



Certification of Natural Wine: Policy Controversies and Future Prospects

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Natural wine is made from grapes produced under organic or biodynamic management without using additives in the cellar. Natural wine represents a movement of winegrowers that see agriculture as an ethical act against wine industrialization and as a way to make food systems more sustainable. The movement has gained fast-growing global fame and connects rural producers with urban consumers. The recent French recognition of a natural wine certification has spurred discontent among other European countries and wine business associations. A debate about the policy implications of natural wine certification is necessary in order to shed light on the matter. This article calls for transparency in the labeling of wine ingredients, in line with recent consumer demands, which would make the creation of new certifications redundant.

Keywords: natural wine, sustainable winemaking, organic wine, food social movements, agroecological transitions, natural wine movement, organic wine consumption, organic farming

INTRODUCTION

On March 25 2020, natural wine (NW) obtained legal recognition for the first time in France under the designation *vin méthode nature*, opening the way for similar initiatives worldwide. This recognition results from a long struggle led by the *Syndicat de Défense des Vins Naturels* (SDVN) before the French Government. The SDVN groups together a range of actors from the NW movement, from an anthropologist to a lawyer, from writers to winemakers. It was created *ad hoc* for this purpose, given that French *syndicats* are entitled to act as spokespeople to the government. Recognition in France has paved the way for winemakers from all over Europe to join the SDVN and certify their wines. Because putting “natural wine” on wine labels is not allowed, the *syndicat* agreed with the French anti-fraud agency (DGCCRF) to adopt the brand “natural method wine” i.e., a different winemaking method rather than a different wine category. This new label is a private brand and initiative, not an official French category. The INAO (*Institut National de l'Origine et de la Qualité*) will overview the performance of the certification for 3 years before it can gain official recognition.

Although estimates of NW production in France only account for 2% of the national total, opponents of NW certification were swift to respond. On 15th April 2020, both the European member Lizzi (15 April 2020), from the right-wing Italian party *Lega Nord*, and the *Comité Européen des Entreprises Vins* (CEEV), the association representing the interests of the EU wine industry, addressed letters to the European Commission concerning the new certification. Similar complaints ensued from national industry representatives in Spain, Italy and other countries. The CEEV asked for a clarification about the use of the term *vin méthode nature* and the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development from the European Commission

responded to their complaints. The CEEV argued that NW is not contemplated in EU legislation, that it would cause unfair competition by damaging the image of other wines and could confuse consumers by making them think that NW are healthier or better. However, *vin méthode nature* refers to a specific production method, which is covered by European legislation. The Commission will ask France for further clarification and decide on the new certification in the future (European Commission, 2020).

The Commission also pointed out that “practices authorized in the EU are such as to preserve the natural and essential characteristics of the wine and do not cause a substantial change in the composition of the product concerned” (European Commission, 2020). This refers to the dozens of legal winemaking practices, additives and ingredients contemplated in Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013, from sulfites or gum Arabic to egg albumin or casein, which allegedly do not change wine’s composition. This rather intra-sectoral view is currently being challenged by consumer demands to reduce information asymmetries through “cleaner” and more transparent-ingredient labeling of wine. Wine is currently exempted from compulsory labeling along with other alcoholic beverages (BEUC, 2015). Consumer organizations’ claims against this situation have led to new legislation on alcoholic labeling being discussed in the EU, but still to be agreed upon (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2017). It is worth noting that the term “natural,” understood as the absence of synthetic products, residues and additives, lacks a legal regulation for foodstuffs in the EU. The closest definition can be found in Regulation (EC) Number 1924/2006 on nutrition and health claims made on foods, which ambiguously states that a product can be labeled as natural when it fulfills the conditions for the use of a nutritional claim. In Spain, the term natural can be exclusively employed for additive-free yogurts, still water, non-synthetic aromas, and canned products.

Moreover, Europe and in particular France, has always led the definition and establishment of new wine and food certification systems. This is shown for instance in the quick response to the French certification in other countries such as the US. Here, the Clean Label Project, a national non-profit with the mission to bring truth and transparency to consumer product labeling, has established a Code of Practice for Natural Wine in 2021. The addition of sulphites to wine illustrates the complexity of the issue. While the French certification does not allow for the addition of sulphites, the American counterpart does. This is even more intriguing given that organic wine regulations in the US prohibit the addition of sulphites to wine. This will surely add a further layer of confusion for international consumers of natural wine.

POLICY ANTECEDENTS

Although the definition of NW is controversial, it can be understood as a wine made with grapes from organic or biodynamic vineyards with minimal intervention in the cellar (Legeron, 2018). This includes the banning of certain physical processes (inverse osmosis, filtration, stabilization, or

clarification) and enological additives of any kind. If the industrialization of wine emphasized the role of the technical winemaking process in the cellar, natural winemakers often see themselves as farmers aiming to reconnect to traditional and sustainable vineyard practices (Teil et al., 2007). For Nossiter (2019), the natural winemakers’ cultural insurrection against industrial agriculture has succeeded in creating a global network of farmers’ solidarity that embraces agriculture as an ethical act. In doing so, natural winemakers have created a model for rural reinvigoration in turn connected with global networks of “clean” consumption from New York to Barcelona, São Paulo and Tokyo. The growth of the NW sector is an opportunity to increase the global share of sustainably produced wines and cleaner food systems, more importantly because vines are the crop with the most intense application of synthetic pesticides in Europe (Alonso González et al., 2021).

Although wine has been made without additives for centuries, the modern NW movement started in France in the 1970s. Inspired by the works of Jules Chauvet, a group of winemakers and enologists in the Beaujolais region known as the Gang of the Four started producing and marketing NW (Feiring and Choksi, 2019). There was a reaction against the spread of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers in agriculture as well as enological products during winemaking. The global success of NW came in the 2000s, when the movement gained momentum and winemakers associations emerged, first in France and then in Italy, Spain and elsewhere in Europe and beyond (Alonso González and Parga-Dans, 2020). These associations were, and still are, conflict-ridden. Controversy often arises around the line-drawing exercise that involves defining the permissible levels of intervention to qualify as NW and the winemaking specifications. For instance, the creation of the French *Association des Vins Naturels* (AVN) was followed by the more radical *Sans Aucun Inérant Ni Sulfite* (SAINS). In Italy, ViniVeri split into two, giving rise to Vinnatur and more recently to VAN and Vite. In Spain also, the Catalan members of the association *Productores de Vino Natural* (PVN) were expelled from the association, leaving one the liveliest NW regions in Europe unrepresented.

Resulting from this conundrum is the lack of unified criteria and specifications for NW, with various certification bodies and associations claiming authority (Jones and Grandjean, 2018; Hu, 2020). Along with this we must consider the greenwashing techniques employed by free-riders in the wine market. This means that wine companies draw on the commercial success of NW to tap benefits by creating ersatz cuvées disguised as NW (Alonso González and Parga-Dans, 2018). This issue has given rise to various scandals in France, most importantly the disclosure of pesticide residues in wines publicized as natural by a consumer association (UFC-Que Choisir, 18/04/2019)¹. Among other responses, this scandal spurred the creation of the SDVN. As a result of this controversy, consumers tend to confuse NW with wines without sulfites (D’amico et al., 2016; Amato et al., 2017), as well as organic, and biodynamic (Jones and Grandjean, 2018). Nonetheless, it has been shown that consumers acquainted

¹UFC-QUE CHOISIR 18/04/2019. Vins naturels. Du raisin et rien d’autre? Newsletter UFC-Que Choisir, 580.

with NW are willing to pay more for it, in various contexts (Galati et al., 2019; Migliore et al., 2020; Vecchio et al., 2021).

POLICY SCENARIOS AND ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS

The normative implications involved in the NW controversy call for a unified, EU-wide response at both the Directorate of Agriculture in the European Commission and the national ministries of agriculture. This would help assuage the polemics among countries and the various agricultural and industrial associations involved, bringing about a solution for all interested parties that includes consumer interests in labeling transparency. In what follows, we will assess the three main potential upcoming policy scenarios.

The first scenario involves the abandonment of the *vin méthode nature* certification after the 3-year watch period established by the French INAO. Not only might the French government discontinue the certification, but also the European Commission could take action against it for infringing EU regulations. Furthermore, there is staunch opposition by the industrial wine lobbies to the adoption of NW legislation. The Spanish Wine Federation, for instance, argues that wine “necessarily requires human intervention for its transformation and cannot be found in nature as such,” therefore any wine “has the right to claim a connection” with nature (cited in EFE, 21 June 2021)² In addition, many natural winemakers and associations themselves oppose the certification. Paradoxically, their main argument is that they see in the official recognition of NW an opportunity for industrial winemakers to take over that market niche, in a similar fashion to what has happened with the organic certification since the 1970s (Haydu and Skotnicki, 2016). Some associations like the Spanish PVN explicitly reject certification because it would add more bureaucratic burden to producers. Others, like the Italian VAN, only want a certification that clearly “distinguishes the real winegrower from the various industrial and speculative enterprises” (cited in Bortone and 28 March, 2019). VAN’s claims add a further layer of complexity by going beyond the end-product to including ethical and social factors such as being “small” or “artisanal.” Still others see NW as a form of agricultural counterculture movement that would come to an end with certification and institutionalization. In the words of the renowned NW producer and writer Corrado Dottori, “Natural wine is not a ‘type of wine’. It is a counterculture movement. Natural wine is not ‘a method’. The real and powerful insurrection of natural winemakers concerns the profound re-discussion of the relationship between agriculture and industry, between city and countryside, between culture and nature, between techno-science and organic life. Reducing natural wine to a set of regulations is playing the game of the ‘enemy’” (Dottori, 2016). Given this state of affairs, its expansion

to other countries or the establishment of a EU-wide certification should not be taken for granted.

A second policy scenario involves the continuance of the certification without official recognition. This would mean establishment of a certification by a private company, such as *Demeter* for biodynamic agriculture. Otherwise, certification could remain in the hands of non-profit organizations such as SDVN, along the lines of the *Biodyvin* certificate issued by a French union for biodynamic wines. This would allow growers to have their work validated by a third party and their standards enforced. The scope of the certification would be higher than the self-regulations established by NW associations for their members (such as VinNatur or PVN), as anyone could join them. However, this would probably increase confusion among consumers, arising as yet another certification without official recognition. Moreover, this solution loads natural winemakers with the administrative and economic burden, instead of spreading it over the whole sector.

The third scenario involves the EU-wide establishment of compulsory ingredient labeling for wines. Rather than deriving from agricultural legislative branches of the European Commission, this possibility results from consumer claims for transparency in alcoholic beverages, labeling of ingredients and nutritional information (Parga-Dans and González, 2018). Many natural winemakers advocate this position. They consider that clear ingredient labeling would directly differentiate them from conventional wines in the market. Indeed, increasing minimum labeling standards tends to discourage producers from establishing their own certifications (Codron et al., 2005). Although this debate has been ongoing since the 1970s, it has gained momentum nowadays and in 2017 the EU requested the alcoholic beverage sectors to make their self-regulatory proposals. The wine sector is the most reluctant to adopt ingredient labeling laws, and insists on offering information online rather than on-label, which consumer groups reject (Laaninen, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Most natural winemakers advocating ingredient labeling rather than a certification have overlooked a subtle but essential stratagem of the wine sectors’ proposal, which is that so-called processing aids will not appear on labels. According to the *Organization Internationale de la Vigne et du Vin*, processing aids differ from additives and can be defined as “any substance or material, not including apparatus or utensils, and not consumed as a food ingredient itself, intentionally used in the processing of raw materials, food or its ingredients, to fulfill a certain technological purpose during treatment or processing and which may result in the non-intentional but unavoidable presence of residues or derivatives in the final product” (OIV, 2016). The list of permitted processing aids is long, including numerous substances like potassium hydrogen carbonate, ammonium sulfate, kaolin, and chitosan (OIV, 2017). This concealing of certain winemaking practices would again create information asymmetry and act against consumers interested in obtaining

²EFE. 21 June (2021). *Controversia con los vinos “naturales” por falta de una definicion oficial* [Online]. La Vanguardia. Available online at: <https://www.lavanguardia.com/comer/al-dia/20210621/7545140/vinos-naturales-abren-nueva-polemica-falta-definicion-oficial.html>.

wines with no additives and winemakers seeking to differentiate themselves on this basis.

The normative implications of these various policy scenarios stand out, given the small but growing segment of winemakers and consumers involved in NW production, distribution and consumption. In the bigger picture, promotion and growth of NW would be positive in terms of environmental sustainability and also contribute to a cleaner food chain in Europe and beyond. It is therefore fundamental to reconcile sustainability aims with consumer and producer interests alike. This will enable future agroecological transitions from conventional agriculture based on fossil fuels toward alternatives that store carbon, support biodiversity services and increase food security. To this end, a solution to the NW conundrum necessarily passes through the clear labeling of all ingredients and processes involved in winemaking, letting consumers make the choice about what is natural enough for them or not. Alternatively, if no such commitment is achieved, it would be therefore necessary to establish a certification of NW to differentiate these wines on the

market and put an end to the profusion of regulations passed by many countries and associations. It is the aim of this forum piece to spark debate on this topic and pave the way for an agreed-upon solution to the natural wine issue.

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PA and ED: definition, conceptualization, investigation, and writing—original draft. RF: investigation, writing—original draft, and review and editing. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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