

## BODEGA CHACRA

PATAGONIA ~ RIO NEGRO



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*A Wine Revolution*

by Sophie Menin

**A new generation of wine producers are embracing organic, biodynamic, and natural ways of producing their wines—and changing the way we drink.**

The crowd at the tasting hosted by natural wine importers Jenny & François in the basement of the restaurant Smith on the Lower East Side was unusually young and tattooed for an industry event. The winemakers, who were equally young and mostly French, wore jeans and work shirts. In addition to information about the wines, the catalogue listed the attending wineries' organic and biodynamic bone fides, assurances that all had forsworn the agrochemicals, cultured yeasts, acidifiers, de-acidifiers, and filtering devices that have made winemaking easier and more homogenous during the last 30 years.

The scene lent natural winemaking a bohemian air. Yet far from being on the fringe, the natural wine movement is actually the purest expression of the most important far-reaching trend in winemaking: renewed focus on organic and biodynamic farming. If terroir—the expression of place—is the holy grail of fine wine, and anything that changes a vineyard's ecology also likely blunts the potential of its wine, it is not surprising that in today's world, many of the most gifted and ambitious winemakers are working as naturally as possible.

A visceral desire to express Cabernet Sauvignon's potential for both power and elegance in the stony alluvial soils of Napa Valley's Rutherford Bench, prompted Cathy Corison to go out on her own and employ organic practices after 30 years of making wines for the likes of Chappellet and Staglin Family Vineyards. Similarly, when Piero Incisa della Rocchetta, grandson of Sassicaia creator Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta, committed to resuscitating the historic old-vine Pinot Noir vineyards of **Bodega Chacra** in the Rio Negro plateau of Patagonia, he chose biodynamic winemaking to give voice to the character of the unique site. Nicolas Joly, one of biodynamic winemaking's most passionate spokesmen, often tells the story of moving to biodynamic viticulture shortly after taking the reins of his family's Savennières estate, Coulée de Serrant, because two years after applying weed killer at the suggestion of an official at the chamber of agriculture he lost his partridge and ladybird population. It made him wonder what else had been lost. Today it almost goes without saying that Cabernet Sauvignon from Corison Wines, Pinot Noir from **Bodega Chacra**, and Chenin Blanc from Coulée de Serrant are benchmarks of quality in their respective regions.

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It is important to point out that the terms organic, natural, and biodynamic have different connotations on a bottle of wine than they do in the supermarket. Organic wine is made from grapes grown without synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, or fungicides. Natural wine describes organic wines that use only natural yeasts during fermentation. Biodynamic wines are organic wines by winemakers who follow the teachings of Rudolf Steiner. In the Steiner model, the vineyard is treated as a living organism not separate from the cosmos; special homeopathic applications are used, balance and harmony are the guiding principles. Sustainable is a term used to describe vineyards that are guided by organic philosophy without adhering to standards set by regional regulators.

Given the current level of excitement, it is difficult to imagine that just five years ago referencing organic, natural, and biodynamic wines evoked visions of lean green bottlings without a lot of nuance or finesse: wines that put ethos before pleasure. Iconic vineyards employing natural, organic and biodynamic practices did so quietly, almost imperceptibly, to avoid being associated with lesser bottlings. Even houses with unassailable reputations such as Domaine de la Romanée-Conti and M. Chapoutier kept their biodynamic programs largely under wraps.

To understand how and why this seismic shift occurred, it is instructive to look at the evolution of organic, biodynamic, and natural wines in the context of the organic food movement. When Whole Foods opened in 1980, there were less than a half dozen organic supermarkets in the United States. The popular impression of organic produce was wholesome food that didn't necessarily taste good: brown rice, oatmeal, granola, spelt, and wheat germ. Subsequently, a generation of chefs made farm-to-table cooking their mantra, and today organic produce is synonymous with ripe heirloom tomatoes, wild fennel, eggs with marigold yolks, artisanal cheeses, ripe summer plums, antibiotic-free chickens and milk, and trout from local brooks.

Meanwhile, two parallel phenomena occurred in the wine world. First, winemakers in Europe and California who came of age under the organic food movement also bore witness to the devastating consequences agrochemicals had on vineyard ecologies and returned to organic and biodynamic practices. Then a handful of pioneering American importers like Louis Dressner, Terry Theise and Jenny & Francois championed these wines and introduced them to restaurants, wine shops and ultimately to home cooks.

Oenophiles who actively seek out organic, natural and biodynamic bottlings now rely on the imprimatur of these importers as a badge of quality. They know that without Louis Dressner, the wonderfully funky biodynamic Rhone wine Terre-des-Chardons Marginal would not be on the wine list at Veritas; without Terry Theise, the delicate Nikolaihof Hefeabzug Grüner Veltliner would not be at boutique wine shops showing how a white wine that whispers can speak so profoundly; and without Jenny & Francois the Colombaia Rosso "Vigna Vecchia" would not be exposing Americans to how sipping old-vine Sangiovese can be a Technicolor experience.

When conversations about organic wines veer toward health benefits, someone invariably points out that consumers view wine as an alcoholic beverage and therefore not healthy, regardless of a vineyard's practices. To this person, the idea of linking wine and health is absurd, except paradoxically in relation to the longevity of the French and why they don't struggle with weight loss.

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The more one knows about viticulture, the more untenable this viewpoint becomes. Wine is first and foremost an agricultural product. The pesticides and fungicides applied to grapevines are not water-soluble. Multiple university studies have shown that trace amounts of all synthetic chemical compounds used in the vineyard end up in the pressed juice. In other words, what goes on the vine goes into the wine and ultimately into your cup.

Beyond being chemical free, organic and natural wines tend to be lower in alcohol because they rely on a grape's natural acidity. Conventionally farmed vineyards often leave grapes on the vine as long as possible to attain higher sugar levels and a richer more voluptuous wine style with higher alcohol. Low acidity levels are often corrected with additives during the winemaking process. Most organic and all natural winemakers rely on precision picking, waiting for the moment when the phenolic ripeness and acidity levels in the grape are perfectly balanced. It is also the reason why when natural wines fail, they fail so badly.

The other important question regarding organic wines is whether they taste perceptibly better, or at least different. City Winery recently hosted a panel on organic and biodynamic wines with Rouge Tomato Sommelier Pascaline Lepeltier, Winespectator.com Managing Editor Dana Nigro, and Lisa Granik, MW. While stressing that there are outstanding and awful organic wines, the panelists all agreed that organic wines tend to have more natural acidity, more complexity and less overt sweetness.

After the discussion, two sets of wines were tasted blind to offer a sense of how natural wine tastes compared to conventional wine. The first pairing pitted the natural wine La Grange Tiphaine Montlouis "Clef de Sol" 2009, by Damien Delecheneau against a conventional 2009 Vouvray by Barton & Guestier. It was an uneven pairing, since Delecheneau is a fourth generation artisanal winemaker while Barton & Guestier is a large conglomerate. Not surprisingly, the Barton & Guestier was thick and sweet and a little flabby, while Delecheneau's wine was bright with pinpoint clarity and a little residual sweetness.

The second pairing, the organic wine Colombaia Rosso 2007 and the conventional wine Frescobaldi Chianti Rufina "Nipponzano" 2007, was a much fairer comparison. Both are very good Sangiovese based wines from Chianti and both are blended with traditional indigenous varieties. Yet they could not have been more dissimilar. The conventional Frescobaldi was deep purple and highly extracted with generous warming alcohol and notes of cardamom and cocoa, while the organic Colombaia was bright ruby with well-defined fresh red fruit and vibrant natural acidity. Given that the wines were from the same vintage and the same region, one would assume that the Sangiovese grapes in the Frescobaldi wine spent far more time on the vine. The real source of distinction most likely occurred in the winemaking process. Winemaking at Colombaia relies on spontaneous fermentation using natural yeasts; the resulting wines are neither filtered, clarified nor stabilized before bottling. Winemaking at Frescobaldi employs cultured yeasts, extended temperature controlled maceration, malolactic fermentation and other techniques for extracting flavor and softening the wine. The pairing highlights two competing value systems: the organic Colombaia is laser-focused on showcasing Sangiovese's varietal character, while the conventional Frescobaldi emphasizes Sangiovese's potential to be full-bodied and voluptuous.

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Some wine snobs scoff at the current vogue for organic, natural and biodynamic winemaking as a passing phase, or claim to be sitting on the fence until there is proof that natural wines are stable. But little by little the top names in wine, from Louis Jadot in Burgundy, to Château Latour in Margaux, to Badia a Coltibuono in Chianti Classico and Benzinger in California, are embracing the organic model as much as the site climate of their vineyards and the economics of their balance sheets permit.

This shift is not just about the environment. The phenomenal growth in the popularity, quality, and quantity of organic, natural, and biodynamic wines has gently shifted the way quality in wine is assessed. It marks a move away from conversations about hedonism and power for power's sake, toward honoring balance, finesse, subtlety, and brightness, qualities best achieved through organic, natural, and biodynamic practices.

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