

NO-SULPHITE-ADDED WINES HIT THE MARKETPLACE

As the 'organic' label can only be used in the US if no SO₂ has been added to the wine, producers have long looked for ways to avoid it. Now, international demand for 'natural wine' is fuelling new attempts to make wines without sulphites, as Dr Jamie Goode discovers. But do these wines have any special benefits?

Of all alcoholic beverages, wine can claim to be the most natural. It isn't manufactured, in the sense that grapes contain within themselves all that is needed to make wine without any additions, save just one: that of sulphur dioxide (SO₂).

The molecular guardian of wine, SO₂ is added to wine because of its role in protecting against unwanted microbial growth and oxidation. But some winemakers, aiming to make wines without any additions, have been trying to work without SO₂ at all. In Europe there is a growing 'natural wine' movement, a loose coalition of artisanal producers aiming to work without any additions of yeasts or preservatives during the winemaking process. Most, though, make the concession of adding a little SO₂ at bottling.

The natural wine movement

Many of these producers gather at regular natural wine fairs - and there is a growing band of Parisian wine bars specialising in natural wine. The unofficial father of the movement is the late Jules Chauvet, a scientist and winegrower from Beaujolais. As well as working on natural wines, Chauvet was an expert taster who is probably best known for designing the standard ISO tasting glass.

It would be convenient to dismiss such 'natural' wines as a fringe activity, irrelevant to the wine trade at large. But in March 2008, major UK supermarket Sainsbury listed the first commercially significant NSA (No Sulphite Added) wine, part of their 'So Organic' range, and retailing at £4.99.

The wine in question is a South African Cabernet Sauvignon 2007 from the Stellar winery, and comes with a neck tag explaining the concept behind the wine. "Sulphites (sulphur dioxide) are generally added to wine as a preservative and an antioxidant," it reads. "Careful grape selection and handling,



»» I have learnt more about SO₂ by not using it than I had over all the previous years. ««

Dudley Wilson, winemaker at Stellar

coupled with the best of modern winemaking and bottling techniques has enabled this wine to be made without the addition of sulphites. Once opened, do not store this wine." This is a complex message for consumers to take on board, and there is a concern that if Sainsbury's promote this wine as being healthier or more natural than wines

with sulphites added, then shoppers will begin to question the soundness and healthfulness of the rest of their range.

Does removal change the wine?

So what does the wine taste like? It isn't at all funky or faulty, and the dominant features is focused blackcurrant and blackberry fruit. It has purity and freshness, and there's no sign of any oxidation. It over-delivers for the price point.

How has Stellar achieved this? "Modern production techniques and equipment make the use of SO₂ less critical than in the past," explains winemaker Dudley Wilson. "Standards of hygiene in cellars are much improved and the widespread use of stainless steel makes cleaning much easier. With the selection of healthy fruit at optimum ripeness in the vineyard, there is little need to use large amounts of SO₂ at the start of the wine making process." Wilson has also made a concerted effort to protect the wine from oxidation during the winemaking process. "Most wine makers rely on the presence of SO₂ to protect the wine when a lot more could be done by looking at dissolved oxygen in wine and understanding where it came from."

Wilson prepares the wine for bottling by protecting it with inert gases, and measuring oxygen pick-up to make sure this protection is working. He adds that, "working with a dissolved oxygen meter has also exposed that the most common methods to protect wine with inert gas are more ritualistic than effective." The bottling machine he uses pulls a vacuum on the empty bottle, fills it with nitrogen,

and then with wine. The wine is also sterile filtered just before entering the bottling machine. "The aim is to have almost no dissolved oxygen in the wine before bottling, to have no oxygen pick up during the filling process and to have the wine sterile at bottling," says Wilson. "On the question of shelf life," he continues, "it is my opinion that if the wine has not oxidised within the first three weeks post bottling, then it will age according to the style in which it was made." Wilson says the style is often dictated by the tannin profile, pH, volatile acid content and wood influence, so it will be subject to the same ageing factors as a normal wine, assuming that there is no ingress of oxygen or microbes through or from the closure. "One sometimes errs on the side of reductiveness when bottling some of these wines and they may, just after opening, exhibit some atypical bouquets. A bit of airing will invariably remedy this. Another feature to look for is the colour intensity. Even though these wines are chosen with a dense structure, the lack of bleaching SO₂ results in wines with exceptional richness of colour."

Why make an NSA wine?

Wilson cites two reasons for making NSA wines. The first was the recent legal requirement to put 'Contains sulphites' on the label where sulphur dioxide has been added. "Many people mistakenly think that organic wines are SO₂ free," says Wilson, "so we anticipated a bit of confusion when this happened." The second was the fact that in the United States the 'organic' label has been restricted to wines where no SO₂ has been added. "We saw that there was a large niche there to be exploited."

Not all wines are suitable candidates for being made without SO₂. Wilson says that those with deep colour and rich tannins are the best candidates. "We have tried it with white wine and have had some success, but the process is far more unforgiving than reds," Wilson reports. "It often requires a lot of work to stabilise and bottle when we are still taking in red grapes. One

doesn't have the safety net of tannins to mop up oxygen. Hyperoxidation and fermentation with bentonite are all options that can be explored, but the resulting style will not be as fresh and will not really work on Sauvignon Blanc."

So far, Wilson reports that the response to his NSA wines has been very good, especially among consumers who have concerns about the effects of sulphites on their health. "There are probably as many people who write in claiming they can now drink wine again who have probably been affected psychosomatically, as those who have found relief from a genuine intolerance towards SO₂," he adds.

But there has been some hostility from within the trade. Critics of NSA wines assert that claiming wines without added SO₂ are more natural is nonsense, because all wines contain some sulphites as a fermentation by-product.

Stellar is not the only winery that have attempted to make a commercial SO₂ free wine. Australian giant Hardys have been marketing a Cabernert Sauvignon, a Shiraz and a Chardonnay, in their NPA (no preservatives added) range, which retails for around A\$15.00 (\$13.70/€8.80). These wines are only available in Australia because there are concerns about how they will ship.

According to ex-Hardy's winemaker Tony Milanowski: "NSA wines were never a big seller. I think we made 5,000 cases of each a year. I think they were definitely marketing to people with specific health concerns and not people interested in natural wine." He doesn't think that NSA wines will become commonplace. "We will certainly be increasing the proportion of our production that is SO₂ free, but I doubt it will catch on elsewhere."

For the trade at large, it would be good if the NSA initiative could spark debate about the intrinsic 'naturalness' of wine. It could be very important in helping consumers choose wine as the natural, food-friendly alcohol of choice. In the current climate of interest in the origin and green credentials of food and drink, that could be a strong hand to play. ■

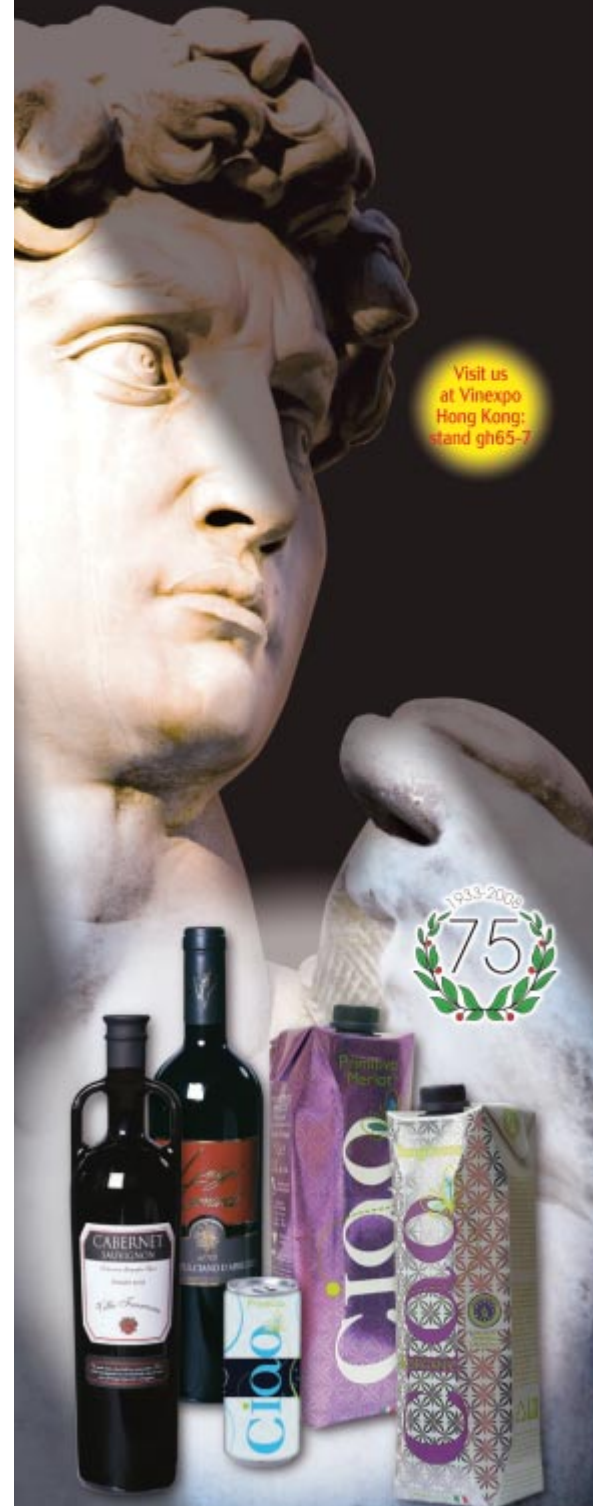


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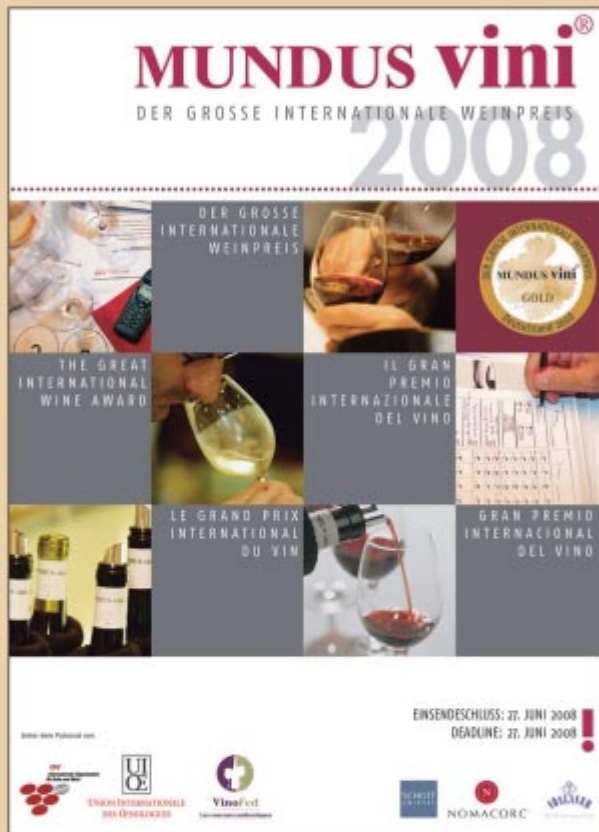
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