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Natural Wine, Natural Food

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Introduction

Natural Wine, Natural Food is an invitation to taste more vividly and cook more intuitively. It celebrates the living character of wines raised with care—biodynamic, organic, and minimal-intervention—and the foods that spring from farms, coasts, and pastures managed with the same respect. When these two meet at the table, something electric happens: flavors lift, textures align, and a sense of place becomes tangible.

This book is grounded in a simple idea: pair what is alive with what is alive. Natural wines are not engineered to taste the same year after year; they speak in accents of soil and season. Farm-to-table cooking is equally expressive, shaped by weather, ripeness, and the hands that harvest. Rather than forcing either into rigid rules, we'll cultivate a flexible palate—one that can read acidity and texture in a wine the way a cook reads sweetness and bite in a tomato.

You will find practical tools for pairing that start with observation, not dogma. We'll look at how acidity slices through richness, how tannins knit to protein and char, how skin-contact whites echo the grip of olive oil and nuts, and how pét-nats refresh crunchy, saline foods from the garden or the sea. We'll talk about temperature, serving, and glassware choices that keep wines vibrant, and cooking methods—poaching, grilling, fermenting—that nudge dishes toward harmony with the bottle in your hand.

Seasonality and spontaneity are the heart of this approach. Instead of shopping with a fixed recipe, we'll begin with what's beautiful at the market and let that guide the meal. Recipe frameworks will show you how to swap ingredients confidently—peaches for apricots, sardines for mackerel, farro for barley—while maintaining balance on the plate and in the glass. A small pantry of ferments, pickles, and broths will add depth and brightness to match the energy of natural wines.

The story of natural wine and natural food is also the story of relationships. Throughout these pages, growers, vigneron, fishers, cheesemakers, and chefs share how they collaborate on menus and cultivate landscapes. Their interviews reveal the patient work behind transparency—soil kept alive by cover crops, vineyards buzzing with biodiversity, kitchens minimizing waste, and dining rooms where the producers' voices are present in every pour.

Use this book as a companion rather than a manual. Read a chapter to sharpen your tasting, then cook a simple meal and test the ideas at your own table. Keep notes on how a bright, saline white meets a plate of raw vegetables; notice how a carbonic red

softens smoky char; try an amber wine with artichokes or kimchi and see why it works. The goal is not correctness; it is resonance—food and wine that make each other feel more themselves.

Above all, trust your senses. Natural wine and farm-driven cooking reward curiosity, patience, and play. Some bottles will surprise you, some dishes will evolve from what you thought you were making into what the season suggests. When you welcome that unpredictability, you open space for joy—and for meals that tell the truest story of where you are and who gathered to share it.

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CHAPTER ONE: What Makes a Wine “Natural”?

The world of wine can sometimes feel like a labyrinth of regulations, traditions, and esoteric terminology. Even for seasoned drinkers, the term "natural wine" often raises more questions than it answers. Is it just a trend? Is it the same as organic? Does it mean the wine is always cloudy and a little funky? The short answer to the last question is: not necessarily, but we'll get to that. The heart of natural wine lies in a philosophy of minimal intervention, aiming to let the grapes and the land speak for themselves, with as little manipulation as possible from human hands.

Unlike "organic" or "biodynamic" wines, which often have specific certifications and legal definitions, "natural wine" operates more as a set of guiding principles embraced by a community of winemakers. While there isn't one universal, legally binding definition, most agree on a core set of characteristics. Think of it as a spectrum, with some producers adhering more strictly to every tenet than others, but all sharing a common goal: to produce wine that is as unadulterated as possible.

The journey of a natural wine begins, invariably, in the vineyard. This is where the commitment to minimal intervention truly takes root. Natural winemakers overwhelmingly prioritize organic or biodynamic farming practices. This means avoiding synthetic pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers, which are seen as detrimental to the health of the soil and the overall vineyard ecosystem. Instead, they foster biodiversity, relying on natural methods to maintain balance and vitality. You might see cover crops growing between the vine rows, encouraging beneficial insects and enriching the soil, or hear winemakers speak of a deep, almost spiritual connection to their land.

Hand-harvesting is another common practice in natural wine production. While machines can be efficient, they can also damage grapes and pick unripe or unhealthy bunches. Hand-picking ensures that only the best fruit makes it to the cellar, preserving the integrity of the harvest and reducing the need for sorting tables or further intervention down the line. It's a meticulous, labor-intensive process, but one that natural winemakers believe is essential for quality and authenticity.

Once the grapes arrive at the winery, the philosophy of minimal intervention continues. This is where natural wine truly diverges from much of conventional winemaking. The key here is spontaneous fermentation, which means using indigenous yeasts—the wild yeasts naturally present on the grape skins and in the winery environment—rather than introducing cultured or laboratory-selected yeasts. These native yeasts are believed to contribute to the wine's unique character and a truer expression of its terroir.

Beyond fermentation, natural winemakers generally avoid a long list of additives and technological manipulations that are common in conventional wine production. This can include things like adding sugar (chaptalization), acidifiers, powdered tannins, or even coloring agents. They also shy away from aggressive fining (using agents like egg whites or bentonite clay to clarify the wine) and filtration, which can strip the wine of its natural flavors, aromas, and even texture. This is why some natural wines might appear hazy or have a bit of sediment at the bottom of the bottle—it's a sign of their unadulterated nature.

Sulfur dioxide, or sulfites, are a particularly hot topic in the natural wine world. Sulfites are naturally occurring compounds in wine, but they are also commonly added by winemakers as a preservative and to prevent oxidation. While organic wines have strict limits on sulfite levels, and biodynamic wines even stricter ones, natural winemakers aim for minimal to no added sulfites. Some producers make "zero-zero" wines, meaning no additives and no added sulfites whatsoever. This low-sulfur approach is often cited by those who claim to experience fewer headaches or allergic reactions from natural wines, though scientific evidence on this link is still debated.

So, if there's no official certification for "natural wine" in most regions, how do you identify it? It often comes down to transparency and trust. Many natural winemakers are small-scale, independent producers who are passionate about their craft and are happy to discuss their farming and winemaking practices. Look for terms on labels like "vin nature," "zero-zero," "unfiltered," or "unfined." Ultimately, it's about connecting with producers who share a philosophy of respect for the land and a desire to create authentic, expressive wines with minimal interference.

It's important to understand that "natural wine" is not simply a synonym for "organic" or "biodynamic," although it often encompasses those practices. All natural wines are typically made from organically or biodynamically grown grapes, but not all organic or biodynamic wines are natural. Organic certification primarily focuses on vineyard practices—the absence of synthetic chemicals in grape growing. Biodynamic farming takes organic principles a step further, viewing the vineyard as a holistic, self-sustaining organism and incorporating practices based on lunar cycles and specific preparations. Natural wine, then, is a broader philosophy that extends these respectful farming practices into the cellar, emphasizing a hands-off approach throughout the entire winemaking process.

This distinction is crucial because an organic wine can still undergo numerous manipulations in the cellar—things like acidification, the addition of commercial yeasts, fining, and sterile filtration—that would generally be avoided by a natural winemaker. Similarly, a biodynamic wine might adhere to strict vineyard practices but still employ some modern winemaking techniques that a natural wine producer would eschew. Natural wine is about the whole journey, from the soil to the glass, with

minimal intervention at every step.

The appeal of natural wine lies in its promise of authenticity and a true reflection of terroir—the unique combination of soil, climate, and topography that gives a wine its sense of place. By stripping away the layers of manipulation, natural winemakers believe they allow the intrinsic flavors and aromas of the grapes to shine through, unmasked by additives or heavy-handed techniques. This often results in wines with vibrant acidity, sometimes lower alcohol levels, and a distinct character that can range from fresh and fruity to earthy, funky, or even slightly sour.

The appearance of natural wines can also be quite varied. Due to the lack of fining and filtration, some may exhibit a slight haze or cloudiness, especially certain white wines. Colors can also be more vibrant or unusual, with amber hues in skin-contact whites (often called orange wines) and deep, inky reds. These visual cues are part of the natural wine experience, reminding us that we are drinking something alive and unadulterated.

While the natural wine movement might seem like a recent phenomenon, it's actually a return to ancient winemaking methods that predated industrialization. Before the advent of chemical pesticides, cultivated yeasts, and sophisticated machinery, all wines were essentially "natural." Winemaking was a simpler, more intuitive process, guided by the rhythms of nature and the wisdom of generations. The modern natural wine movement gained traction in the 1960s and 70s, particularly in regions like Beaujolais, as a counter-movement to the increasing industrialization and homogenization of wine.

The philosophy isn't about rejecting technology outright, but about using it thoughtfully and judiciously. It's about letting go of the need for absolute control and trusting in the inherent wisdom of nature. This can be a challenging path for winemakers, as it requires a deep understanding of their vineyards, meticulous attention to detail, and a willingness to embrace the occasional unpredictability that comes with working with living organisms. But for those who commit to it, the rewards are wines that are not just beverages, but vibrant expressions of a time, a place, and a philosophy.

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