DIRECT PRESS

PRIVATE PRESS:
HOW SMALL GROWERS MAKE THE MOST PERSONAL WINES

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For all the

talk in natural wine circles about sulfur in the cellar and chemicals in the vineyard one thing that often gets overlooked is scale. Before 'natural wine' became the umbrella term, 'small grower' was the phrase more commonly used. Using both terms together is more effective, I find; especially when compared with their opposites, which is mass-produced wines made with synthetic chemicals. The scale necessitates the chemicals. Smaller scale allows for humans to do all the work, which is the good news and the bad news.

Small-production natural wines like those that are featured in Direct Press are a minuscule drop in the proverbial spit bucket of the global wine industry. David is barely a gnat to Goliath in this metaphor. A study by Michigan State University from a few years ago revealed that 51% of the wines available for sale in the US were owned by just three companies: E&J Gallo (think brands like Barefoot and Apothik), The Wine Group (Franzia, Cupcake, Benziger), and Constellation Brands (Mondavi, Ruffino, Clos du Bois).

With this in mind, I worry that when we get caught pitting a winemaker using zero sulfur against one adding 40ppm we are missing the more serious threat. Bigger landowners, corporations, and cooperatives have the ability to buy up vineyards and squelch out competition at a level that is nearly impossible to match for an independent winemaker. And they cannot make the same kind of wines. Changing the scale of wine production drastically changes the end product. One of my favorite things about getting into wine was the fact that vineyards and grapes had a limit to their production where the quality level would immediately drop. The best wines are impossible to mass produce because nature does not allow it. You cannot get around the equation of superior fruit making superior wine—and superior fruit is a finite agricultural product. The winemakers we feature this month are doing all the vineyard work themselves, walking the rows, putting their hands on every vine, and it shows. I don't know the Josh behind Josh Cellars, but he sure as s%*& isn't in the vineyards pruning or digging post holes.

I spoke with Kevin McKenna of LDM (Louis/Dressner/McKenna) Wines, where he has been working with small growers since 1995. "It's all about the work," he says. "If you're going to make wines naturally you have to do the work to get proper raw material that will vinify itself and ferment without adding anything. You have to be really selective and make sure all the grapes are healthy. And in order to do that you have to work in the vineyard. Exceptional vineyard work has got to be there. And it's kind of a given that once you go past a certain scale you cannot possibly be making the wines that way."

To be this hands-on throughout the winemaking process, how big can you really be? We chose to feature winemakers who are working with less than 10 hectares under vine (about 24.5 acres). Think roughly the size of Fort Greene Park. That seems to be the cutoff point for those who want to do all the work themselves, in the way they

want. António Marques da Cruz of Serradinha in coastal Portugal (featured in the Press 4 Mix and Red groups this month) told me seven hectares is perfect for him because he can work the vineyards himself. He is the only full-time employee, and gets part-time help throughout the year as needed. Any more land than that and he says he is "no longer working with vines but with spreadsheets," which is why he left his previous career in plastics back in 2003 to start making wine with his father.

António Marques da Cruz of Serradinha

To be clear, you can make thoughtful, amazing wines with far more land and more full-time help. I would say most of the wineries we stock in the shop are somewhere in the 10-20 hectare range. Scaling up from this and the added labor and fossil fuel use that is required can begin to mitigate any claims to making natural wine. Despite the challenges of growth, I would argue that it is deeply important to have more wineries of larger scale that stay true to organic farming and good labor practices. The last thing I want to do is fetishize small wineries just for being small—but I feel strongly that when you are putting your hands on everything in the process all the time, you are going to make a more personal, idiosyncratic wine. That is what I want to call attention to.

Before Stephen Bitterolf began his import company Vom Boden 10 years ago, we worked together at Crush on 57th St, where he was one of two seasoned buyers and I was a very green sales associate. I owe much of my understanding of German and Austrian wine to Stephen, but his contagious passion for these wines was even more central to my growing love of wine. At heart, it was not specifically Germany or Austria but the fact that he was finding wines from these places that had the unmistakable stamp of the personal touch. My feelings about small producers are just as easy to trace back to the mentorship of Stephen as my ability to decipher a Prädikatswein label. His recent book about his years as an importer, Ten Years of Hocks & Moselles, is out this month. It is a must for any wine lover, especially any German wine freak. But he explains this concept of size and scale better than I could so he graciously allowed me to use an excerpt here.

From "Ten Years of Hocks & Moselles" by Stephen Bitterolf

For me, one of the most profound consistencies through nearly a decade of retail wine experience, no matter the country, the grape, the terroir, or the philosophy, was the following: Small estates just make the more curious, the more individual wines.

They're not always better, mind you, they're just more...human. The wines have more of a personality; they have their own signature. They are more transparent and they are less consistent, in the beautifully unpredictable way humans are.

This is hardly a revolutionary idea. In the landscape of much European wine over the past half-century—to say nothing about human commercial endeavours since time immemorial—scale has been something of an issue.

We seem to always want more.

This growth imperative seems to be a particularly human ailment—the logic of cancer made manifest in our behavior, in our societies. One finds this perverse association even in our linguistics. In English, the word "great" can have a complicated dual meaning. It can, on the one hand, be used to suggest quality, excellence, or virtue. It can also be used to describe something that is quantitatively large with no reference to quality. "The great hall" is not always an architectural work of art; it's just a big room. The German word "gross" blurs this line even more. "Gross" truly translates to both "great" and "large." Beethoven's 9th Symphony is "gross," yet so is an airplane hangar.

Certainly the "amazing" technologies of the last few decades have encouraged this growth. They have made everything quicker, easier, faster, more ergonomic and better looking. It's become easy to expand, to grow. After all, now we can toast our bread, have the dishes washed, and whiten our teeth at the same time. I don't mean to dumb down a very complex story. In viticulture, some of these technologies have literally saved vineyards. And by saving these vineyards, by making them economic to farm, they have saved the growers and the villages that grow, or die, based on the health of these ecosystems.

Yet as machines have taken over more and more of our human practices, it shouldn't be too surprising to us when we notice that we've lost something of our human touch in the things we are making—or in fact are not making.

All of a sudden, curiously, much of what we "make" somehow feels so appropriately average, so perfectly correct and consistently the same, that it feels foreign. It feels deeply unsatisfying in a very essential way. Yet why exactly it's unsatisfying is very hard to articulate. It's something like looking in the mirror and having a perfectly symmetrical human face smile back. It's us, but it's not at all us. Something is amiss, but it's hard to articulate.

Humanity and nature are defined by not being perfect or consistent.

It's important to also keep in mind that the correlation between scale and a certain homogeneity is not completely a matter of deep, mysterious essential truths. It is in some ways, but not completely. Another part of the equation we can't ignore is capitalism, with its childish logic of supply and demand. In other words: If you produce a lot of wine, if you have a large supply, you are going to have to create a large demand. And most people, alas, are not looking for singular, unique, imperfect wines. Most people are looking for something in the middle, something generally comfortable and familiar. And they want this familiar comfort to be more or less consistent, year after year after year.

In other words, larger estates may make more uniform wines not only because the human touch has been taken away, but because they have to.

Growth has its consequences.

If this is all grandiose—and it is and is meant to be—for me, as the importer, as the person on the ground, there is also a much more basic and selfish motivation: I want to hang out with growers and not with "cellar managers," "export managers," "vice presidents of sales," "marketing directors," or the like. No disrespect meant: I'm also just a cog in the sales apparatus; I get that.

But part of this is—how do you say—a lifestyle choice?

Yannis Mittas of Oenos Mittas

I want to go to Europe and sit at a small table, preferably not in a sleek tasting room, with the grower and talk about wine and not about sales. I want the person sitting there with me to have their name on the label; I want to see the dirty fingernails. I want to selfishly gorge myself on their connection to their land, for at the end of the day, this is what I lack, and this is what I yearn for.

For me, chasing sales is a fool's game. I know people do it and do it very well; they make a lot of money. That's wunderbar. I personally just can't deal with looking at the universe that way; it would kill me—and then bore me. (from *Ten Years of Hocks & Moselles*)

The actual scale, however, of a small-scale winery is its own impediment. "Basically, you have to put in as much energy as someone else does and it's just a question of how many workers you have," says Kevin McKenna. You're doing the same amount of work as somebody who has a 12 hectare or 16 hectare and you're getting less for it. When you're a small producer you're thrown to the back of the line when sourcing equipment and materials. When things become scarce—like what happened during the pandemic with bottles, labels, capsules, et cetera—the big companies get first priority and the small ones get f#%@ed, basically. And so a lot of smaller wineries during that period banded together to make a big enough purchase that bottle manufacturers would pay attention."

Then there's a fiscal consideration.

McKenna explains, "the more vines, the more wine you have to sell, the more cash eventually you have. It's the economy of scale. If you already have the vines, if you already have the facility, then it's just a question of the extra cost of labor and energy utilities. And so you have a bigger pool of money at the end of everything to keep going. So for smaller producers it's much more hand to mouth. They have to sell as much as they can possibly produce every year or else. With more hectares and more employees you have more time to get away and sell your wine. For a small producer to go do the marketing they're losing time on the other end with all the vineyard work." This is why an importer like LDM or Vom Boden who can sell these wines is vital to keeping them afloat.

Another way small producers can stay in business, especially with the added vulnerability of climate chaos, is by purchasing fruit from neighbors. Often called négoce, this process of using someone else's grapes would at first glance compromise on individuality. "For a small producer, having to reach out to other growers to buy fruit is a big decision," says McKenna. But working at such a small scale is tenuous, and these are humans contending with more than just their own work ethic or philosophies. Survival is the name of the game here. Négoce fruit can be used to help finance a small winery; or get it through a vintage where they have lost fruit due to hail, frost, or other acts of nature.

Philippe Chevarin, who has five hectares in the western Loire, did just this starting in 2021 with his 'Détour' label (featured in this month's Press 4 Red group). It was the fourth devastating vintage in the six years since he started making wine. It enabled him to stay in business. "I work about 10 hours a day and still I can not do everything I want in the vineyard," he told me. "Having a small area is not necessarily ideal but in my case it is complicated to grow any bigger. I started by working alone on a small parcel and then even though I grew I never found the financial balance to hire people. So now I work alone and I like the freedom it provides. I continue gaining efficiency a little each year." He sarcastically added, "the day I retire I will be at the top."

But what is the top? If we're talking about freedom and expressiveness, Philippe is already there. If we're talking about connecting souls with wine that possesses real human emotion, Philippe and others featured this month are already at the top of my list.

Cheers,
Jonathan

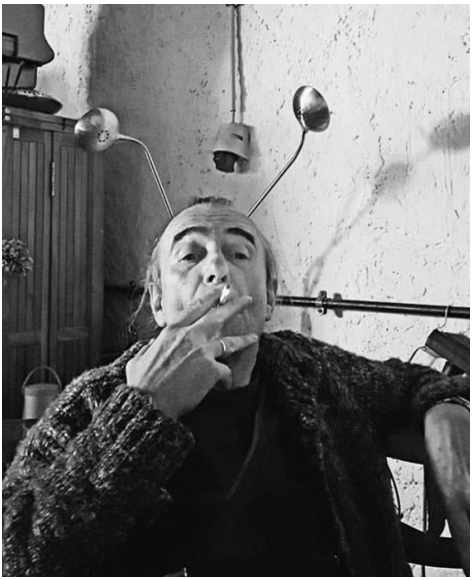
Hild Elbling Trocken
Mosel • Germany
Press 4 Mix/White

The Obermosel, or Upper Mosel, starts at the border with Luxembourg and is planted mostly to Elbling on limestone instead of Riesling on slate. Growers here typically have none of the esteem that their Riesling-focused peers enjoy, and much of the Elbling ends up in bottom shelf grocery store plonk for Eastern Europe. And yet, the Hild family, led by Matthias Hild, has maintained some of the only remaining old terraced vineyards in the area, which is not at all financially reasonable. It is an act of love to preserve the history here of one of the oldest grape varieties in Europe. Their six hectares are an outlier in the Obermosel and are a source of heartwarming hope for any lover of underappreciated grapes and wine culture.

This Elbling is the first I've tried, and boy what a reward we receive from small producers focusing on making wines with character. Grassy and lemony on the nose, the flavors in the glass adding orange pith, flint, and tropical hints of melon as the wine opens up. The ever-present acidity will for sure make this wine shine alongside cheese-based dishes and snacks. It is no surprise that Elbling is a parent to both Chardonnay and Riesling, and if the grape meant to bestow its best qualities into its children, it seemingly has achieved that fleeting goal. *Demi Elder*

Gismondi Cerreto
Campania • Italy
Press 4 Mix/White

Anabel and Antonio Gismondi have only been making wine since 2018 but the Gismondi family has been



Matthias Hild

cultivating grapes, olives, and vegetables without the use of pesticides or herbicides for many generations. Antonio befriended Massimo Marchiori of Partida Creus when he was living in Barcelona, and with his guidance he began making wine from his family's grapes back in Campania, and they stopped selling their grapes to the cooperative. In just a short time they have quickly been championed by natural wine lovers all over Italy. The family had about three hectares of vines a few hours from Naples in Cerreto Sannita at about 350 meters above sea level. Antonio purchased another two hectares in 2021 to take their total to five hectares, all farmed biodynamically.

There are wines that are popular in the US but not in their home region, and vice versa. Gismondi's wines are extremely popular in Italy but are

catching on quickly in New York. It's not hard to see why when you taste them. Cerreto Bianco is Malvasia di Candia with four days on its skins and zero sulfur. The texture from the skins is combined with ripe, juicy pear fruit, dusty dried flowers, and a salty backbone. It's a fabulous wine with a complex mixture of layers and a boisterous, freewheeling charisma. *Jonathan Kemp*

Serradinha Vinho Tinto
Leiria • Portugal
Press 4 Mix/Red

António Marques da Cruz began working with his father in the family vineyards around 2003 when fatefully a ladybug landed on a bottle his father was just about to open. His father was so taken with the moment he decided to commemorate it with a wooden ladybug glued to every cork.

The Cruz family have maintained the estate since 1890 and Antonio is the first in his family to make wine his full time career. Also of note Serradinha was the first winery in Portugal to be certified organic. They are located in the northern town of Leiria and are included in the Lisbon appellation. He tends to make lower alcohol wines which run contrary to the wines currently in vogue in Portugal.

The Vinho Tinto 'Castelão et al.' is a blend of Castelão, Touriga Nacional, Alfrocheiro, and Tinto Miúda. The grapes are destemmed and macerated for 10 days in an open-top wood vat. The grapes are then pressed and racked into 600L barrels and the wine is aged on lees for two years without racking. 20/30mg per liter of sulfur is added before fermentation and 20mg at bottling.

This Tinto is a sophisticated wine with aromatics of black plum, roses, violets, earth, black pepper, and black licorice. On the palate I found a refreshing yet firm mix of black cherry and plum, black pepper, textural earthy tannin, sage and rosemary. This would be a great pairing with lamb, steak, and roasted vegetables.
Jeremy Hernandez

Patrice Martin Julienas
Beaujolais • France
Press 4 Mix/Red

The pinnacle of Patrice's lineup - this is serious stuff. A single parcel of 100 year old vines on a steep slope. The wine is vilified and aged in oak and results in an intoxicating, dense, and more intense side of Beaujolais. My tasting notes from Patrice's cellar are "Wow…amazing wine. Dense palate, plum, cherry, sauvage, spice, licorice, and violet on the finish." *Greg Rubin*

Philippe Chevarin Detour Rouge

Loire • France

Press 4 Red

This is Philippe Chevarin's negoce Cabernet Franc from Anjou. Due to a devastating growing year Philippe chose to purchase organic fruit to continue to make wine in years that his harvest were not sufficient to make enough wine from his own fruit, and for this I am thankful! This is organic fruit that is vinified like all his other wines; whole cluster, 7-10 day maceration in fiberglass tank, then bottled the following spring without sulfur.

Philippe Chevarin

This wine is a true gem. It is simultaneously playful, sophisticated, balanced, and lifted. Aromas of brambly berries, fresh rose petals, and a hint of the famous Cab Franc pyrazines. I was blown away by the complexity and lusciousness with notes of strawberry, hibiscus tea, rose petals, green peppercorn, great acidity and minerality. Truly one of my favorite Cab Francs yet.

Jeremy Hernandez

Oenos Mittas Naoussa Xinomavro

Naoussa • Greece

Press 4 Red

Oenos Mittas is a very young project headed by Yiannis Mittas, himself not even 30 years old. Though he is the first in his family to make wine, his cousins at Domaine Dalámara have one of the most highly regarded wineries in the Naoussa region in Greek Macedonia. This gave Yiannis an insight to where some of the best Xinomavro vines were located, so when a 1.8 hectare parcel went up for sale, he jumped on it.

With the exception of his cousins, much of the wine in Naoussa is still of inconsistent quality. Yiannis is driven to a level of excellence that is quite different from many of his neighbors. Here we have a 100% Xinomavro with a gravitas that is reminiscent of Piedmont, Tuscany, and Burgundy all at once. Bursting with plump, rich fruit, it has the perfect balance of ripeness and tannic grip. A touch of new French oak adds some heady richness. Black cherry, plum, rose garden, leather, and horse barn. It's a luxe wine without a hair out of place.

Jonathan Kemp

Lunotte Rossignoux

Loire • France

Press 4 White

Christophe Foucher of La Lunotte is about as at one with his land as you can get. Working his 5.5 hectares in Couffy of the Loire Valley solo, every stalk and stem is personal to him. His journey began in 2000: originally he taught classes in engineering, but after working alongside his father-in-law at his wife's family vineyard, a passion for winemaking sparked within him. Their vineyard was organic, so it was only natural for Foucher to continue observing the organic standard. By 2001, his vineyard was also converted to biodynamics. Foucher eats, sleeps, and breathes his land as well as his commitment to natural winemaking. So much so that he opted for the Vin de France declassification rather than joining Touraine AOC, which allows far too many chemicals for his liking.

He's a man of character and so is his art. Employing naturally occurring fermentation, use of ambient yeasts, carbonic maceration, and bottling his wines by hand unfined and unfiltered. To top it off (or not to top it off!) he completely forgoes using sulfites or other additives. Foucher is also a fan of a good long elevage, with his wines being housed in barrel from anywhere from a year up to five years before they see the light of day and the inside of our anticipatory glassware. He grows Menu Pineau, Cabernet Franc, Côt, Gamay, and as our selection for this month includes–Sauvignon Blanc. As you can imagine, his dedication to the natural process gives his wines a mighty and distinct character unlike anything you've ever tasted.

This 'Rossignoux' Sauvignon Blanc was aged for a year in barrel and then allowed to interact with a layer of flor—quite the unusual path for the varietal. Likewise, what you'll find in the bottle is anything but the expected. The intensity on the aromas is dialed up, first expressing marmalade on toast, followed by notes of butterscotch and caramel. It's nice and dry on the palate, recalling a sherry-like nuttiness. He has achieved nothing short of a layered and unique take on this ubiquitous noble grape. Interesting and talkative all the way through, it'd be no surprise if you want to have a one-on-one with this bottle, but I find myself also wanting to pair it with peanut-based Thai food.

Demi Elder

Menti Roncaie sui Leviti Frizzante

Veneto • Italy

Press 4 White

Menti is among a small number of producers bringing back some of the soul to an area long lost to the overreach of industrial wine production after the international success of Soave in the 1970s and 80s. Menti, in nearby Gambellara, has been at the forefront of the progressive winemaking revitalizing the Veneto. Menti employs organic and biodynamic methods in the vineyards, and though the family takes farming very seriously, they allows Garganega's playful side to come out, leaving all the easy refreshment and adding a little more character and depth. As I've tasted more examples of this approach to Garganega, I've come back to Menti each time as the gold

standard for exciting Garganega in the region, a feat they've accomplished with just 7.5 hectares of vines.

Menti's "Roncai Sui Leveti" takes Garganega and adds bubbles using the ancestral method, with no sulfur added at any point. This Menti cuvee is not super funky, either, but clean and understated. Green tea, pear, whole grain mustard, and some salty, refreshing menthol on the finish. It definitely falls in the category of "breakfast wine" (yes, that's a category, and, um, only on weekends?) but is also a perfect accompaniment to dinner fare like fish tacos or spicy takeout.
Jonathan Kemp

Stein Palmberg Kabinett Trocken 2022

Mosel • Germany
Press 2

Palmberg is Stein's best vineyard, a breathtaking ampitheater at a sheer pitch that hovers over the small village of Sankt Aldegund. I could barely get a foothold in this vineyard of single-stake, ungrafted vines that were planted nearly a century ago. This is easily one of the best vineyards in the Mosel, and Stein's careful preservation of these older Riesling clones has been a lifetime's labor of love for him.
The result is a wine that is as invigorating and ripping as sticking a fork in an electrical outlet while eating a bag of sour patch kids. Sterling, righteous and crystal clear. The piercing acidity makes this wine a fantastic candidate for long term aging, but given time to open up, it shows the energy of the unadulterated old vines it came from. The nose is chalky and packed with lemon pez, candied ginger and Mirabelle plum. Mouthwatering, mineral and exciting, the definition of stony. With air, juicy Meyer lemon and canned pineapple joyfully jump from the glass. Decant to drink it now, but I think giving this some time will be beneficial for all our members. It will easily age for a decade or two. Stein's wines have the muscle and energy to benefit from cellaring, but they are also not short on precision, detail, and vivacious finesse.
Jonathan Kemp

Ulli Stein in his vineyard

Nusserhof Teroldego 2017
Alto Adige • Italy
Press 2

Weingut Nusserhof is located directly in the regional capital of Bolzano, Italy at the foot of the South Tyrol mountains of Alto Adige and next to the Isarco River. If there's any illustration of this month's theme in the form of a winery it would be this small winery, run by Heinrich and Elda Mayr, being encroached upon by the developing city around them.They maintain an approximate 2.4 hectare farm that surrounds their family home and have a history of the same family farming the land as far back as 1788. They are certified organic farmers and harvest by hand.

This Teroldego comes from only 10 rows of grapes averaging 30 years old with very low yields. The wine is fermented in stainless steel for 4 weeks, aged in used Burgundy barrels for 2-2.5 years, followed by at least 2 more years in bottle, with a very small amount of sulfur at bottling.

Teroldego has been one of my benchmark grapes ever since I caught natural wine bug, January 2020, when upon my first few visits to a wine shop someone suggested Floral Terranes Teroldego from New York's North Fork. It was done in a very luscious, velvety, supple style with dark red and black fruits, a hint of leather, cigar tobacco, and deliciously ripe tannins. This Nusserhoff is almost exactly like that and therefore I am in love with this wine! Perfect for cooler weather and the upcoming feasts. Buy a couple extra bottles to share with your friends because they will undoubtedly be hooked after their first glass.

Jeremy Hernandez

Heinrich and Elda Mayr of Nusserhof

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