

Natural, Organic, Biodynamic: Marketing or Magic?

Following the wishes of most organic wine exhibitors, the world's leading international trade fair for wines and spirits – ProWein in Düsseldorf – returns organic wines to regional pavilions in 2015. Is this the end of a fad or the beginning of a new chapter as organic wines go mainstream?

Wine is, for better or worse, not immune to the affliction of trends. Critter labels, “food wines,” and orange wines have all recently had their moment in the sun. While there are some inevitable winners that emerged from these trendy categories, talk of them has faded after a few years in the spotlight. Today that spotlight is focused on the group of wines called organic, natural, or biodynamic -- different monikers for categories that are fundamentally linked. They're linked mostly by what is not done to the fruit and wines during production, but linked just the same. In many circles these wines are spoken of as fad wines, and perhaps they are to a degree, but can wines that have always existed, and will in all likelihood always continue to exist truly be called “fads”?

The answer, of course, is both yes and no, and unfortunately it's all quite complicated.

Organic Wines as a Market Niche.

It is impossible to say that organic wines are better than conventionally produced wines, though consumers, with their preferences, are free to make such determinations. What can be said is that they are distinctly different from conventionally produced wines. When wines made with organic grapes fail to display these differences, they may lose favor with serious organic wine drinkers, though at the same time the powerful marketing message that organic carries with it more than makes up for



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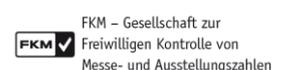
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that financial loss with more mainstream consumers. The difference here is subtle, but it may be the difference between being a fad or an enduring element of the wine industry.

Today organic wines are seen as a potentially revolutionary development in some regions. Consider Tim Marshall's (Deputy Chair of the Organic Federation of Australia) recent statement: "I believe the McLaren Vale area in South Australia could become the world's number one producer of organic wine in the world and we could easily realize this potential within a matter of years." Continued growth in the sector accounts for some of wine's biggest gains around the world, even as wine sales fall or remain stagnant in many European countries. Annual increases in sales of organic wines of 20% (Canada), 18% (Sweden), 10% (Holland), 8% (Denmark), 7% (Italy, Switzerland), 5% (Austria, France) and 4% (USA) are revolutionizing the industry in these countries. Acreage being farmed organically around the globe has almost quadrupled over the past decade and this explosive growth continues unabated.

All of these figures bode well for producers of organic wines -- but will the increased use of "organic" as a marketing point of differentiation steal some of the thunder from smaller, more rigorous producer? Or will it serve as a catalyst for further segmentation within the market for 'organic' wines?

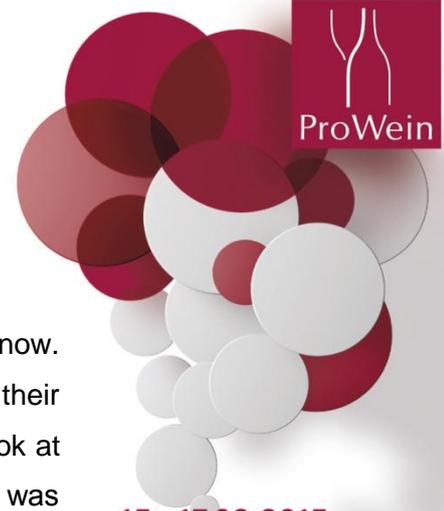
So this is where we are today. We have wines that are ironically known as conventional wines having dominated the industry for the past half a century or so. Prior to that, so called conventional wines were what we might refer to as wines produced from organic grapes, and then prior to that, of course, natural wines was the convention. Perhaps in fifty years time biodynamic will be the convention of the day!

What Does the Future Hold?

To better understand the direction these wines will take, and what role marketing will play in the broader adoption of the 'organic' monikers we

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need only look around and see what is happening with them right now. One of the truly profound developments with these wines today is their broad based and mass acceptance. For proof of this we need only look at any typical retail shop. Not long ago this group of “organic” wines was segregated on retail shelves, either to allow for ease of shopping from devotees, or to help the average consumer avoid them. They were the proverbial minefield -- full of pleasure, but also risks.

Today these wines are no long shunted aside, relegated to their own ‘special’ section. Instead they are returning to the shelves, displayed alongside other examples of Cabernet, Barolo, Chinon, or Pinot Noir. They’re no longer second-class citizens but fully the equal of the greatest conventional wines of their appellation or variety on offer.

Adam Morgenstern, co-founder of the Organic Wine Journal sees this happening as well, and reflects on the desires and intentions of the winemakers behind the labels:

“The winemakers don’t have it easy either. I haven’t met one winemaker who wants to be known for being organic. They want to be known for making great wine — and organic is simply the way they think leads to the best quality. Each one has their own balancing act, deciding whether they want to draw attention to their practices over their quality, and even if they want to put it on their label — which the majority do not. There’s much more to this, but the biggest fear I’ve seen is that wine stores will take them out of their appropriate geographical section and place them in the ‘organic ghetto’ maybe somewhere behind the counter next to the kosher wines.”

This is not an isolated incident. It is a movement and we need look no further than ProWein for further evidence of this integration of “organic” wines into the mainstream. ProWein in 2015 will no longer feature a distinct “organic” pavilion which was originally necessitated both by the increase in the number of self-identified organic producers participating in





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ProWein from a mere 17 producers in 2005 to roughly 300 in 2014, and by a professional interest to bring attention to the growth of this segment. This return of organic wines to their national pavilions at ProWein 2015 is just further proof both of the growth of these wines in numbers, as well as in importance.

A final point of evidence as to the direction these wines are taking is the gradual abandonment of certification. As more and more producers begin to create wines that are in some way organic, more and more are eschewing the expensive, cumbersome, and perhaps increasingly meaningless official “organic” certifications. In much the same way that organics will no longer be officially distinct at ProWein, producers no longer worry about being officially marked as organic.

Sommelier and director of the podcast series *I'll Drink to That*, Levi Dalton succinctly captures the moment we are at today with his offhand observation of wine in the mainstream: inexpensive and at the supermarket.



“A few days ago I was in a Whole Foods in California and I saw this loudly organic labeled wine on a shelf, on sale for \$10 a bottle. I checked the winery website, which declares Frey “America’s First Organic Winery” and lists 17 wines for sale with “Organic” as the first word of the wine listing, in addition to some Biodynamic offerings. It seems this winery has securely latched onto “organic” as the brand idea, and it does seem to be making the most of its use as brand positioning.

For me it is clear at this point that there are at least two meanings for organic: there is organic as a farming protocol, and there is organic as marketing. Some wineries engage in both, and some wineries pursue one and not the other.”



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Get to Know Organic Wines This Year.

We are undoubtedly at an inflection point in the trajectory of the modern organic wine movement. Wineries engaged in organic as a farming protocol are increasingly finding that intelligent use of back labels to inform consumers, along with a more engaged and enlightened media and the wines themselves, are all more valuable when demonstrating the quality achieved by the organic methods than any stamp or symbol. Certifications, while not meaningless, are rather easily attained by those with money and staff. Power is moving from the bureaucracy to the consumer and producers. It's a slow process, but one that is obviously well underway.

While we are all better off as the wine industry increasingly adopts the methods of organic production, let us not forget that there have been those who not only have always utilized them, but did so in relative obscurity and never once thought to leverage their practices as a marketing advantage. Once again it is convenient to return to ProWein's decision to return their organic participants to their regional pavilions, for among the wines that always remained under their nation's flags were some that could have easily declared themselves organic, or natural, and could have enjoyed a greater share of the that spotlight. For whatever reason, philosophical, financial, or simply out of complacency, they chose instead to remain with their neighbors, simply producing whatever wine it was that they produced and content to let that wine stand on its own.

Without a doubt the family of wines that are produced under the 'organic' umbrella represent some of the most interesting, dynamic, fun, and innovative wines in the market today. They should be compared, as they increasingly are today, not to one another, but rather to their regional peers. If you wipe prejudices from your mind and approach these wines with a clean slate I am sure that you will find that when compared with their peers organic wines are their full equal. This can only be done tasting them side by side with like wines and there is now no better place to do that than at ProWein in 2015. Filling nine exhibition halls, ProWein is set to

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present an unparalleled diversity of wines and spirits from all continents. Over 5,000 exhibitors from around 50 countries are being expected.

Always with their fingers on the pulse of the wine industry, ProWein has once again proven to be ahead of the curve in delivering the quintessential experience for the wine professional!

So see you there in Düsseldorf, Germany, for ProWein 2015 from March 15-17, 2015!

Gregory Dal Piaz has been involved with wine for over three decades, beginning on the restaurant side of the business, before moving to retail, and now as Editor-in-Chief of Snooth.com.

Press photos of ProWein 2014 can be found in our photo database under "Press Service" at www.prowein.com.



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