

Organic Wine: A Step Beyond Convention

These are good days to be an organic wine. After decades of being dwarfed by traditional producers, now organic, natural, and biodynamic wines are filling up cellars nationwide.

People are caring more and more about the food they're putting into their bodies, the ingredients they're putting on their skin, and the origin of the wine they're drinking. No longer just the realm of the hippie or hobby farmer, organic wine is a prime candidate where it counts: in our glasses.

From California to Argentina, dedicated wine producers around the world have become the drivers of a new transparent and sustainable trend that is supported by a new generation of conscious wine consumers.

Europe is estimated to account for 78% of the global organic wine market by 2022, whereas the Americas will represent approximately 12% of total organic wine consumption.

However, with this swell of interest in sustainable living and drinking, there's also an element of confusion about what "organic" really means. This guide breaks down the details about organic wine versus conventional wine, how organic production affects the final product, and how to find fairly-priced organic wine you'll love. (Hint: It's easier than you think.)

What Is Organic Wine?

The term "organic" means growing and processing food (in this case, grapes) without chemical pesticides, fertilizers, or other artificial agents. Although it might be a modern-day buzzword, organic winegrowing is a centuries-old farming practice. People have cultivated grapes for wine for thousands of years without chemical assistance. To keep pests at bay, winegrowers have worked with — not against — nature.

However, this term has some layers to it, and not all organic wine is created equal.

There are two types of organic wines. The first uses grapes that have been farmed without chemical herbicides or pesticides. These wines can contain added sulfites in low amounts, up to 100 parts per million (ppm), but they cannot be labeled "organic." However, the label can mention organic grapes.

The second type is certified organic wine. Along with the grapes that must be farmed in a chemical-free manner that protects the environment and preserves the soil, all ingredients (such as yeast) must be certified organic and authorized by the USDA National Organic Program.

Certified organic wine must carry certification from a relevant third-party organization. USDA-certified organic wine means it was made without genetically modified organisms (GMOs), additives, artificial pesticides, preservatives, fungicides, or herbicides.

Also, wines that are labeled organic cannot have any added sulfites, which are different than naturally occurring sulfites (10-40 ppm).

A Word About Natural Wine and Biodynamic Wine

Natural wines are similar to organic wines, in that both utilize natural agricultural practices that forgo chemicals in the farming process. A large percentage of natural wine producers use either organic or biodynamic farming practices in their vine cultivation. The difference is how the wine is made.

There are currently no legal definitions of natural wine — the term is not regulated. However, some winemakers in France, Italy, and Spain have self-regulated classifications that are even stricter than those imposed by organic or biodynamic certification associations.

These quality assurances require proof that the grapes have been produced through organic farming, and exclude winemakers that use additives, added sulfites, unnatural substances, or manipulation techniques (except filtration).

Because no chemicals are used, some winemakers maintain that natural wine is the most authentic reflection of the land from which it comes.

Taking things a step further, biodynamic wine is made following the ideologies of Austrian scientist and philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). The idea is to create a self-sustaining system through crop rotation, stock management, and the growing of complementary plants to return nutrients to exhausted soil.

Biodynamic wine producers take many aspects into consideration when pruning and harvesting, including lunar phases and astrological factors. Biodynamic farmers not only eliminate man-made chemicals, but they also forgo (or significantly limit) practices such as tilling and irrigation.

Similar to the third-party certifications of organic wine, biodynamic wine also undergoes evaluation. The Demeter label is an official certification that confirms biodynamic methods have been followed to produce wine. Demeter was established in the U.S. in 1985 to ensure a marketplace label for biodynamic wine consumers and sellers.

Organic Winemaking vs. Conventional Winemaking

Organic wine: Picnic with Usual Wines and a peach

Unlike early vintners who had to follow nature's rhythms without the help of machinery or technology, today's winemakers employ a host of technological processes to speed up wine production and deliver a consistent product to the masses.

Many modern winemakers also rely on additives like sugar, yeast (often made from genetically modified yeast strains), enzymes, and powdered tannins. And that's just the beginning.

There are more than 60 ingredients allowed in conventional winemaking, as well as three authorized manipulations that can change the final product's chemistry. Wine manufacturers can manipulate the product with enzymes, tannins, and other additives to artificially improve texture and taste. They might also increase the alcohol content by speeding up fermentation with sugar, a process known as chaptalization, which is illegal in a number of U.S. states and regions around the world.

Unfortunately, many wine drinkers are oblivious to the processes involved in winemaking or the artificial substances used to create the wine they enjoy so much.

Wine Allergies and Conventional Wine

More often than not, the most readily available wines (including premium offerings) have been treated with synthetic additives to adjust the flavor, color, and stability of the final product. And because wine producers are not required to disclose all the ingredients and processes they use in conventional wine production, there's a good chance you don't know what's really lurking in that glass of wine you're about to drink.

On the other hand, organic or biodynamic wines are produced with the least amount of chemicals and scientific manipulations possible. As such, research suggests that alternative wines (organic, biodynamic, and natural) generate fewer side effects for drinkers than the conventional equivalents.

Wine allergies can include symptoms ranging from facial flushing, nausea, and headaches to rashes, sinus problems, tingling sensations, and breathing problems. When a product like wine is made with countless undisclosed ingredients, it's hard for someone to pinpoint the exact cause of the reaction.

Sulfites are often blamed for these allergies, but the FDA estimates that only 1% of the U.S. population is sulfite-sensitive, so this is very rare. Histamines and tannins (also found in coffee, tea, and chocolate) are more likely linked to the headache effect, but there are many other potential triggers at play when it comes to allergic reactions and side effects of conventional wine.

It's Time for Some Good, Clean Wine

Organic wine picnic

Humans have cultivated wine organically for thousands of years. And though many of the natural winemaking practices of the past have been traded in for faster, cheaper, and bigger

techniques over the last century, the organic wine industry is making a comeback. Winemakers are once again producing wines that harken to an ancient art that is better for the environment and your health.

Wines made with organically grown grapes were once hard to find, and the price tag was usually quite hefty. Thankfully, the growing interest in natural and sustainable wines means that more reasonably priced, high-quality wines are on the market. Among these are Usual Wines, which are made in small batches from sustainably-farmed grapes with no chemical additives and no sweeteners.

So, say goodbye to the myth that delicious wine must be expensive (or loaded with extra ingredients). It's time to raise a glass to some good, clean fun.