



# Through the grapevine

Calling natural winemaking a trend is missing the point. A handful of winemakers are simply rediscovering the way things once were. Leading the charge is **Craig Hawkins** at Lammershoek Winery in the Swartland. **Keith Bain** sipped and swirled *au naturel*.

**YOU KNOW THE SCENE.** Chatty hipsters milling around the tasting room, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, elated that – in exchange for making a hefty purchase – they get a few free tastes and a quick, by-the-numbers lesson in wine appreciation: 'Mulberries this. Rose petals that. Perhaps a hint of peppercorn.' Then it's sniff, sip, swirl and spit or swallow. Followed by that knowing exchange of glances and nodding of heads – the winemaker is a genius, surely. 'It's heavenly!' you tell your companions, knowing you'd better *not* disagree with the double gold this vintage received in some competition you've never heard of.

But none of these wine-tasting sessions reveal one big closeted truth about the overwhelming majority of commercial wines: that they're chemically engineered. In fact, without passing too much judgement, when they sell you a wine, they don't tell you the honest story of how it manages to exist at all. Because conventional winemaking now usually comes down ➔



to the bottom line: high volume at low cost. There's an economic imperative, and it's maximised by manipulating and controlling every step of the winemaking process. Anyone still clinging to the illusion that the wine they drink is a natural product may be baffled to learn that they've been living – and drinking – under a cloud.

But, as with all clouds, there's a silver lining.

## The trailblazer

To meet maverick winemaker Craig Hawkins, I've driven out to the Swartland, about an hour from Cape Town, somewhere between Malmesbury and Paarl. The final kilometres are bumpy dirt track through honest farmland sprawled against a postcard backdrop of undulating hills.

The spell of idyllic countryside is broken by one hell of a racket in the Lammershoek cellar – grinding engines, pumping water for barrel cleaning. When Hawkins shuts down the pump, there's still a lot of noise, only now it's hardcore rock thundering between the fermentation tanks. No mellifluous classical symphonies here – this is a working man's cellar.

'Good music's important,' says Craig.

'Does it help the wines?' I ask, pondering if the sound influences fermentation.

'It helps me,' he grins.

And then he takes me through the simple-sounding alchemy that results in a finished bottle of wine. Basically, the grapes are hand-harvested, brought into the cellar and hand-sorted. They are then crushed (or macerated) – often under foot – and the resulting must (or young wine, along with skins, seeds and stalks) is moved into the fermentation tanks. And, aside from keeping careful watch, that's more or less that. What startles me is that there's no mention of yeast and there's no filtering or fining – processes typically used to remove residue. In a robust farm environment, explains Craig, there's sufficient naturally occurring yeast, while all those filtration and purification processes yank the soul from the wine.



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**SEDIMENTARY, MY DEAR WATSON**  
Flairing with wine bottles is generally  
frowned upon in bartending circles.





**STOMP THE YARD**  
Make sure your feet are clean and healthy. Nobody wants to drink athlete's Shiraz.

Huh? I'd always assumed filtration simply took off all the excess plant mulch floating in the grape juice.

'Well, yes. Filtering removes the cloudiness after the heaviest bits have settled,' explains Craig, 'but it also extracts a lot of life and character.' By way of example, he describes how discerning drinkers have come to accept craft beer. It's often cloudy and heavier than large-scale industrial beer – because it's unfiltered.

## Winemaking 1-0-what?

What's happening at Lammershoek runs contrary to virtually everything you'd learn about winemaking at university. And the resulting flavours, smells and colours tend to be discernibly different. Not for everyone, perhaps, but different. Here, the homogenising effects of chemical farming and using a long list of additives to control the fermentation process don't exist. 'A lot of flavour you're tasting in wine is not actually from grapes,' Craig warns. 'It's the additives you're tasting, the wood, tannins, and sulphur. Sulphur gives a specific taste. And it takes a while to wear yourself off that.'

This so-called 'natural winemaking' – already a full-blown movement overseas – has only recently started raising eyebrows and arousing interest locally.

'We're 10 years behind Europe,' says Craig, who has just returned from two natural wine fairs in the UK, where for the past three years he's been the only South African winemaker.

'The only way to learn about natural winemaking is to travel,' he says. Lammershoek is one of only a handful of farms in the country producing natural wine, and most of what's produced is exported.

## Da vine intervention

While natural winemaking could be seen as a philosophical approach rather than a production method, what sets Craig's wines apart is primarily what he doesn't do. 'It's really about minimal intervention, which means having faith in the grapes. It's tough, because you have to farm properly. That's what most people forget. They think you can leave it all up to the process in the cellar, but it starts in the vineyard.'

In order to produce a good wine without chemical or technological intervention, you need good grapes that can translate into an honest expression of the region and the cultivar. To test this theory, Craig says he once tried making natural wine using grapes produced for volume from a commercial vineyard. 'But grapes grown that way need all the additives to hold the structure of the wine together,' he explains. 'The wine needs "crutches" to keep it alive. Using natural fermentation, bacteria just took over and the wine fell apart after two months.'

Hawkins claims the best vineyards are bustling with life. Sure, you don't want pest-riddled vines, but you also don't want to change the character of the soil, or bung up the plants with chemicals. Which is what most commercial farms do. The soil is chemically treated and vines are sprayed with hectic pesticides that are long lasting and potentially harmful.

For purists like Hawkins, 'proper farming' means organic – and, ultimately, biodynamic. It's why he has cows producing manure and uses nitrogen-fixing plants rather than chemical fertilisers. Virtually everything is done by hand. And there's minimal spraying for pest control.

'By farming properly, I'm able to pick earlier, get my alcohols in balance, and ensure my wines are light, fresh, and have energy,' says Craig. As for sulphur, 'unfortunately, sometimes you do need it,' he sighs. 'But the ultimate goal is to work entirely sulphur-free. Nothing that doesn't come from the vineyards.'

## Hang-ups and hangovers

Of course, as with any kind of revolution, there's a backlash, and some strong arguments against natural wine exist. It comes from 'experts', wine-lovers, and winemakers themselves, many of whom suspect 'natural' is an excuse.





**STRIKE A POSE**  
'Guys, have you taken the photo yet? Seriously, my arm is starting to ache.'

'Yes, there are winemakers bottling bad wine,' says Craig. 'It's cloudy, okay. But it tastes like dead mouse. And they turn around and say, "No, it's because it's natural."' In the end, even the most ardent natural winemakers need to make a living, and there's controversy over just where to draw the line: How natural is *natural*? 'I'm not dogmatic or a fundamentalist, but winemakers have to admit there's a line between natural and faulty. You need to work hard to stay on the natural side of that line.'

To avoid falling foul of potential disaster, even Craig is compelled to add some sulphites to his wines during bottling. 'I'd hate to ship 10 000 bottles to Europe only to have them all destroyed by oxygen.' Still, the quantity of sulphites – added to conventional wines at multiple stages of the process – is radically reduced. 'You taste that purity in the wines,' claims Craig. And, as numerous converts will attest, the absence of chemicals radically impacts the way you feel the next morning. 'This stuff doesn't give me a hangover,' he says, 'and we drink bottles of the stuff every night.'

After an exhaustive tour of the farm, Craig finally shows me what he's been talking about. I taste straight from the barrels and instantly understand why there's rock music blasting through the cellar. Wines with this much verve and exuberance deserve something ballsy they can dance to.



**DON'T SLIP**  
At least drowning in a tub of wine means dying a happy death.

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## Playing by the rules: Natural winemaking for dummies

In Europe 'natural wine' is quite a big deal, and a hotly debated, controversial, steadily growing movement. France even has an *Association des Vins Naturels*. Of course they do. 'Fine natural wines are vibrant and alive, and show diverse personalities full of emotion,' says Isabelle Legeron, co-founder of London's Natural Wine Fair. Genuine natural winemaking means sticking to some pretty stringent rules, with the general understanding that you're trying to make low-intervention wine with natural yeast and minimal chemicals. If you're wondering whether a wine's natural or not, here's a basic rundown of what should be expected, so you know what questions to ask the winemaker:

- Grapes should be grown organically or biodynamically, and handpicked.
- Vineyards should be dry farmed (no irrigation) and low yielding.
- No sugars, yeasts or bacteria should be added.
- No artificial adjustments should be made for acidity.
- No additives to alter colour, texture or mineral content – not even water – should be added.
- Nothing should be added to change the flavour.
- There should be little or no fining or filtration (vegetarians and vegans may be interested to know that fish and egg derivatives are sometimes used in fining).
- These processes are a no-no: micro-oxygenation, reverse osmosis (to remove water), cone spinning, and cryo-extraction.
- If sulphites are added, this should be minimal, usually during bottling. ■