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# Wine That's Not Only Natural, It's Alive

**THE POUR** | ERIC ASIMOV



Top, RAW Wine's recent trade and consumer fair drew almost 2,300 visits over two days in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Above left, each cuvée from Gut Oggau, a small producer from Austria, is named after a family member, complete with line drawing of the relative's face on the label. Above right, the fair organizer Isabelle Legeron.



Stephanie Tscheppe-Eselböck (pouring) and Eduard Tscheppe (behind her) of Gut Oggau.



## A Brooklyn fair celebrates a contentious category that has polarized the industry.

IT MAY SEEM shocking, precious or counter-intuitive to think of wine as alive. But RAW Wine billed its recent trade and consumer fair as a celebration of “wines with emotion. Wines that have a humanlike, or living, presence.”

“Humanlike” and “emotion” may overstate the case. Yet few qualities are more desirable in a wine than a sense of it as a living, evolving, energetic thing.

RAW was a perfect opportunity to test out the proposition, as roughly 125 producers poured tastes of their wares in a cavernous, barely finished event space in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The fair drew almost 2,300 visits during its two-day run in early November, the event organizers said.

While RAW did not say so explicitly, the event was a celebration of natural wine, that contentious category that has polarized the wine industry over the last decade.

Opponents have excoriated natural wines just as the establishment lampooned hippies in the 1960s, citing bad hygiene in production, stinky bottles and, most of all, the lack of a rigorous definition of what makes a wine “natural.” They take issue with the implied criticism in the term: If your wine is natural, what does that make mine?

I have always considered the lack of a definition of natural wine to be a great strength. Despite the mainstream wine industry’s defensiveness, natural wine has never been an organized movement. It’s an ideal, rather than a set of rules: to make wine with an absolute minimum of intervention and manipulation in the vineyard or in the cellar.

Practically speaking, that means farming organically, biodynamically or by using some variant of the two. In the cellar, no overt manipulations or additives are allowed beyond a minimal amount of sulfur dioxide, which has long been used as a stabilizer and preservative, and all processes should be communicated transparently. Yet, even within the natural-wine world, the meaning of the ideal is debated fiercely.

Regardless of a precise definition, the significance of natural wine has been its role as an insurgency, inspiring the public to think more about what goes into the wines it is drinking and, through commercial pressure, to force the mainstream wine industry to confront and modify its own practices.

In New York, at least, the interest is clear. The first natural wine fair to be held in the city, the Big Glou, drew packed crowds in February at the Wythe Hotel in Williamsburg. Acclaimed restaurants and wine bars like Wildair, Rouge Tomate, Racines NY and the Four Horsemen all feature natural wines. And RAW, which has held fairs annually in London since 2012, as well as once in Vienna and twice in Berlin, saw New York as a ripe opportunity.

At the Brooklyn event, people stood four deep at producers’ tables, waiting for a chance to sample their wines. In a smaller room set aside for speakers, crowds spilled onto Randolph Street, straining to hear talks on the importance of soils or on what “natural” means in the context of other beverages, like cider, mead and vermouth, which were also poured at the fair.

“The word ‘natural’ might go away, which wouldn’t be a bad thing,” said Alice Feiring, an author and natural-wine advocate who, along with the sommelier Pascaline Lepeltier, spoke on how soils impart their personalities onto wines. “More and more, we’re just talking about good wine.”

Which brings me back to the question of what it means to call a wine alive. I asked Isabelle Legeron, an educator and author who organized RAW, what the term “living wine” meant to her.

“They have rather strong personalities, they are fully self-expressive,” Ms. Legeron said.

“I think the issue nowadays is that we taste with our heads, we don’t really taste with our mouths. Let your instinct take over, then you really connect to this living element of the wine. There’s a communication with them, because they are so full of life.”

With a nod to a growing contingent of American natural winemakers, around 25 were represented at the fair, including old favorites of mine like Dirty & Rowdy, which poured a wonderful, mineral-suffused mourvèdre from the Chalone region of California; Donkey & Goat; AmByth Estate (see if you can find its savory 2013 Paso Robles syrah); and Eyrie, now making a trousseau from the Dundee Hills of Oregon.

Newer names for me include Day Wines, making pure Willamette Valley pinot noirs, and Vinca Minor, which makes primarily cabernet sauvignon and carignan wines from old-vine vineyards in California.

“It was powerful, and we feel lucky to have been a part of it,” Jason Charles, Vinca Minor’s owner, said of the fair. “Isabelle is a force, and the community that she has built

with RAW is remarkable.”

Perhaps no wines at RAW embodied Ms. Legeron’s definition of living better than those from Gut Oggau, a small producer from the Burgenland in eastern Austria. The wines seem so alive to the proprietors, Eduard Tschettepe and Stephanie Tschettepe-Eselböck, that each of their cuvées is named after a family member, complete with an intricate line drawing of the relative’s face on the label.

In the glass, they are energetic, exuberant and pure. They are not only a pleasure to drink, they also make you feel healthy and good. I particularly loved the gorgeously floral rosé, called Winifred, made of blaufränkisch and zweigelt.

Ms. Tschettepe-Eselböck, who has been to RAW events in Europe, said she was thrilled to be at the New York fair.

“At the end of the day, we are just producing wine, creating and sustaining a culture,” she said. “Why not get a wider awareness of healthy soil and sustainable production?”

Alive can take many forms. It could be a tannic, complex herbal wine made of the chinuri grape and aged in qvevri, or amphorae, from Gotsa Family Wines in the country of Georgia. Or House Music, a fascinating and delicious pétillant naturel, or lightly sparkling wine, made from a field blend of hybrid grapes by La Garagista in central Vermont. Or even Or d’Âge, a revelation of a honey wine that smelled like honey but tasted like sherry, from Desrochers, a mead producer in Quebec.

The selections were not nearly all this esoteric. I found excellent Champagnes from Lelarge-Pugeot; wonderful Bordeaux from Château le Puy, not far from St-Émilion; and terrific ciders from Fable Farm Fermentory in Vermont.

Not everything I tried was great. As with every genre of wine, some examples are more successful than others, and because artifice is not permitted, the flaws in natural wines are even more apparent.

Consumers seemed enthralled nonetheless, and, as is often the case regardless of the type of wine, coming face to face with producers amplifies the meaning of what is in the glass.

“When people pay \$20 or \$30 a bottle, they can see there is a reason,” Ms. Legeron said. “The producers work really hard, everything is made by hand. It’s a craft done well by people who are passionate about what they are doing. It’s a commitment to nature and to the living.”

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