

BOOK REVIEW

Aaron Ayscough: *The World of Natural Wine: What It Is, Who Makes It, and Why It Matters.*

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“Natural wine has nothing to hide,” touts the back cover of Aaron Ayscough’s 2022 book, *The World of Natural Wine: What It Is, Who Makes It, and Why It Matters*. What an enticing idea and unexpected premise to invite those perusing store shelves to buy a copy! And who better to learn more about the world of natural wine than Ayscough, an established wine writer and sommelier in both the United States and his native France. With a straightforward approach and frank style of writing, Ayscough has produced, according to fellow wine author, Alice Feiring, “an essential addition to natural wine literature,” (back cover).

In the preface, the reader is told that this book is “intended as a field guide ... It’s an attempt to describe, in practical terms, what the natural wine community is, how it came to be, and how to navigate it” (p. 8). Over 440 pages and 20 chapters of sophisticated yet inviting writing and striking photography, Ayscough offers a snapshot of the history of natural wine and captures where this niche industry is headed.

The book is arranged in three sections: *Part I: What’s Natural* (chapters 1–3); *Part II: A Pantheon of Natural Wine* (chapters 4–17); and, *Part III: Enjoying Natural Wine* (chapters 18–20). Ayscough explains that “natural wine is at once a beverage and a culture ... because wine growing and winemaking are practices that require a high degree of sensitivity to local terrain and climate, as well as to local social and economic conditions” (p. 13). Since wine drinkers are becoming wiser and seeking enhanced transparency about the winemaking process, the demand for natural wine is organically growing (pun intended). “Wine has an astonishing capacity to reflect where it came from, the grapes it was made from, the land they were grown on, how that land was farmed, [and] the weather that year. Natural wine is wine that tells the truth about these origins” (p. 16). This, argues Ayscough, is the conviction of natural vignerons: “the goodness of a wine is inseparable from the naturalness of how it was made” (p. 18).

Throughout chapter 1, *A Way of Thinking About Wine*, Ayscough writes from an educational standpoint by providing rich background to inform his reader of the

history that led to the renewed focus on natural winemaking. He discusses case studies (e.g., Lyon, California), entomology of industry terms (e.g., vigneron, paysan), and comparisons with other wine categories (e.g., organic, biodynamic). He also shares his Five Basic Principles of Natural Wine: 1. Organic Farming, 2. Native Yeasts, 3. Low or Zero Sulfite Additions, 4. No Other Additives or Transformative Processes, and 5. No Fining or Filtration (p. 22).

Natural wine began in France in the 1980s when the movement was spearheaded by “a patchwork of disparate cultures and individual stories” (p. 24). Ayscough provides timelines and biographies of seminal players in the movement (e.g., Lapierre, Chauvet, Néauport), beginning with the first wave of natural wine in the 1980s, through the second wave in the 1990s, and, finally, the third wave of natural wine in the early 2000s. Ayscough highlights critical moments, vignerons, and restaurants that played key roles in establishing the future of natural wine. He uses this history as a launchpad to where we find ourselves today: natural wine in the twenty-first century.

In chapter 2, *How Grapes Are Grown*, Ayscough explores the growing of grapes in modern winemaking versus natural viticulture. Here, he contrasts the “conventional vineyard” (e.g., monoculture, insecticides, irrigation) with the “natural vineyard” (e.g., polyculture, natural pest management, dry farming) (pp. 48–49). This comparison is perhaps most striking when viewing the photograph of a conventional vineyard in Napa, California, which looks precise and measured with a natural vineyard in Piedmont, Italy, which seems unruly and overgrown. Ayscough investigates organic and biodynamic farming, and how those approaches to winemaking express themselves differently from conventional winemaking in the glass largely due to the natural wine philosophy of wine growing, which includes specifics about pruning, grass management, plowing, pasturage, and overall soil nutrition.

In chapter 3, *How Natural Wine Is Made*, Ayscough briefly discusses enology and uncovers the process of how grapes become wine. He affirms that one of the issues with modern winemaking is adding sulfites and other common conventional wine additives like clarifying agents, fermentation aids, and preservatives. Ayscough states that “natural winemaking isn’t simply about not *adding* anything to wine; it’s also about not intervening in high-tech ways to fundamentally transform a wine” (p. 86), for example through thermovinification, centrifuging, and reverse osmosis. Ayscough commits the remainder of the chapter to the steps of how a natural wine is made, and lists some of the top natural wines in the field, as well as the most prominent natural wine certification organizations active today.

Ayscough states, “the world of natural wine is a community, made up of individuals united by common beliefs about wine growing and winemaking” (p. 123). In chapters 4–17, which are the bulk of the book, Ayscough examines the most influential natural winemakers throughout France and parts of Europe. Selected regions include: The Beaujolais, The Loire, Burgundy, Auvergne, The Languedoc, Provence, Spain, Italy, and Austria. Each chapter opens with an overview of the region, benchmark wines, notable vignerons, and basic profile information for highlighted estates like “founding date, its size, its agricultural certification, which grapes it works with, and which appellations it produces” (p. 123). Each segment also illustrates what Ayscough calls a “Legends in the

Making” section where he spotlights up and coming vigneron in the field of natural winemaking.

Finally, in chapters 18–20, Ayscough describes how best to taste, serve, and find natural wine, which the author alleges “can be easy – even instinctive” (p. 365). Ayscough writes:

gaining a knowledge of natural wine involves learning how such wines behave in a glass: what they look like, how they smell, how they taste, and how these attributes evolve over time. But it also involves *unlearning* many expectations specific to conventional wines. ... Tasting natural wine is a different experience, ... it involves learning to appreciate wine while it is still vibrant and alive (p. 369).

Ayscough admits that there can be flaws in natural wine such as cloudiness, acetates, and oxidation; however, the author maintains that natural wines are the only true source for producing genuine wine the way it was meant to be enjoyed before conventional winemaking became dominant.

Ayscough argues throughout his book that “natural wine is more than a beverage: it’s a counterculture,” (p. 8). Due to a passionate, international community of supporters, he believes that natural wine is on the cusp of global recognition and augmented popularity. “Natural wine is more than wine. It is a lens through which we can examine other aspects of the way we live today. Natural wine asks us to look at the cultural and social costs of technological progress,” (p. 416). Ayscough’s point is also a plea: natural wine results in better health for the planet, the people, and the long-term economic benefit of the industry.