

DIRECT PRESS

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ZERO ZERO HEROES

S<mark>ulf</mark>ur dioxide **(So2)** has gone

from common wine preservative to bugaboo in the past few decades. It is an immediate signifier of natural wine bona fides — or a symbol of all that is misguided about natural wine, depending on who you ask. Since the ancient Romans, sulfur has been the most-used additive in wine. It helped preserve and stabilize fermented grape juice, allowing it to be shipped and transported all over the Roman Empire. Though the dyed-in-the-wool natural winemakers refer to sulfur as a 'poison,' they are usually referring to how it kills healthy microorganisms in the fermentation process. Unlike lead, which was used in wine for thousands of years, even in the 1800s, sulfur does not cause acute toxicity for humans. That doesn't mean it's harmless, especially for those of us who are allergic. Wine typically has less sulfur than canned tuna or commercial dried fruit, but its use has been ramped up to fit the industrial scale of wine production, and it is not without a whole host of downsides, aesthetically and chemically.

Though sulfites naturally occur during fermentation in the 30 grams per liter range, it often dissipates and much of it doesn't remain as 'free' sulfur that can trigger allergies. Personally, I am more senstive than most, though I'm usually fine when it's under 30 grams per liter, typical for most 'natural' wines. Wines that are meant to age or are sweet will typically have more sulfur, which is why sweet German Rieslings meant for decades of cellaring are typically on the high side. Above 30ppm and I will get red in the face, irritable, itchy, and lightheaded. It's no fun. Wines in the US can have up to 350 grams per liter of free sulfur, 10 times the amount I can handle without Benadryl. Even organic EU wines can have up to 100 grams. This is typically not easy data to ascertain and doesn't have to be listed on a label, along with 75 or so other permitted additives. A brand called 'Good Clean Wine' advertising low sulfur actually has close to 100 grams/liter of So2 in most of their wines, not to meantion a heaping amount of bulls#!% and greenwashing. No lead, though.

Are health issues the reason winemakers became entrenched in a fight against this very effective compound? The stereotypical natural winemaker is a chainsmoking party animal, not a fitness buff. Of course the ornery personality type is drawn to the thrill of zero-sulfur winemaking. It's like riding a Harley when everyone else is commuting in a Camry. The risk is real, and for many winemakers it can mean the difference between selling their wine or going bankrupt. On the other hand, it means entry into a small group that is outspoken and tightly-knit. Gaining the respect of older zero/zero heroes is still a crucial way to get your wines taken seriously by the in-crowd, especially in France; but forgoing sulfur is about far more than style points.

which point you may have already finished the bottle, so it doesn't matter. Sometimes it goes away with time. And sometimes it's there immediately and is hard to ignore. That's when most winemakers will start adding a very minimal amount.

My esteemed colleague and Direct Press co-director Kirk Sutherland is in the unique position of making zero-sulfur wines under his *Erde* label after years of selecting zero/zero wines for glass pours during his time as beverage director at Roberta's/Blanca and Marlow and Son's/Diner. For him, mouse can be a major distraction and is a flavor he's grown to despise; but it's also something extremely interesting, a chemical reaction that highlights



On the hardcore end of the spectrum are families like Saetti in Emilia-Romagna (*Press 4 mix/red*), who never use sulfur and never will. Their Lambrusco Salomino Santacroce Rosso is always fantastic, but their rose version usually has the *goût de souris*, as they say in France, the dreaded 'taste of the mouse,' so-called because of its resemblance to a gamey mouse cage. It's one of the most identifiable qualities in many no-sulfur wines. Sometimes it tastes like tortilla chips, skunky Budweiser, or kombucha that's been sitting in a bodega stockroom since 2009. Sometimes it takes 45 minutes to appear, by

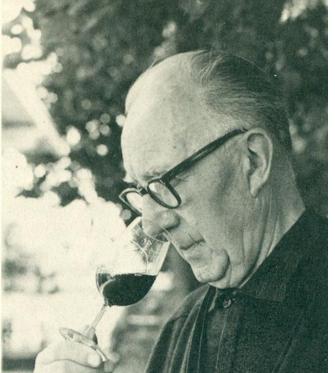
the fact that natural wine is a living thing. "To make clean tasting wines without adding sulfur is quite difficult. Most folks would just assume that all a zero/zero winemaker does is throw grapes or juice into a fermenter and then step back and let nature run its course. While some certainly do this, wines without additions are very delicate and are susceptible to a number of issues that can easily spoil them if the winemaker doesn't give the juice the time and attention required to help it become healthy wine. This means cleaning all the time. If you do a pump over or a punch down on a red wine you're making with no So2, you must

immediately wipe the sides of the fermenter down and clean up any stray juice to prevent it from getting acetic." With white wines, he adds, So₂ helps to prevent oxidation and stops the juice from turning brown. "Zero sulfur white winemaking is significantly harder in my experience. If you're not keeping a constant eye on your wines, tasting them throughout the fermentation and aging process, the risk of making a flawed wine is all too real. So for me, successful natural winemaking is a <mark>testa</mark>ment to a winemaker's skills, care, and attention to

For Luciano Saetti, he will never use So2, despite the risk of mouse. "Producing wine without the help of chemical preservatives cannot be identified simply as an alternative winemaking method, but it becomes a real production philosophy, which requires a lot of dedication, patience and above all passion," he says. I think it's notable that Saetti's home region was nearly ruined by overproduction

detail."

and industrial wine in the 1970s and 1980s. Mention Lambrusco to anyone of a certain generation and they won't be able to shake the image of Lambrusco as headache-inducing, sweet, sparkly grape juice. The same is true of Beaujolais, where the natural wine



as a reaction to mass producers like Georges Duboeuf, who plunged Beaujolais into a crisis because of cloying, bubble-gummy Beaujolais Nouveau. Farmed with a host of poisons and manipulated with chemicals, Duboeuf and others nearly destroyed the

movement started in earnest

reputation of Beaujolais permanently.

In reaction, figures like Jules Chauvet, the granddaddy of natty wine, taught people like Marcel Lapierre, Yvon Metras, Guy Breton, Jean Foillard, and others about the benefits of trying to make

> wine without sulfur. as well as working organically. Their work was central to turning the region's fortunes around, and zero sulfur wines were a provocative weapon in the battle against industrial viticulture and excessive chemical farming that destroys ecosystems. They still are, and the Saetti Lambrusco is a perfect example.

Jules Chauvet called sulfur 'the easy way'. Without sulfur, his

protégés were forced to fall back on pre industrial methods and older traditions. The 'hard way' requires a very high level of hygiene in the cellar, as mentioned before, and the fruit itself must be healthy and of a higher quality. For many, adhering to a zero-sulfur regimen is about

process more than provocation. It forces them to address the holistic health of their vines. When Martin Texier (*Press 4 red*) started making wine, his first vintages were pretty gnarly, and, yes, mousey. Since then he has replanted vines and embraced the idea that great wines are made in the vineyard. Not using sulfur is the ultimate test. His wines have reached another level recently. "It takes a lot of work to do nothing," Martin says. Indeed, Martin's father, winemaker Eric Texier, often uses his background as a nuclear engineer to help understand the complex science of fermentation, allowing him to more confidently know when to not intervene.

Eric is a notoriously outspoken \$#!@-talker and his 'advice' is not always well-received, but just as often it spurs on others to adopt his high standards. Cyril Cuche of Puech Redon (*Press 4 mix/white*) is one such disciple. Though Cuche

was growing organic cereals and grapes, his early wines were fermented with packaged yeasts, fined, filtered, and heavily sulfured. He really just didn't know how to go about making it another way. Fate brought him in touch with Eric Texier, and the Puech Redon wines today are deliciously alive and remarkably stable, despite the absence of sulfur.

Winemaking is complicated. Eschewing sulfur doesn't make you a better winemaker, and drinking zero/zero wines doesn't make you a better human. Though it's right to point out that obsessing over sulfur can distract from all sorts of other issues from carbon footprints to labor

practices, it would also be unfair to underplay the role that hardcore zero sulfur wines have had in bringing many of those same issues to the forefront. Zero sulfur wines plant a flag and touch nerves.

I really fell hard for wine when I discovered rustic, wild wines with no sulfur. It was like being able to handle the spiciest Nashville hot chicken, or the most putrid smelling durian. When customers returned bottles they thought were 'bad' it was exciting to think they just couldn't handle 'real' unadulterated wine like it was made 300 years ago — as misguided a judgment as that may have been on my part (see my earlier comment on lead). Also, to

be clear, I never had the heart to sell funky wines to anyone without making sure they knew what they were getting into. But the intense reactions were my first glimpses that maybe wine was not the static, stuffy luxury good it was made out to be. It led me down the road of seeking out independent vignerons, learning about organic farming, and many of the other details of winemaking I love so much. It all began when I tasted something outrageous.



One of the most returned bottles during my time at Chambers Street was a wine by Natalino del Prete (*Press* 4 *red*) in Puglia. An estate with beautifully overgrown vegetation and super low-tech winemaking, his wines are intense. They could smell like a canvas tent from the 1970s, replete with pine pitch, campfire smoke, and wet dog. The fruit was gamey and dark, like mushy raspberries and pickled beets. For \$12, it was either a total blast or a total bust depending on who was drinking it. There was no middle ground. The "Anne" from Natalino included this month is far less rough

around the edges, far less polarizing, though no less vibrant and exciting. It's nice to not scare people away sometimes, and there are more and more wines these days from zero sulfur adherents that are less freaky and more approachable. I'd say that most winemakers we work with are more pragmatic than dogmatic, and will add sulfur if necessary.

However, as natural wine gets a little more mainstream and more wines are made with just enough sulfur to prevent the "mouse" and other off-putting flavors, I feel the need to call attention to the work of the zero/zero zealots. They pushed things forward with provocation, not incrementalism, and were motivated by a fearlessness and passion that continues to inspire today.

Making wine without sulfur will always be a high-wire act, one that can both excite an audience and push the performer. Are there health benefits? To a degree — I mean, it's an alcoholic beverage, not a keto power shake. The real benefit to me is as a flashpoint for other issues. Wine has always been

an excellent medium for our own projections and sulfur is still a powerful symbol that invites many interpretations. Risk and vulnerability are key to zero sulfur wines. For all the work they require, the return on investment is not great. The rewards are in the creative process, the community it forms, and the (mostly) friendly arguments centered around this symbolic, polarizing gesture.



For those drinking them, it's a concept that is easy to grasp and it can lead to a better understanding of winemaking. Just as sushi makes you appreciate the long chain of events that serving raw fish requires, zero/zero wines are a direct line to the pitfalls and work of a winemaker. Luckily, unlike bad sushi, funky wine won't hurt you.

Cheers! Jonathan Kemp Kirk Sutherland

*All of the wines this month were made without added sulfites

Puech Redon "L'Apparente" Blanc 2020

Languedoc • France

[Press 4 Mix + Press 4 White]

Cyril Cuche lives off the beaten path in the Languedoc on a massive property that used to supply wheat to a large scale bread baker. Over the last couple decades Cuche has been renting off the wheat fields and has shifted his attention to planting and maintaining about 45 hectares of vines ranging in age from 5-30 years old. His winery, Chateau Puech Redon has been producing natural wines under the consult of the one and only Eric Texier for a few years now. The Puech Redon wines could fall under the Cévennes IGP, but Cuche intentionally declassifies his wines, partially because he chooses to pick his grapes at significantly low alcohol levels than the majority of the region. The result is wines that are more lifted and easier to drink than Cévennes is known for producing, with Texier's influence clearly showing through.

L'Apparente Blanc is mostly Viognier and Grenache Blanc, with a splash of Roussanne. The grapes are whole cluster direct press and fermented and aged in a mix of barrique and concrete. Unfiltered, the wine has an almost florescent color in the glass, wir a vibrant nose of guava, bergamot and white flowers. Medium-bodied and quite high-toned for a southern wine, the palate is fruity, with white peach, fleshy pear and straw. Perfect for this warmer weather coming our way. It was still in great shape a few days after opening. No sulfur? No problem! Kirk Sutherland

Weingut Müller-Ruprecht "Orange" 2021

Pfalz • Germany

[Press 4 Mix + Press 4 White]

Despite releasing their first vintage in 2020, Müller-Ruprecht is already making waves in the Pfalz region of Germany. Started by Sabine Wöhrwag and her husband Philipp, they work vineyards that date back to the 1700s and have been in her family for generations. Germany was not the first place to embrace zero sulfur winemaking, but this shows how much has changed in the past 3-5 years. This particular wine is made of a two grapes, one you most certainly know (Chardonnay), and one that's more obscure. The Huxelrebe varietal is relatively new, having been developed in 1927 by crossing two equally unknown grapes, Gutedel and Muscat Précoce de Saumur. It is most often left on the vine for a late harvest, meaning more sugar and less acid, and made into a sweet dessert wine. While only accounting for about one half of one percent of all plantings in Germany, its impact on this bottle is huge.



While the Chardonnay provides richness and a certain savory quality, the Huxelrebe is really showing its parentage with the aromatics of Muscat shining through. Orange blossom, mandarin orange, jasmine, and overripe mango make for a complex and enticing aroma. The acid is laser focused, almost prickly, and takes all of the delicate aromas and turns them to

Above: Philipp and Sabine Wöhrwag of Weingut Müller-Ruprecht. The Pfalz region's reputation is on the rise with a new generation who are embracing natural wines.

eleven, sharpening the fruit character and balancing the perfumed florality. Drink it on its own or pair it with some spicy roast chicken or oilier fish dishes...sardines on brown bread with butter and arugula sounds like a plan. *Alex Rifkin*



Mas Coutelou "Quoi Qu'il En Goutte" NV

Languedoc • France

[Press 4 Mix + Press 4 Red]

Jeff Coutelou was one of the first to be certified organic in France — back in 1987! His neighbors were not accepting of his methods. When he planted hedges to help block their chemical sprays from coming into his vines, they burned them down. Twice. Today he continues to take on work that many others do not have the patience or commitment for, like restoring obscure, nearly forgotten varieties to combat the effects of global warming; and planting thousands of olive, almond, fig, and fruit trees for future generations.

According to him, the decision to work without sulfur is to fully realize "the accomplishment of the work which has been done in the vineyards, to avoid additives in order to let the grape express itself. The use of So2 is nonexistent, even at bottling, in order to preserve the authenticity of our cuvées. Bottling happens, according to the lunar calendar, in order for the wines we make be respected as much as possible from the vineyard to the glass."

The "Quoi Qu'il En Goutte" is a wine that stirs up memories of the natural wines that first captured my heart. It's got some funky barnyard aromas, black cherry notes, peppery texture and a little spritz. Carignan and Syrah, it's from two vintages. The first vintage, 2019, got stuck, so some juice from 2020 was added to get the fermentation going again. It was then bottled intentionally with some sugar, but it fermented dry in the bottle — hence the spritz. So it's kind of like a secret Pet Nat? The bubbles are pretty mild, and will go away if you shake the bottle.

This is a great example of making the best of the situation without adding anything. The results are not typical but they are delicious and soulful. The name means "whatever it takes," a take on Macron's phrase "quoi qu'il en coute" or "whatever the cost" regarding bailing out the French economy at the start of Covid-19. Jeff is nothing if not humble about his years of groundbreaking viticulture. "Wine is a beverage which brings dialog and conviviality," he says. "Some grapes; some work and some love, that is our philosophy." Cheers to that. Jonathan Kemp

<u>Vigneto Saetti "Rosso Viola" Lambrusco</u> dell'Emilia 2020

Emila-Romagna • Italy

[Press 4 Mix + Press 4 Red]

Lambrusco became incredibly popular in the United States in the 70's and 80's, along with some other regions of Italy such as Soave, Valpolicella, and Chianti. Because of that

popularity, all of these regions suffered from the same problem: a lot of producers wanted to take part in the cash flow, the regions expanded very fast, and production quality plummeted. Predictably, these wines all soon earned a bad reputation in the marketplace because there was no reliable way to differentiate between well made wine and swill. All of these regions have essentially been trying to tighten up controls and standards ever since.

This Lambrusco made by Luciano Saetti is a now considered classic Italian sparkling wine because it is in direct

opposition to the excesses of the 70s and 80s. Saetti only uses a very local strain of the Lambrusco grape called Salamino di Santa Croce, which here makes a rather dark wine, full of blackberry, plum, currant, and also an herbal/brambly quality which gives the wine complexity and nuance. This is a great food wine as the skin contact actually imparts a bit of tannin and is fermented completely dry. Saetti is also unique in that

he farms strictly organically, has not used any sulfur whatsoever in his winemaking since 2007, and the secondary fermentation occurs in the bottle versus most Lambrusco, that uses the cheaper Charmat method, where the secondary fermentation is done in a large tank. This is not crazy funky but it will get funkier the longer it's open. Don't be too afraid, it's a lovely, refreshing wine made out of passion and deep commitment to changing the attitudes that got Luciano's home region into trouble in the past. *Alex Rifkin*

Martin Texier Côtes du Rhône Grenache 2020 Northern Rhône • France

[Press 4 Red]

DJ turned winemaker, and son of the infamous Eric Texier (who seems to be mentioned in every other French natural wine project these days), Martin Texier makes some of my favorite wines from the Rhone valley. He farms about 5 hectares in the village of

St.-Julien-en-St.-Alban, planted to the classic grape varieties of the region: Syrah, Grenache, Cinsault, Roussanne and others. After a couple vintages of uber-natural tasting wines, Martin

shifted his attention to farming his vines with the utmost care in order to yield healthy fruit to produce clean, delicious wines that require no additions. The most recent vintage I tasted is certainly my favorite, full of energy and character and not a mouse tail in sight. Martin's Cotes du Rhone bottling is 100% Grenache from 30 year old wines planted on granitic soil. Given a gentle whole cluster maceration for a week, this is a light, juicy and refreshing expression of this

joyful grape. Aromas of fresh red berries and sandalwood jump out of the glass, with cherry, wild strawberry and blood orange on the palate. Great served slightly chilled, and exactly what I would want with pizza. *Kirk Sutherland*

Natalino Del Prete "Anne" Negroamaro 2020

Puglia • Italy

[Press 4 Red]

Natalino del Prete is another old guard natural winemaker, certified organic in 1994 and never using any sulfur. In Puglia, he is an outlier. It's a rural, poorer part of southern Italy and there is

not much motivation to work like Natalino, whose costs and labor are higher than those working conventionally. Thankfully he and his family continue to take on the extra work of natural viticulture, and the result is some very unadulterated, distinct wines. They have been called 'unpretentious peasant wine made for everyday consumption' but that is selling them short. The del Prete wines are some of my favorite southern Italian wines.

Though they can be pretty funky, this 100% Negroamaro called "Anne" after Natalino's wife, is less wild, not quite going off the rails. But the feeling that it might is exciting. There's a touch of barnyard but it gives way to a complex mix of pine needle, sandalwood, cranberry, blueberry skin, sumac, and star anise. Though it is a darker wine with mouth-coating tannins, there is a significant lift and energy to balance. Lip-smacking acidity and a crunchy, phenolic bite makes this heartier red surprisingly versatile. Definitely built for pasta and red sauce — Anne says, "if Natalino had his way he would just eat pasta every meal" — it will work with a whole host of summer vegetables and grilled meats, too. Even more surprising, I found it to be great three days after opening it, kept in the fridge. Jonathan Kemp

Ramon Jané "Baudili" 2020

Penedès • Catalonia • Spain | Press 4 White |

Ramon Jané has wine in his blood, coming from a long family tradition of winemaking and a focus on indigenous varietals. After starting Mas Candí, a pioneering winery in the region, Jané created his own label, forgoing any use of sulfur and appellation status, focusing instead on a deep connection with the land and conscientious farming practices. All of his vineyards are dry farmed (no irrigation) and

grapes are harvested by hand; his minimal intervention farming yields wines that are sincere representations of the land his family has cultivated for generations.

This 50/50 blend of Xarel-lo and Parellada from Catalunya, just south of Barcelona, is a pure expression of place and tradition. But a stones throw from the Mediterranean, the coastal influence is made abundantly clear by its briny pop and slate-like minerality. Bright yet fleeting acidity and a silky texture boosts big citrus notes of lemon pith and grapefruit, backed by overripe ripe orchard fruit and an underlying loamy, mushroomy earthiness. With the complexity this wine presents, it's a terrific value. This is a perfect pairing for seafood, especially shellfish (yes, I am telling you to shuck some oysters), but also can stand alone as a refreshing afternoon sipper in the sun. Alex Rifkin



Philippe Chevarin "Les Alouettes" 2020

Pays Nantais • Loire • France [*Press 4 White*]

Located about 35 minutes north from the city of Nantes, Philippe Chevarin has been producing wines in his teeny tiny cellar from his 5 hectares of organically farmed grapes for just 7 years.

Before Louis/Dressner began importing his wines, Chevarin was selling some of his grapes

Above: Ramon Jané under a massive, old vine. He forgoes sulfur in order to shift the focus from winemaking back to vineyard work.

to a couple of our favorite producers, Pierre-O Bonhomme and René Mosse. Chevarin left a career in the music industry to follow his passion for farming and winemaking and has so far successfully made all of his wine without the addition of sulfur.

Les Alouettes is roughly 80% Sauvignon Blanc and 20% Melon de Bourgogne. The grapes are directly pressed, and fermented and aged on lees before being bottled unfined and unfiltered. Upon first tasting the wine, I assumed that it was all Melon de Bourgogne, as it's very fresh and mineral, which is surprising for Sauvignon from this area. Bright and lively, and has a lightly creamy texture, with notes of fresh melon, lemon peel and pear accompanying a long, salty and earthy finish. *Kirk Sutherland*



<u>Domaine Ratapoil "Trotte Menu" Cotes du Jura</u> Chardonnay/Savagnin 2018

Arbois • Jura • France [*Press 2*]

This is an exciting find for our Direct Press members. Raphaël Monnier's wines are nearly impossible to find outside a few limited channels in the US. They are called Ratapoil, roughly meaning 'hobbyist winemaker' in local parlance — Raphaël was a history and geography teacher when he started this project in 2009. For the 10 years prior Raphaël worked for the natural Jura winemaker Jean-Baptiste Menigoz at Domaine Bottes Rouges. The Ratapoil wines come from about five hectares of vines mostly in Arbois, worked organically from the start, with the help of Raphaël's partner Marie Bourdon. The goal is simply to cultivate healthy grapes that need little in the way of intervention once they are in the cellar. Sometimes a small amount of sulfur is used if absolutely necessary, though there is none added to this wine.

"Trotte Menu" is a blend of Chardonnay and Savagnin from marl soils in Buvilly. This is made ouillé, or topped-up, meaning it doesn't have the intensely nutty quality of some Jura wines. Instead it's a nervy, zippy wine with earthy ginger and bruised apple notes. The bracing edge of this wine will soften a bit with some air and reveal some softer creamy notes. The subtle texture and tangy cut of this wine makes it vibrant and fine-tuned, reminding me of the style of wines from another Arbois producer, Bruyère & Houillon, which is even harder to find than Ratapoil. There's a tension between the elegant and untamed elements of this wine that I particularly like. *Jonathan Kemp*

Julien Courtois "Ancestral" 2019

Loire • France

[Press 2]

Julien Courtois is the elder son of Claude Courtois, who was a pioneer of natural winemaking in the Loire. Claude moved his family there in the early 1990s after his organic farm and vineyards in Provence were destroyed by a forest fire. In the barely-populated Sologne area south of Orleans, he took over parcels that had been fallow for nearly a decade and were being reclaimed by nature. Julien and his wife Heidi Kuka (the labels draw from her Maori heritage) now work some of Claude's best old vines, though his brother Etienne may dispute that, as he is also making terrific wine down the road. No chemicals have ever been allowed on the property since the 1990s and Julien and Heidi work the vineyards with a horse, more gentle than a tractor on the soil.

"Ancestral" is made of Côt (Malbec), Gamay Chaudenay, and Gascon, a very obscure grape that Claude had grafted in order to increase the diversity in his vines. This did not go over well with the authorities, and Claude had to fight them in court to keep his Gascon. This illustrates a little of the stubborn, uncompromising personality of the Courtois family. Feral and yet vivid, the Ancestral is funkier on the nose than the palate, which is quite graceful and juicy. Black plum and crunchy blueberries are matched with a little sour cherry and lively tart acids. It's not mindless glou-glou, though it's tempting to knock it back, especially with a slight chill. There is a sense of minerals and spice that underpins the vibrant fruit and keeps it from being too rich or heavy. Instead it's lithe, supple, and invigorating. *Jonathan Kemp*



