

Natural Lottery

The use of sulphur (or not) in wines can be as divisive as Brexit, with about as much middle ground. **DARREN SMITH** assesses whether dropping nature's antiseptic constitutes a jackpot win or a one-way ticket to Disasterville

At the 2013 RAW Fair in London, David Bird MW was asked what he thought about natural wine based on what he'd tasted. He responded: 'There's no doubt at all that making wines with ripe grapes... just treating them naturally with a minimum use of SO₂, or nil SO₂, produces fantastic wines.'

Such a statement from the man who wrote *Understanding Wine Technology* – the bible for students of conventional winemaking – might have marked a bridging of the divide between the conventional and natural camps, as a salutary acknowledgement that with sulphur, less is almost always more. Yet misunderstandings about the role of sulphur in wine remain, as do partisan attitudes about its use.

Clearly the natural wine movement has asserted itself in the on-trade mainstream in recent years. To some, minimal intervention has

become a synonym for quality, with 'just a touch of sulphur at bottling' the only concession made to the supposed need for intervention at all. Yet for every 'naturalist' who argues that adding sulphur leaves a wine straight-jacketed, there's a 'conventionalist' who views 'no-added-SO₂' as a recipe for a bacterial mess.

A lot of water has run under the bridge since Beaujolais-based winemaker Jules Chauvet advocated making wines without sulphur in the late 70s. While the concept has captured the imagination of winemakers across the globe, idealism has taken a more pragmatic approach.

It's particularly noteworthy, says David Harvey of Raeburn Fine Wines, that the cellars of winemakers that Chauvet inspired, including Lapierre, Gramenon, Overnoy, are no longer fundamentalist about sulphur. Even Overnoy uses sulphur on cellar equipment, some of which will transfer to the wine.

'I don't know one producer who never uses sulphites, who is always brilliant,' he observes. 'Every producer who doesn't use sulphites has problematic vintages, barrels, vineyards. The question is: do they bottle them or not and are they sensitive to the problems?'

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SULPHIE SELFIE

SO₂? OMG. #totallynecessary #lovethatguy

There are three key points where adding SO₂ will minimise the risk of oxidation: at the crushing of the grapes, after malolactic fermentation and at bottling.

Effective at extremely low concentrations, it works both as an antioxidant and an antimicrobial agent.

As an antioxidant, the SO₂ is able to bind not just with the molecules formed within the process of oxidation, but also the end products of oxidation, like acetaldehyde, so it is not only able to limit the process, but also clean the mess up after it has happened to an extent. #helpful

Used in the correct concentration, it works selectively, inhibiting dodgy bacteria while allowing yeasts to do their job.

THE NOSE FOR IT

Of course this is a crucial question in the context of microbial scourges like volatile acidity (VA), Brettanomyces and mousiness, the latter heavily correlated, anecdotally at least, to not using sulphur. This should be a serious concern for winemakers and sommeliers, since 30% of people reportedly cannot even detect mousiness.

As Harvey emphasises, in minimal-intervention winemaking, the timing of sulphur additions is crucial. While we're used to hearing about natural winemakers' tiny additions at bottling, little is reported about the importance of adding sulphur before fermentation. This is when the aforementioned problems can be a real danger.

'This mantra of bottling without [SO₂] or only at the end, oenologically, is absolute shit,' proffers Harvey. 'If you have problems, 10mg at the end might help the wine survive bottling, but if you've



~~SO2~~

got Brett or you've got mousiness, you've already got them and 10-20mg will do nothing.'

'I know some quite famous unsulphited winemakers who either don't perceive [Brett] or ignore it,' he adds, 'and their wine [they think] is absolutely brilliant and they nail it. Either they miss it or they are just not able to perceive it, and they go ahead and bottle it even though everyone is going to be saying, "What the hell is this?" That's a serious problem.'

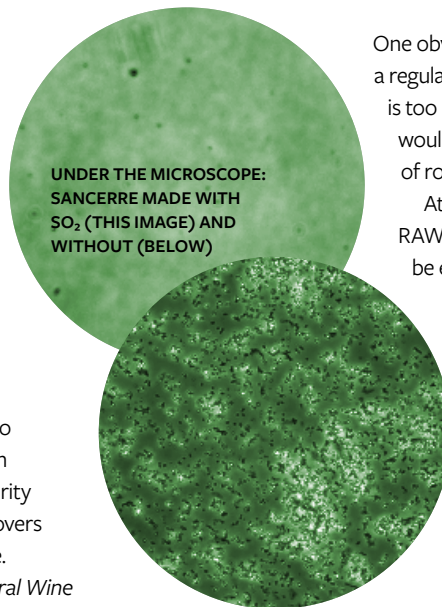
RISKY BUSINESS

As if the vagaries of the vintage were not enough to worry about, why do so many winemakers insist on taking such risks? Beyond the rhapsodies about purity and naturalness, most sense-talking natural wine lovers come back to the idea of the 'aliveness' of the wine.

There's a picture in Isabelle Legeron MW's *Natural Wine* that shows samples of two Sancerres – one made conventionally, one made without any SO₂ addition – under the microscope. Beyond question they are dramatically different: one full of living cells, the other a microbial desert (see above).

For David Bird MW, there are two ways of interpreting these photomicrographs. 'The fanaticist regards the top one as "dead", whereas I would say it's been bottled correctly,' he says. 'The bottom one fills me with horror, as the wine is dirty and might well be unstable. On the other hand, one might think that the top one has been over treated and the bottom one has more character.'

There is, of course, an element of truth to both these perspectives and, as Bird intimates, it's not a matter of black and white, it depends on the wine itself, and the winemaker.



One obvious difficulty with such a complex issue is a regulatory one: how can we say how much SO₂ is too much and how much is too little? As you would expect, the legal maximums allow plenty of room for error.

At the natural end of the scale, Legeron's RAW charter sets the limit for producers to be eligible to show their wines at the fair at 70mg/l, regardless of colour or style. But, while it's commendable to attempt to draw a line in the sand, as Harvey points out, 'it's a big beach'.

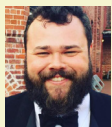
Perhaps, in the end, no-added-SO₂ is not strictly what natural wine is about, suggests Les Caves de Pyrene's Doug Wregg. 'Surely it's a holistic thing about making wines taste natural, or close to place, or close to the heart, and that's not really about sulphur,' he says. 'Of course, sulphur can obfuscate and damage the

wine, but you could say it's a bit like if your child was ill, you would give them medicine. I don't know many winemakers, even the most natural of them, who would say otherwise. To me there's a far greater pragmatism now than there was 10 or 15 years ago.'

Does that pragmatism extend to the trade? Is there still an ideological divide in restaurant terms – a pitched battle between the bearded partisans of Hackney, Brooklyn and the 11th Arrondissement, and everyone else? Not according to Wregg.

'It's more to do with the psychology of the buyer or the sommelier,' Wregg says. 'If you want to make a big thing about natural wines, you can do, but you're always going to antagonise

'WINES ON THE LINE BETWEEN GENIUS AND INSANITY' – SOMMS 'N' SULPHUR



Charlie Mellor,
The Laughing Heart

'Many wines with no SO₂ added are really poor wines, and I think that a small addition somewhere in their production could radically improve them, minimising occurrences of faults like mousiness, oxidisation and unpleasant VA. I also firmly believe, however, that the wines that have moved me the most – beautifully haunting, faultless wines, the greatest wines that can be made – have had no SO₂ added.'

Favourite wine: One need only disappear into a glass of old Pierre Overnoy to understand its potential.



Alex Smith,
Carters of Moseley

'Most of our wines are low-to-no SO₂ and spontaneously fermented using wild yeasts, so we are very aware of the various profiles out there. We serve the entire list by the glass under Coravin, so we are constantly looking at how volatile compounds are enhanced through the introduction of oxygen or argon gas. Sometimes it is the wines that sit on the line between genius and insanity that offer some of the most rewarding pairings with food.'

Favourite wine: Novello is seriously ethereal, life-changing stuff.



Nominoé
Guillebot, Lyle's

'Wines made without any SO₂ tend to be more fragile: they're more sensitive to the weather and atmospheric pressure – we will taste them often to see how they are reacting and behaving. Some wines can be more closed at some stage in the year, for instance, there could be a lot more Brett present in spring than in autumn.'

Favourite wine: Les Vignes de Mon Père by Jean-François Ganevat. After drinking it, you honestly feel like you've paid a visit to the health spa and had the best massage of your entire life.





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some of your customers by calling wines out as natural, or low-sulphur, because I don't think people know what that means.'

Certainly, transparency and good communication with the customer is critical with these wines. Timberyard in Edinburgh opened in August 2012. Its exclusively European list of up to 500 bins includes 20-30% which have no added SO₂. The tightrope walker who looks after that list is Jo Radford. He's under no illusion about the sense of responsibility such a product demands of those selling it.

HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY

'The most important thing is communication,' says Radford. 'A lot of this style of wine can be quite challenging and a bit left-of-centre in terms of flavour profiles and appearances. As long as you're honest and communicate with your staff and guests, you're in a good position to find something that's going to keep everyone happy.'

'Obviously lack of sulphur does put certain wines at risk,' he adds. 'To me, every wine and every vintage that gets released is a new challenge in terms of trying to understand how it's going to develop in bottle under cork and also once opened.'

When serving a natural wine at Timberyard, he says, they'll talk the guest through the wine, taste it themselves, and then let them taste. If they still don't like it, they'll take it back – even if there's nothing wrong with it. Doesn't that create a wastage problem? At Timberyard at least, less of one than you might think.

'With the whole ethos of the restaurant being to minimise wastage and be as sustainable as possible, we've put in quite a few different measures,' Radford explains. 'So a lot of the wine that's been open slightly too long or that's starting to change in bottle, we'll use to make vermouth for cocktails. Also, if wines are heavily oxidised we might use those in cooking.'

Nevertheless, beyond the sales pitch and the (mis)understanding of sulphur – while only 1% of people are allergic to sulphites and for 99% it's harmless, it sometimes seems as if the inverse were true – there are definitely practical issues to stocking no-added-SO₂ wines.

In his book *The Science of Wine*, Jamie Goode notes all such wines

should be kept at a temperature lower than 14°C throughout the supply chain. But does this ever happen? Then there are the logistical considerations, with some natural wine importers exercising extreme caution about when they transport wines. There are also legitimate concerns over the risk of explosion in natural wines containing residual sugar. As Harvey suggests, there are a number of people taking risks that their insurers won't cover.

Admittedly this does paint all no-added-SO₂ wines as volatile time bombs just waiting to cause havoc on the restaurant floor. But more and more, such wines are being made with greater awareness of cellar hygiene and a better understanding of the role of *élevage* – skin contact, long-lees ageing and such like – among what were previously 'have-a-go' natural winemakers. Stability, says Wregg, is less of an issue than we might think these days.

'The wines are a lot more stable than we give them credit for,' he says. 'A good no-sulphur wine will be made from amazing-quality grapes. If the grapes are amazing, the wine is not fragile in that sense, but it's fragile in that it needs to move around, the yeasts are still active, there's stuff going on. I think if we're going to treasure that we need to serve it in the right way and tell customers this is a wine which, over the course of an hour or so, will change.'

Undoubtedly one very positive thing to come of the no-added-SO₂ trend is a general heightened sensitivity to the benefits – assuming clean fruit and impeccable cellar hygiene – of minimal-intervention winemaking. This results in genuine terroir wines that reflect the micro- as much as the macro-environment. The flipside is that even among the absolute reference natural winemakers, there are still some distinctly dodgy bottlings.

'It comes down to promoting pragmatism rather than a notion of zero sulphites equating to purity,' concludes Harvey. 'Why would someone trade up [in a restaurant]? Because a wine is better. The second you give faulty, funky wine to people you come a cropper.' 🍷