

Do organic wines age well?



Jean Natoli

This question in fact depends on several others: is an organic wine produced in an identical way to a non-organic wine? If so, there is no reason that there should be a difference in its ability to age. Does lack of sulfites, or less sulfites, have an impact on the lifespan of a bottle of wine? If the wine is microbiologically stable, aging should not be affected. As the subject requires a detailed analysis rather than a simple answer, we refer to an expert in the matter, Jean Natoli.

Before we look at whether or not organic wines age well, it is important to define what we mean by "ageing" in reference to wine. Some wine labels carry the message "aged in oak", which I always find jarring, because in my mind, wine is not aged in barrels, but matured. Although the terms are often used synonymously, the stage of elaboration that takes place after fermentation and before bottling focuses on bringing out the wine's qualities to their best advantage. In French, the term is *élevage*, which literally means "raising" or "bringing up". Strictly speaking, "to age" is to deteriorate, whereas "to mature" is to be in a process of development. The idea behind *élevage* is to improve the wine, not to diminish it. Given this definition, we can discuss the various ways that winemakers mature their wines: in stainless steel tanks, in new or old oak barrels, in bottles, with reducing agents, using micro-oxidation, and so on. So we can see that what "maturing" a wine actually means depends on the winemaker and the wine they wish to make. In my opinion, this distinction seems important.

With that said, let's get back to the initial question, which is more specifically about the development of organic wine once it is bottled and purchased by the consumer. For those who have read my previous articles, you will know that making organic wine imposes certain constraints on the winemaker that can have a critical impact on the outcome. If these requirements are met when the wine is bottled - that is, it has analytical stability, a balanced taste, the desired level of concentration and volatility, a healthy microbial state, and so on - there is no reason that a quality organic wine should age any differently than a fine conventional wine.

By definition, once bottled, a well-produced wine should be protected from oxygen, its biggest enemy (apart from certain



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specific wines such as Xérès sherry, or *vin jaune* and *vin de voile*, which are wines matured under a film of yeast). On the other hand, a wine of lesser quality that is insufficiently microbiologically stable or is unprotected during the bottling process could start to deteriorate relatively quickly. Of course, this decline in quality is not exclusive to organic wines.

So the true response to the question of whether an organic wine ages well essentially depends on the winemaker and the wine.

Only objectively tasting a well-chosen aged wine will give the end consumer the answer. Another worthwhile question we could pose might be, "Why wait, sometimes a very long time, before drinking a wine?" I confess that this is often my feeling; apart from the excitement we might experience drinking a vintage wine, too many wines are drunk too late, when they are no longer at their best. And that's often a pity!

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