

BOOK AND FILM REVIEWS

Isabelle Legeron: *Natural Wine: An Introduction to Organic and Biodynamic Wines Made Naturally*

CICO Books, New York, 2020, 224 pp., ISBN 978-1782498995, \$16.39.

Kevin Visconti

Columbia University

Email: kv2305@columbia.edu

Nature is full of color, vibrancy, and biodiversity; and so, too, should it be with natural wine. In her newly expanded and updated third edition of *Natural Wine: An Introduction to Organic and Biodynamic Wines Made Naturally* (2020), Isabelle Legeron argues that natural wines are made with conviction and promote a philosophy of love for the land that can, and should, affect the entire wine industry. To make her case, Legeron acknowledges that natural wine is not new; in fact, she states, it is what wine has always been. And across the three distinct parts of her impressive work, she asserts the benefits, qualities, and authenticity of making wine just as nature intended.

In the Introduction, Legeron writes that her book is “a tribute to those wines that are not only farmed well, but also fly in the face of modern winemaking practices, remaining natural at all odds” (p. 6). Brimming with photographs and scientific studies throughout her writing, Legeron interlaces her well-researched perspective with vivid illustrations and rational evidence, pointing out that while the agriculture behind creating organic and biodynamic wines may look untamed and untidy, natural wines require careful attention and precision from those producing them. This native, wild approach to viticulture is exactly how Legeron believes winemaking should be. After all, “We are not separate from our environment and even less so from what we eat and drink” (p. 11).

Following the Introduction, Part 1 of the book, “What is Natural Wine?,” is broken into five sections, each with their own sub-sections to explore the question: Is there such a thing as natural wine; and, if so, what is it? Legeron purports, “Natural wine is literally living wine from living soil” (p. 92); and from the vineyard to the cellar, she takes her reader on a nearly 100-page viticultural and vinicultural journey through the production of natural wine.

In the first segment of Part 1, “The Vineyard,” Legeron examines viticulture across three distinct areas: “Living Soils,” “Natural Farming,” and “Understanding Terroir.” In “Living Soils,” Legeron explains that because there is no worldwide legal certification, one of the challenges in discussing natural wine is in defining it to clarify the difference between natural and organic winemaking. Natural wine “is wine from vineyards that are farmed organically, at the very least, and which is produced without adding or removing anything during vinification, apart from a dash of sulfites at most at bottling” (p. 23). And the first step in producing such a wine is found at the ground

level—in the living soils of the vineyard, teeming with biodiversity and microorganisms that are essential for proper plant and vine nutrition that creates natural wines.

In “Natural Farming,” Legeron defines the distinction between organic, biodynamic, and permaculture approaches. Whereas organic viticulture aims to eschew man-made, synthetic chemicals like pesticides and fertilizers in the vineyard, biodynamic agriculture emphasizes a holistic, astronomical approach to farming that considers the moon’s gravity and ocean tides to inform when to prune vines and bottle wines. “Life on Earth,” Legeron notes, “is fundamentally affected by these large external factors – and biodynamics takes this into account” (p. 35). A third approach, known as permanent sustainable agriculture, or permaculture, incorporates self-sustaining and self-sufficient systems into farming. Permaculture, explains Legeron, encapsulates the idea that “we should farm in such a way that we enrich our environments both for ourselves and for all life that depends on that place” (p. 37). Whether named organic, biodynamic, or permaculture, “clean” farming, says Legeron, will have a positive environmental impact now and for future generations to come.

In “Understanding Terroir,” Legeron notes that terroir is derived from the French word for earth and refers to a sense of place. She continues to say that terroir highlights the unique combination of factors—for example, a distinct year and a specific location—that creates flavors that are irreproducible elsewhere. As an agricultural product, wine is “created by living organisms in a particular place at a particular moment. It is the product of life forms, the sum of which is terroir. And, without them, terroir cannot be expressed” (p. 43). Due to their more traditional production, natural wines, notes the author, are specially equipped to express the finer elements of terroir.

In the second segment of Part 1, “The Cellar,” Legeron examines viniculture across four subjects: “Living Wine,” “Processing and Additives,” “Fermentation,” and “Sulfites in Wine.” Citing numerous studies exploring the microbiology of wine, in “Living Wine,” Legeron relies upon science to support the notion that bacteria found in natural winemaking have a positive impact on the taste and longevity of natural wine. In both “Processing and Additives” and “Fermentation,” Legeron notes factors that set natural wine apart from its competitors. She states, “Wine is one of those rare drinks made from a primary material – grapes – that naturally contains everything the wine needs to exist ... anything else should be regarded as an extra” (p. 55). And in “Sulfites in Wine,” Legeron writes that sulfites, a common winemaking additive, are a defining characteristic and perhaps even a hallmark of natural wine in that little to none are added during natural wine production.

In the third, fourth, and fifth segments of Part 1 of the book, Legeron briefly investigates the reputation of natural wine across three topics: “Taste,” “Misconceptions,” and “Health.” Legeron believes the cultivation behind natural winemaking, described in detail throughout the previous pages of her book, results in a lighter, more ethereal final product. “The proximity to and link with the actual, physical earth means that natural wines have a far greater array of textures than conventional wines” (p. 75). And while natural wine is not immune to potential flaws, Legeron is clear to debunk misconceptions about so-called faults in the stability of natural wine. While few studies have been conducted that investigate the effects of wine on health, Legeron states: “Simply put, natural wine contains far less artificial ‘stuff.’ For this reason, it’s hardly surprising that it might be better for you” (p. 84).

As the reader advances through the book, we learn from Legeron that natural wine is a continuum and may be defined as wine that is “farmed at least organically and made without any additives whatsoever in the cellar” (p. 95). In Part 2, “Who, Where, When?,” Legeron moves on to discuss those who produce natural wine and investigates the heritage and cultural aspects of natural winemakers. Legeron asserts that, above all, what unites natural winemakers is a love of the land and a legacy of traditional practices. This portion of her book reads more like a narrative of the author’s favorite subject, natural winemaking, and the storytelling approach reads like a well-researched historical novel. Legeron has seemingly traversed the globe to interview myriad winemakers and visit countless vineyards, and the robust and unparalleled insight into the production of natural wine makes it easy to keep reading.

In the “Who” section, Legeron recounts many personal stories and family histories from artisans to outsiders (even a Druid!) who were fundamental in the origins of the natural wine movement. “Natural growers,” Legeron claims, “don’t make wine to a formula or for a market. Instead, what they share is the pursuit of excellence” (p. 105). In the “Where and When” section, Legeron discusses grower associations and wine fairs, including her own festival, RAW WINE, which is the only artisan wine fair in the world that “requires full disclosure from growers regarding any additives or interventions used during winemaking” (p. 122). She wraps up this part of her book with suggestions for trying and buying natural wine, which include locations and merchants from her extended travels.

Finally, in Part 3, “The Natural Wine Cellar,” Legeron devotes over 70 pages to the creation of a rich index of global natural wine producers to help the reader discover natural wines. This mini-guide, replete with tasting notes on aroma, texture, and flavor across light-, medium-, and full-bodied wines, offers descriptions of the types of wine available in six different categories: sparkling, white, orange, rosé, red, and off-dry/sweet. Referred to by Legeron as a “do-it-yourself starter-kit” (p. 132), this wine selection adheres to her methodology for making natural wine: farms must use natural approaches and there must be no additives used during winemaking, with the possible exemption of minimal sulfites (which she is clear to detail in her tasting notes). While not exhaustive, this section of the book provides a rich background and vivid explanations of natural wine across varieties from across the globe and concludes with an international list of recommended wine growers.

In this well-executed, thoroughly researched, and beautifully photographed book, Legeron has compiled a necessary companion for any person with an interest in agriculture and wine production. And while this informed work is certainly intriguing upon first read, with its litany of sources, including global case studies and numerous quotes from experts, it also serves the interested reader as a reference to return to again and again. Backed with scientific evidence, *Natural Wine: An Introduction to Organic and Biodynamic Wines Made Naturally* makes the case that natural wines can carry profound appeal to people across the globe. “For me,” asserts Legeron, “only natural wine can be truly great” (p. 6).