

Organic Wine Safe Sipping



Wine's just a muddling of fermented grapes, right? Well, that's the way it's supposed to be. In the McDonald-izing of everything, Apotas says big corporations have taken every drop of art out of wine-making. "[Large production companies] can change everything: sugar levels to get higher alcohol content, acidity, and certain types of yeast for certain flavors," she says. "[The wines] have become chemical equations."

Why buy organic?

Organic and small production farmers disregard that Model T production line mentality and instead revert to traditional (read: more natural) ways of making wine. For instance, large scale vineyards use machinery to harvest the grapes while smaller vineyards harvest by hand, causing less stress to the grapes. "It's really them, toiling with the land and letting the grapes do their thing," says Apotas. "The wines are almost old fashioned." Plus, no additives, like sulfur or tartaric acid, translates to fewer headaches after that second (or third) glass of red.

But it's not all about the label: Even if a wine isn't certified, it could still be organic. Since getting certified requires six years and hefty fees, many small growers are considered "practicing organic" – which means they use organic farming practices without the certification. But Apotas says that as long as you trust the importer, and therefore your wine merchant, "practicing organic" is just as good as certified – with the added bonus that you're supporting an even smaller farm.

What about biodynamic?

Biodynamics (BD) might sound a bit hokey at first: It's a philosophical approach to agriculture that acts according to the ecological, the energetic, and the spiritual in nature. But give it a chance, says Apotas: "It's looking at how everything is related – how the earth is rotating, the lunar effect on the wines." BD practitioners even stir the wines according to lunar cycles. "I hate to call it magic," says Apotas, "but there is some kind of magic to it. Farmers even claim their wines are 'alive' and treat them then as living beings."

Which are the best?

Apotas recommends wines from France's Loire Valley, where rebel growers are producing new vintages free from the strict regulations of the AOC (the French bureaucrats who regulate all your favorite exports, from cheese to wine). The bottles, therefore, won't be labeled with a vintage or a grape but what's inside is still scrumptious. Importer Louis Dresner delivers excellent wines, as do Clos Roche Blanche, a maverick husband and wife team.

Ultimately, is there a difference in taste between organic and non-organic wines? Yes, but it's hard to put a finger on, says Apotas. "For me, the wine is more pure, more just the terroir, the grapes, and the spirit of the winemaker," she says. "People are used to those manufactured wines. Tasting these wines that are so pure is... shocking."