

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TASTING NOTES

The wine first seduces the eye, flaunting translucent brilliant ruby color, with more red-tones than usual for the SLD Estate Cab. Classic Cabernet Sauvignon aromas of black currant, blackberry, plum, olive and dried herb (anise, fennel, mint) prompt a sip that fills out the aromas and wraps the palate in silk. Fresh, vibrant acidity balances the rich flavors and, along with the wine's supple, ripe tannins, begs culinary suitors. While many California Cabernet Sauvignon jump out of the glass, grab you by the throat, and scream at you, this wine speaks softly, has a lot to say, and keeps you coming back to listen. And it'll be talking for a long, long time. Eric Sothern - 10/23/2009



100% CCOF Certified Organic and Demeter Certified Biodynamic Vineyards



Cabernet Sauvignon - "SLD" Stags Leap District - Napa Valley - 2006

OUT WITH THE NEW, IN WITH THE OLD...

I haven't made a terrine in a long, long time. At one point in my life, it was my job at a small luxurious hotel to ensure we always had some style of terrine on hand. We'd slice the terrines into small, chunky triangles for charcuterie trays, loaded with sliced meats, cornichons, pickled onions and spicy mustard. I enjoyed gathering the leftover scraps from butchery and making them into something thrifty and delicious. I'd stud them with pistachios, brandy soaked-fruit or pieces of foie gras, whatever I fancied at the time of creation.

Today, each time I visit the Fatted Calf, I gaze upon their neatly spaced row of various terrines, sparking my memory of my terrine-making days. I decided to get back in the mode by whipping up terrines for frequent entertaining. Both of these are wonderfully scented with herbs and aromatic vegetables to pair with the cassis, blackberry, and olive fruit of RSV's SLD Cabernet Sauvignon. Don't save the wine for the main course, rather serve it with a sumptuous buffet of cow's and sheep's milk cheeses, a variety of terrines, sliced meats, grilled vegetables and your favorite hors d'oeuvres. This year, have everyone over for a casual holiday nosh instead of an elaborate multi-course meal.

I love the covered terrine mold from Revol, the century-old, family owned, French company based in Lyon, France. When it's not in use for terrine making, I use it to serve hearty salads or conceal homemade cookies or caramels until their revelation after dinner.

Enjoy time spent with your family and friends.

Until the next wine...

Maria



PORK AND DUCK TERRINE WITH GREEN OLIVES

My inspiration for this recipe came from my friends at the Fatted Calf, who stud their deliciously aromatic and delicately spiced terrines with bright green, jewel-like Castelvetrano olives. Yields one large terrine.

2 1/2 pounds ground pork, medium grind

1 1/2 pounds ground boneless duck legs, medium grind

1/4 cup minced shallots

4 medium garlic cloves, pressed

1/2 teaspoon Quatre Epices

1 cup pitted Castelvetrano Olives or similar meaty green olive

1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme

2 teaspoons chopped fresh rosemary

4 teaspoons kosher salt

Freshly ground black pepper

1. In a large bowl, mix all of the ingredients together well. Form a thin patty and cook in a sauté pan until well done to check for seasoning. Add more salt or pepper if necessary.
2. Press the mixture into a terrine mold and cover. Overflow can be baked in another baking dish covered with foil.
3. Place the terrine in a roasting pan and fill with hot water to reach halfway up the side. Place the pan in the oven and bake for 1 hour 15 minutes until a thermometer registers 150 degrees F. Remove the terrine from the oven carefully and let it sit in the hot water bath until slightly cool. Remove the lid and pour off half of the juices and fat from the terrine and discard. Place a foil-covered piece of thick cardboard cut to fit inside the rim of the terrine mold and press down. Weight with cans and place in the refrigerator in a pan to catch the fat and juices. Chill overnight. Run a knife around the edge of the terrine to loosen. Turn out the terrine and slice to serve. Freeze well; cryo-vac or wrap well in plastic.



HERBED POTATO AND MUSHROOM TERRINE

This vegetable terrine, packed with aromatic vegetables and herbs, is savory and satisfying. It is a delicious vegetarian option for pre-meal nibbling or as a first course. Yields one large terrine.

6 large Savoy cabbage leaves

2 packed cups fresh breadcrumbs

1 cup heavy cream

2 1/2 pounds Crimini mushrooms

3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil divided

1 cup dry red wine

Kosher salt

Freshly ground black pepper

2 tablespoons finely minced shallots

6 garlic cloves, pressed

2 tablespoons chopped fresh thyme

1 pound creamer size Yukon Gold or German Butterball potatoes, cooked and peeled

2 egg whites

2 tablespoons chopped fresh flat leaf parsley

1. Blanch the cabbage leaves in boiling salted water for 1 minute. Drain and pat dry. Slice the ribs of the cabbage leaves even with the leaf so that the leaves are flat.
2. Trim off any dirty mushroom stems. Rinse briefly if the mushrooms are dirty and drain. Pop the stems off of 16 mushroom caps.
3. Heat a medium sauté pan over medium high heat. Add 1 tablespoon olive oil and the 16 mushroom caps. Sauté until the mushrooms are golden and dry, season with salt and pepper. Add 1 cup red wine and reduce until the mushrooms have absorbed the wine and the pan is almost dry. Turn out the mushrooms onto a plate and reserve.
4. Heat a large sauté pan over medium high heat. Add 2 tablespoons of olive oil and the remaining mushrooms and stems. Cook until the mushrooms start to exude their juices. Add the shallots, garlic and thyme and cook until the pan is dry and the mushrooms are golden, season with salt and pepper to taste. Cool.
5. Place the mushrooms in a food processor and chop finely, season with salt and pepper to taste. Puree in the egg whites and parsley until smooth. Add the breadcrumb mixture and blend until smooth.
6. Place 1 1/2 inches of the mushroom duxelle in the bottom of the terrine mold. Cut the potatoes in half and place a layer on top of the mushrooms pressing the rounded side into the duxelle. Top with another layer of duxelle and then the mushroom caps with rounded side pressed into the duxelle. Top with duxelle and then another layer of potatoes. Finish with a thin layer of duxelle. Fold over and press the ends of the cabbage leaves into the layer of duxelle to cover the top. Place the lid on the terrine and place in a roasting pan with hot water, the same as for the pork and duck terrine. Bake until the thermometer registers 145 degrees, about 1 hour and 15 minutes. Remove from the water bath and press in the same manner as the Pork terrine.



Cabernet Sauvignon - "SLD" Stags Leap District - Napa Valley - 2006

CABERNET SAUVIGNON
"SLD" STAGS LEAP DISTRICT
NAPA VALLEY, 2006

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Printed on 100% recycled paper using soy based ink



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