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Additives: the good, the bad and the ugly

It's the Wild Wild West out there on bottle labels. We give you the most important facts.

"NATURAL WINE" remains a hot topic, albeit an ill-defined one. Mainly it refers to wines made with few or no additives, but there are not many regulations. While soft drink labels must list all ingredients, wine may have traces of egg, dairy, gluten, fish products and other allergens – and none of this would make its way onto the bottle. While this should be remedied, it is important to note that not all additives are bad. In fact, some are integral in the creation of sound and traditional styles of wine.

At a bottle shop

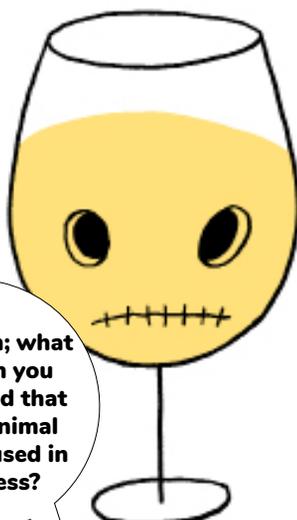


This bottle says that it contains sulphites... Is that a bad thing?

One of the few labelling requirements in most countries is the phrase "contains sulphites". Sulphites are a naturally occurring byproduct of the fermentation process, so even wines without added sulphites would be required to make this warning. Sulphur has had a bad rap, but it's a useful antioxidant and antimicrobial agent that is perfectly safe for human consumption. There are some people who are sensitive or allergic to sulphites. But if you're able to eat dried fruit and cured deli meats – both of which contain exponentially more sulphites than wine – then sulphur is probably not the problem.

Illustrations SIMON LETCH

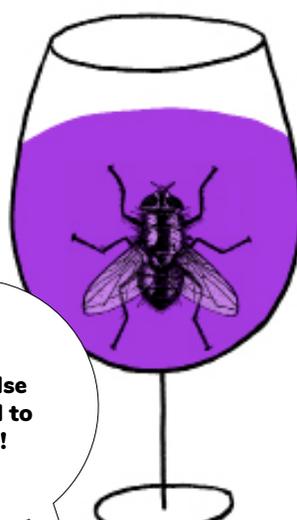
At a restaurant



I'm a vegan; what wines can you recommend that have no animal products used in its process?

Additives are a serious matter when it comes to dietary restrictions and allergies. Fining agents used to clarify wine are the usual culprits. Fining is the process whereby a substance is added to the wine that binds the stray proteins, allowing them to be removed more easily. Everything from egg whites to casein (a milk protein) to bentonite clay to isinglass (fish bladder – yes, really!) may be used. Some wineries are starting to label when their wine is fully vegan, but this is still relatively rare. A few big names on the vegan wine scene: Yalumba, Cullen, D'Arenberg. Most producers in the low/no additives camp are also vegan, including Jauma, Dormilona and Ruggabellus.

At a winery



What else is added to wine?!

There are many other things that may be added to a wine before, during or after fermentation. Some are traditional: winemakers in Burgundy have, for centuries, added sugar before fermentation to boost body and alcohol; sherry is almost always acidified; champagne usually requires cultured yeast for a secondary ferment. Modern technology and mass-market winemaking have introduced more interventions: alcohol can be removed or added at a whim; tannins and acid adjusted on the fly. While the additives are safe for human consumption (other than in cases of allergies and dietary restrictions), the big question is whether they enhance or detract from the true expression of a wine.