

## Chapter 19

# A Brief History of the Vin Méthode Nature Syndicat: Paradoxes and Challenges of an Institutionalization Process



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### Introduction

Over the last decade, the small world of so-called natural wines (NW) has emerged from obscurity, at least in terms of media visibility. The number of winemakers engaging in viticulture free from synthetic chemical inputs, both in vineyards and in the cellar, has grown substantially, along with the rise of import agents, wine shops, and specialized restaurants in France and internationally. Raisin, the first app dedicated to natural wine, launched in 2016, has been downloaded by 450,000 people and averages 60,000 visits per month in 2024, according to its founder Jean-Hugues Bretin (personal communication). Despite their media notoriety and commercial success, natural wines remain a small niche within the broader wine sector: of France's 59,000 vineyards in 2023, only about 2000 are fully dedicated to natural wine. This has often provoked disdain or mockery from critics, which later turned into more serious accusations: that these wines are not “real” wines, as they sometimes exhibit “faults” like reduction or fizz upon opening. There is also likely some envy surrounding the environmental respect and sustainable practices associated with natural wines, narratives that are increasingly valued both in terms of communication and commercial success amid the ongoing ecological crisis.

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While profiles of conventional, so-called traditional winemakers have continued to appear in specialized magazines, stories showcasing the novelty—or revival—of natural wines have filled the pages of national media outlets such as *Le Monde* and *Libération* in recent years. After decades of marginalization, these wines have finally gained mainstream recognition. By the summer of 2024, the number of wine bars in Paris featuring at least 30% natural wines had grown to 650, as listed in the Raisin app. This visibility has intensified criticisms, as seen in *La Revue des Vins de France*, which published an article in 2017 titled “The Divide Between the ‘Natural’ and the ‘Anti-Natural’” that recounted the deep debates these wines provoked, even within the editorial team of this prestigious French wine publication. These tensions were further exacerbated by the fact that the definition of “natural wine” has never been clear to the general public, especially since, until recently, there was no official state-recognized label. This allowed some producers to claim the natural wine title without necessarily adhering to the same criteria as others.

## Defending Natural Wines

Amid growing tensions over the denunciation of conventional practices—such as the use of pesticides and other synthetic chemical treatments in vineyards, combined with a range of oenological products and techniques in the cellar—the attacks on the natural wine community intensified. These included cellar inspections, lawsuits (Morain, 2019), defamation, and accusations of fraud. In response, a union to defend natural wines was formed during the “Sous les pavés la vigne” Parisian wine fair in May 2019, aimed at clarifying the position of natural wines in the eyes of institutions, consumers, and winemakers themselves. Natural winemakers decided to assert their right to exist legally and legitimately, rather than remaining in a more intimate, underground status. Although there were existing natural wine labels, none had yet been legally recognized by state-controlled certification bodies.

The Association of Natural Wines (AVN), founded in 2005 and comprising many winemakers, still exists but has lost a significant number of members over the years due to internal debates about the definition of natural wine. To be a member of AVN, winemakers must (1) produce wines made from grapes grown under organic or biodynamic agriculture and (2) vinify and bottle wines without any inputs or additives.<sup>1</sup> Another organization, Sans Aucun Intrans Ni Sulfite Ajouté (SAINS), emerged from a split within AVN in 2010. It has its own guidelines, which specify that winemakers must manually harvest 100% of their grapes, which must be free from all synthetic chemical and molecular products. The transformation from grape juice to wine must occur naturally, through the action of indigenous yeasts and bacteria only. Thus, members of SAINS are committed to not using any products or technologies from laboratories at any stage of fermentation or bottling to accelerate

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<sup>1</sup> AVN: [https://www.vinsnaturels.fr/002\\_natural\\_wine/labels\\_associations\\_vin\\_nature.php](https://www.vinsnaturels.fr/002_natural_wine/labels_associations_vin_nature.php)

the stabilization or modification of the juices. Consequently, sulfites and other oenological inputs must be absent in 100% of their winemaking activity.

These two associations form the foundation of the contemporary history of natural wine and provide the groundwork for the Syndicat, two of whose founding members, Gilles Azzoni and Jacques Carroget, were part of these associations. The internal debates among winemakers within these groups gave shape to the Syndicat. However, given the lack of official recognition for the aforementioned labels (which were built around peer-to-peer agreements and affinity groups focused on best practices) some winemakers grew weary of constantly having to justify the legitimacy of their practices while denouncing greenwashing and pseudo-environmental protection labels. In the face of increasing attacks, the concept of defence took precedence over the more informal support and camaraderie that had driven conversions and commitments in the early days of the movement (which we date to the early 1980s, with significant growth in the 2000s; Pineau, 2019).

Some winemakers sought to re-engage in dialogue with institutions, even at the risk of being accused of betrayal by their more libertarian peers, or of being hampered by the slow pace and cautiousness of decision-making bodies, or being co-opted by marketing strategists.

We propose here to tell, in an immersive format close to the field and its actors, the brief history of the Syndicat. To do so, we draw on the recent debate held in May 2024 at the Parisian wine fair “Sous les pavés la vigne,” where two of the Syndicat’s founding members, Jacques Carroget (president) and Gilles Azzoni (secretary), as well as vice president Vincent Wallard, were present. The event’s organizer, Antonin Iommi-Amunategui, is also a member of the Syndicat’s administrative committee and chairs its communication commission. The clarity of the debate offers an ideal entry point to provide a real-time, reflexive analysis of a situation in progress. Before proceeding, let us reveal who “we” are and explain our methodological approach.

## Respecting the Dialogue that Nourishes Us

Initially enthusiasts of these wines, we, the authors of this paper turned them into a research topic and have been conducting investigations in the field for about 15 years. Christelle Pineau completed a PhD in anthropology on natural wines (Pineau, 2017, 2019), then conducted collaborative research actions such as founding a small vineyard in Anjou that she converted to organic farming, vinifying its *cuvées* using natural methods. She participated in the debates that led to the creation of the Syndicat, attended the event from the inside, and remains on its administrative committee. This practice of engaged ethnography allows for real-time sensing and assessment of the mediation processes, resistances, and compromises during pivotal periods. Denis Chartier, an environmental geographer and artist, has been, over the last two decades, analysing across various fieldsites in France and Brazilian Amazonia the many ways that more-than-human collectives respond to the

ecological crisis. His research methodologies combine political ecology, performative arts, and somatic-sound practices. Over the past decade, he has been engaged in research-creation with winemakers to uncover the political, ecological, and sensory dimensions of their practices (Chartier, 2021; Blanc et al., 2022). These research methods have led him to explore the effects of sound on fermentation processes through collaborations between art and science with biologists and winemakers. We regularly share our fieldwork questions and discoveries, and felt called to reflect on the creation of this Syndicat.

## The Genesis of a Syndicat... Officialization of a Label

Let us start at the beginning. As Gilles Azzoni explains, the Syndicat was founded in 2019 based on the foundations laid by two affinity-based associations (AVN and SAINS) created in the 2000s:

Jacques [Carroget] and I were part of an association called AVN, which was a sort of ancestor of our Syndicat. Within this association, we had some disagreements. Jacques and I were in favour of an open approach, meaning that if we were to create a label, it had to be open. But we had some conflicts with others in AVN who preferred a more closed system, a kind of exclusive, member-only arrangement. Jacques left, and they more or less pushed me out. At the same time, you need to understand that the fraud authorities, especially the Ministry of Agriculture, needed a definition of natural wine. They had already requested one from AVN. We worked on it, with Jacques leading the effort, and we established many contacts with various institutions. The Syndicat was born from this dual drive, both from us and from the institutions. Jacques and I seized the opportunity to create this Syndicat and made sure it was something open.

The creation of the Syndicat aimed to gain institutional recognition and identification for natural wines. More than that, the goal was to allow winegrowers who were not necessarily fully identified as part of the “natural [wine] spirit”—for example, those practicing organic farming but not yet vinifying without inputs or sulfites—to join the natural wine family through one or two of their *cuvées*. The term “natural spirit” is deliberately vague. We mention it because winemakers themselves frequently use it to express their deep commitment to these demanding and risky practices. This “natural spirit” also conveys a sense of emancipation from the dominant viticultural model that shaped their path into natural winemaking.

We created the Syndicat with six people and the six of us wrote the definition of natural wine. We had experience of long debates with multiple participants, so we decided to limit the number of people involved to arrive at a clear definition. We then proposed this definition, discussed it with the administration, and shared it with our colleagues. What followed was a year of discussions. But that’s normal because we had to determine if, for instance, wines with naturally occurring sulfur (such as wines vinified without added sulfur but containing 25 mg of residual sulfur) could still be labelled as ‘natural’—and this was part of the debate (Carroget).

At what point can a wine be called natural? Is it a matter of mindset, intent, or sulfur levels? Is simply adhering to a methodological charter enough, or is natural wine

something more? The discussions gave participants headaches after every session. The process of labelling was organized concurrently with the creation of the charter. Among the significant moments that led to internal debates and disagreements were two key points, which illustrate the Syndicat's intent to encourage and educate: First, the establishment of a primary label, emphasizing "no added sulfites," and a second label designed as a stepping stone toward "pure juice" vinification, allowing a tolerance for sulfite addition under 30 mg/L. The ideal for everyone remained "grape as the only ingredient," meaning wine made exclusively from grapes without any inputs. Finally, it was acknowledged by all that the term "natural" carries semantic difficulties due to the word's inherent ambiguity.

Another central aspect of the Syndicat's guidelines was the decision to certify wines by cuvée rather than by the entire estate. This approach was intended to welcome winemakers who might want to experiment with natural vinification but were hesitant to commit their entire production. This inclusiveness allows those who don't produce only natural wines on their estate (perhaps making organic wines but not vinifying "naturally") to have one or two cuvées validated without jeopardizing their entire operation. This policy offers flexibility for winemakers who face economic risks in an unpredictable environment.

Many winemakers found themselves in difficult situations and had to make decisions [to temporarily move away from natural vinification] to avoid going bankrupt. So, the Syndicat allows us to certify specific cuvées. If a winemaker believes that a particular cuvée is perfect for natural wine, they can label one or two as such, while continuing to produce classic organic wines with the rest, without risking their entire estate (Azzoni).

However, this position has not gained unanimous support within the natural wine community. Some of the older members chose not to join the Syndicat, believing this policy compromised the radical ideals of emancipation and freedom that defined the movement. The very idea of introducing a degree of compromise is seen by some as a surrender, a dilution of identity, and a loss of autonomy. The founding winemakers of the Syndicat, who frequently discuss these issues with their colleagues and friends, are aware that their inclusive stance is not fully understood. Their gamble on openness is a calculated risk—different from the inherent risks of natural winemaking (weather, spontaneous fermentation, etc.)—it's a human gamble, trusting in the integrity of natural wine practitioners. This approach, which prioritizes inclusion over exclusion and seeks cooperation with institutions to build collective momentum, does not pass judgment on those who choose not to align with the Syndicat.

This strategy is rooted in the experience of president Jacques Carroget, a winemaker since 1978, who has worked closely with various institutions. He helped structure organic agriculture in France, was involved with the FNAB (*Fédération Nationale de l'Agriculture Biologique*) from 2000 to 2017, and served as a representative in developing organic winemaking guidelines before the establishment of the European organic label in 2012. Carroget's background experience in long discussions and compromises, including issues such as the use of copper in organic

viticulture, has informed the Syndicat's creation. According to the Syndicat, natural wine could follow a similar trajectory to that of organic wine.

Some in the natural wine "family" (including some older members) remain sympathetic but do not fully support the Syndicat, or are even critical of its approach. It's important to note that the wine world in general (and natural wine is no exception) tends to foster egos, partly due to the personal branding that has become common with wine labels, which have increasingly become a means of self-expression. This dynamic alone might explain why some individuals prefer to exist outside the collective framework. Additionally, some winemakers have become disillusioned with the individualistic behaviour they see as destructive to the living world in all its diversity. These winemakers tend to retreat and observe from the sidelines, reducing their interactions with the broader wine world. They prefer to cultivate their vineyards away from the troubles of modern Western society, or in opposition to these troubles.

In contrast, Jacques Carroget emphasizes:

The DNA of our Syndicat is openness and the opportunity for anyone to claim they are making natural wine.

We didn't create this for our friends but for everyone who wants to make natural wine, especially those who don't have the right networks (Azzoni).

Even if it's somewhat monastic, it creates a beacon for the whole movement and helps maintain the idea of natural wine (Carroget).

## A Question of Method

Once the definition was written and refined based on the principles of the founding associations, the Syndicat requested a meeting with the French Directorate General for Competition, Consumer Affairs, and Fraud Control (DGCCRF) with the help of a member of the Minister of Agriculture's cabinet at the time. During the first meeting, attended by several members of the Syndicat and eight DGCCRF officials, the prior attempts to draft a similar charter were recalled, led by Emmanuel Cazes, the head of the organic wine commission at the INAO (National Institute of Origin and Quality). This earlier project had been blocked by AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) representatives, who struggled to accept organic wines within their ranks (Abellan, 2018). Every point in the charter was carefully examined, particularly by a legal expert who pointed out some inaccuracies that were subsequently corrected.

The discussions soon crystallized around the choice of the label's name. How could the terms "natural wine" or "vin naturel" be used without violating European law, which prohibits these terms as too vague? The solution was offered by the institution itself, which reminded participants that only a "method" (or practice) could be certified, not an "idea." Thus, the proposal to insert the word "méthode" between "vin" and "nature" was approved by both parties. The DGCCRF also requested that the word "méthode" be printed in the same size as "vin" and "nature" to ensure it was clearly legible. Subsequent meetings ensured the proper drafting

and finalization of the label, which was then filed with the INPI (National Institute of Industrial Property). This sequence of discussions left a lasting impression within the Syndicat because it marked the first time such an initiative was brought to completion, adding to the sense of accomplishment in providing a stable definition of natural wine.

## The Syndicat Label and Its Guidelines

At the end of this foundational act, the “Vin Méthode Nature” (VMN) was summarized in a few lines by the Syndicat members:

A ‘Vin Méthode Nature’ is a certified organic or biodynamic wine (Agriculture Biologique or Nature & Progrès) made from hand-harvested grapes, fermented with indigenous yeasts, and produced without any additives (with the possible but not encouraged exception of sulfites added post-fermentation, which must remain below 30 mg/L in total and be indicated around the label if present). The use of sterilizing or altering techniques is prohibited.

Moreover, for the Syndicat’s board members, natural wine is not just about what’s inside the bottle. It is also tied to respect for all living things. Therefore, the guidelines also include motions against all forms of discrimination (sexism, racism, etc.), along with environmental commitments in line with Article 2 of the French Environmental Charter. By July 2024, 5 years after the Syndicat’s creation, there were 263 members (191 winemakers, 43 professionals, and 28 consumers), and 889 cuvées were certified VMN (300 in 2023, 244 in 2022, and 170 in 2021), more than 75% of which were made without added sulfites (671 zero-sulfite cuvées; 218 with less than 30 mg/L).

## Controls and Safeguards

As with most organizations, the Syndicat is structured around various commissions, currently numbering six: communication, certification (responsible for controls), legal (to defend natural wines and their producers with public institutions and professional organizations), institutional and international relations (to facilitate dialogue with the DGCCRF, INAO, or OIV), and anti-fraud (to monitor clear cases of fraudulent use of the label or the terms “natural wine” or “vin naturel,” as well as any other use of the word “natural” without proper adherence to the guidelines). With the growing number of cases of fraud, misuse, and even outright cheating, it became clear that promoting best practices was necessary to clarify any ambiguity regarding the “natural” network, which was increasingly coming under scrutiny from the powerful industrial wine lobbies. This was one of the key drivers behind the creation of the Syndicat, as recounted by its president, Jacques Carroget:

One of the reasons for creating the Syndicat was cheating—the issue of fraud in the natural wine world. We’d heard about winemakers who claimed to be making natural wines, who were highly respected or even famous, but there were rumours that their grapes were not necessarily organic. We all know that natural wine starts with organic grapes. So, that was one of the reasons for creating the Syndicat: to address this fraud that existed within the movement.

The lack of a clear, stable definition (due to the ambiguity of the term “natural”) had opened the door to varied interpretations and uses. This had allowed critics, many from within the wine industry itself, to point to examples of non-compliant producers who claimed to make natural wines despite using synthetic chemicals in the vineyard or cellar. In its contemporary meaning, a natural wine must be made from organic grapes, and vinifying without added sulfur or excessive manipulation in the cellar is only part of the equation.

Three weeks before the Syndicat’s creation, the magazine *Que Choisir* published an analysis of 38 samples of so-called natural wines. We were absolutely certain that two of those wines had been made from conventionally grown grapes. Natural wine is something pure. We always strive for purity. I’m not saying it’s completely pure—absolute purity doesn’t exist—but it’s scandalous that, for mercantile and financial reasons, someone would undermine the hard work of people who respect the vines and the soil (Carroget).

Has the trust that traditionally underpinned the relationship between winemakers and consumers, based on the proximity of purchase (or via intermediaries like wine shops, restaurants, or importers), been eroded? Is this trust no longer enough in light of the growing complexity of the “natural wine phenomenon”? This was the question posed by Antonin Iommi-Amunategui, organizer of the fair and debate:

Now that natural wine has matured and can be considered to have come of age, is it still possible to continue acting a bit like punks, which has its charm, but without any label and simply asking people to trust us?

While freedom and a certain radicality are celebrated within the natural wine community, the question of viability is not ignored. Gilles Azzoni addressed this concern:

No matter what, we’re still merchants. If you’re making wine only for personal consumption, you can do whatever you want. But if you’re putting it on the market, there are rules to follow. Making natural wine is not the easiest thing to do when you want to make a marketable wine. [...] The DNA of natural wine has always been anti-system—an alternative. It’s like saying, ‘screw the oenologists, screw the appellations’ (referencing Pascal Simonutti’s iconic cuvée, *On s’en bat les couilles*).

And it’s this very freedom that some fellow winemakers fear might be lost after having fought so hard to preserve it. One well-known, respected natural winemaker who chose not to join the Syndicat worries that the path chosen by his colleagues might lead them toward normalization or even standardization. Adding to this concern is the fact that the Syndicat’s guidelines allow large producers to certify only one cuvée out of their entire production. Thus, a large company could use the label as a marketing tool, promoting it even if it represents only a small portion of their production. This contrasts sharply with the policy of welcoming smaller producers



who are hesitant to convert their entire production to Vin Méthode Nature for economic security. To address this, the Syndicat has introduced mandatory controls for vats larger than 100 hectolitres to verify the legitimacy of the request (for example, whether the rest of the production is organic or conventional) and to dissuade opportunists from exploiting the system.

We're fully aware of the opportunistic effects, and we conduct audits [...] We visit producers we don't know personally, we're unfamiliar with their methods, and we check everything—the papers, the methodology, the vineyard, etc., to ensure the approach is coherent. [...] It's not about coercion or punishment; it's a kind of soft control. [...] I accompanied an audit at a winery I knew well, which produces around a million bottles, and they had 400 hectoliters of potential Vin Méthode Nature. Everything was perfectly in order, traceability was flawless. So, this is important—it's not about coercion but about validating the hard work and giving meaning to this certification. [...] It shows the seriousness of the Syndicat (Vincent Wallard, vice president).

The idea behind these systematic controls for vats over 100 hectoliters is to prevent exploitation of the label by larger producers, ensuring they don't use the Vin Méthode Nature designation as a cheap marketing tool for a single cuvée. The Syndicat has implemented safeguards to avoid being co-opted by capitalist dynamics. We chose to defend the product, not the profile of the winemaker [...] We can't approach the authorities and ask them to limit vineyard size—that's the fight of the *Confédération paysanne*<sup>2</sup> (Carroget).

In addition to the 100-hectoliter rule, the Syndicat conducts random annual audits on 2% of certified cuvées, with the certification body Ecocert handling the inspections. These audits, which are costly and paid for by the Syndicat, help ensure credibility with members, consumers, and especially with the DGCCRF, which raised the issue during the drafting of the charter.

## Framing Taste

Aware of the pitfalls and paradoxes inherent in creating a Syndicat and, more importantly, a label that is both demanding and inclusive, the Syndicat's president seeks to reassure people that the principle of freedom to make natural wine in all its diversity remains intact, as long as these methods remain radically opposed to the dominant production model:

The label guarantees the alternativeness! [...] If there's no label, natural wine ceases to exist, because everyone can claim to make it. We defend a specific idea of natural wine: having the label [...] might feel confining, but it creates a beacon for the movement and maintains an idea of natural wine. That means someone who claims to make natural wine but doesn't follow the rules has fewer and fewer chances of selling their bottles. There are no flexible principles—the charter is strict and not lax at all (Carroget).

This strictness may have annoyed some winemakers who produce natural wines but, due to economic reasons, occasionally make exceptions—filtering or pasteurizing

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<sup>2</sup>Confédération Paysanne, the French farmers' union to which he belongs. He held office from 1985 to 2010.

their wines in certain years to address significant problems or inoculating their wines with yeasts to save a few hectoliters, as Azzoni mentioned earlier. Some winemakers may not wish to risk having their natural credentials questioned or their entire production scrutinized. With established reputations, they have little to gain by joining the Syndicat, as their wines, though sometimes outside the label's framework, are still considered high-quality, organic, and natural. They may not have recognized the inclusive approach promoted by the Syndicat, which may hold little relevance for them since they are already economically secure.

The fear of standardizing natural wines through the label seems unfounded considering that, within the framework, all vinification options remain open, allowing winemakers to produce wines with diverse profiles—whether they choose to destem or macerate whole clusters, blend grape varieties, vinify separately, or age their wines in different materials such as wood, terracotta, stoneware, stainless steel, food-grade plastic, or even an animal-skin wine bag like the *Lagar* used in Chile. These choices all influence the taste of the wine without relying on synthetic additives to reproduce specific flavours. The list of possibilities grows when winemakers focus on expressing the unique characteristics of indigenous yeasts and what remains alive in the wine's microbiome.

I've noticed a significant improvement in the quality of what I taste overall. Yes, there are still some mistakes, but in general, I've seen real progress [...] I genuinely believe there's a network effect at play. I'm not saying the Syndicat is solely responsible, but its existence has facilitated exchanges between people, leading to improvement. Now, there are absolutely remarkable bottles made under Vin Méthode Nature certification, and there are others that aren't certified but are just as good. The Syndicat acted as a catalyst in the chemical sense of the term, encouraging this evolution over the past five years. We're talking about wines that express sensitivity, subtlety, and vibration. I believe the Syndicat came into being at just the right time, and it has added its own small touch to this overall progress (Carroget).

We're also probably seeing the maturation of the natural wine movement. Some winemakers have been producing natural wine for 40 years and are now entering retirement. The movement has matured, and many have learned from past mistakes. They're no longer repeating them (Azzoni).

## The European Initiative: Strengthening the Network

The Vin Méthode Nature charter remains a private document, but the underlying utopia is to see it eventually incorporated into public law at the European level, similar to the trajectory of organic wine. However, there's still a long way to go, and the Syndicat members are aware that the label must be strengthened to become a significant player. The introduction of the VMN label has caused ripples in the European wine scene. As noted by Alonso González et al. (2022), opponents of the VMN certification were quick to react. On April 15, 2020, Italian Northern League party member Lizzi and the European Committee of Wine Companies (CEEV) addressed letters to the European Commission regarding the new certification. The CEEV sought clarification on the use of the term Vin Méthode Nature, arguing that

it was not provided for in European legislation, could create unfair competition, and might confuse consumers into believing that natural wine was healthier or better than other wines. However, the term “vin méthode nature,” referring to a specific production method, was found to be covered by European law, and these challenges did not progress further.

Beyond these institutional dynamics, discussions have been initiated with counterparts in Spain and Italy. However, it is necessary for each country to harmonize its own rules at the national level before imagining a common European label. For example, some aspects of the French charter would not be acceptable to many Italian colleagues, particularly regarding filtration practices. Carroget recalls this while emphasizing his firm stance on the definition of Vin Méthode Nature, which he refuses to see diluted:

We started discussions with our Italian friends, who allow exogenous yeasts and filtration. We also had debates within the Syndicat itself. Some people said it’s complicated to make natural wine without filtration, but filtration is a fundamental part of natural wine. We’re open to discussion, but the definition of natural wine is already established, and, according to that definition, I’m not convinced that there are 2000 winemakers who make natural wines.

Notable progress has been made in Switzerland. In 2021, 2 years after the creation of the French Syndicat, a group of Swiss winemakers founded their own Syndicat based on nearly identical principles. By 2022, the Swiss Association of Natural Wine (ASVN) was working with the Haute École de Changins and Bio Vaud (the Department of Agriculture and Viticulture of the Canton of Vaud, DGAV, and the Swiss Confederation, OFAG) to develop a new tasting sheet specifically tailored to natural wines. The idea behind this new tasting grid was to create criteria suited for evaluating natural wines in competitions or tastings, focusing on tactile sensations and defining sensory qualities while excluding wines with fatal flaws.<sup>3</sup>

Sensory analysis professor Pascale Deneulin was part of the team that developed this tasting sheet, which included a unique criterion: “Evaluate the emotion evoked by the wine. This judgment is personal, though often shared. It does not reflect a wine’s objective quality, as perfection is not necessarily harmonious or emotionally moving.”

While the French Syndicat appreciates the sentiment behind this proposal, it prefers not to follow this path. Instead, it envisions initiating dialogue with the DGCCRF’s laboratories (though this is not yet in progress) to explain the different methods of tasting and to let winemakers take responsibility for their own wines (Carroget). The problem with the Swiss proposal, according to Carroget, lies in the difficulty of fitting natural wines into well-defined categories. Who can truly judge the emotion provoked by a wine? There’s a risk of creating a “taste police,” as Carroget puts it. Nonetheless, the French Syndicat maintains a good relationship with its Swiss counterpart, which it praises for its precise and demanding charter.

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.vin-nature.ch/>

In an optimistic spirit, some people associate the concept of “maturity” with natural wines. Given the progress made over the past decade—in terms of media visibility, institutional dialogues, and knowledge-sharing among winemakers—it is not unreasonable to describe the movement as having matured. However, as we have seen, these dynamics face obstacles both within the movement and from powerful conventional wine industry lobbies supported by agricultural unions like the pro-agro-industry FNSEA (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2020) that exert influence over public decision-making.

## The Paradoxes of Labeling

One of the key questions arising from the creation of the Syndicat concerns the potential consequences of a normalization or standardization dynamic, which could be detrimental to natural wine.

Since ancient times, governments have encouraged intensive agriculture, and the pressures to standardize crops have been varied and numerous. Since the nineteenth century, scientific agriculture has gone beyond previous domestication efforts, turning standardization into the modern norm. “Today, only standardisation allows farmers to market their crops. Yet standardisation makes plants vulnerable to all kinds of disease, including fungal rusts and smuts; without the chance to develop resistant varieties, the crops may all go down at once” (Tsing, 2012: 147). The wine world has not escaped this trend toward standardization, which has led to the production of increasingly technological wines, designed to offer similar products year after year despite climate and health variability.

Natural wines, on the other hand, were born out of a struggle against the standardization of taste and practice, breaking away from the rules imposed by France’s appellation system. Many natural winemakers have opted out (or been excluded) from the AOP/AOC system to regain greater freedom in what they put in their bottles. The natural winemaking method makes it difficult or impossible to reproduce the same wine year after year. Some winemakers have even renounced state subsidies they were entitled to. This space of freedom has always operated with a form of self-certification, based on transparency about what happens in the vineyards and the cellar, and on a relationship of trust between producers and consumers, which is often facilitated by close proximity, unlike wines sold in supermarkets (Pineau, 2019; Dubois et al., 2022).

Here we encounter a paradox. While transparency is necessary for natural wines to be better defended, there is also a danger of co-optation by large producers. This raises the question of whether it might be better to maintain some degree of opacity, to protect the movement from being commodified or standardized. Some will immediately object that this opacity has allowed certain producers to market so-called natural wines made from conventionally grown grapes, or that it has made it difficult to know how much pesticide conventional winemakers are actually using. Nevertheless, we find it useful to borrow the notion of opacity from Édouard

Glissant (1997), as it seems helpful in thinking about what's happening in the world of natural wine. Opacity, as Glissant defines it, "is an epistemological notion that grants each individual the right to retain their 'thick shadow'—that is, their psycho-cultural depth. Opacity, thus understood, recognizes that each individual has cultural elements that are incomprehensible to others who do not share the same culture." Extrapolating this concept to natural wine, we might ask whether preserving a certain opacity could help the movement remain, at some level, incomprehensible and, therefore, unassimilable. Understanding the other may lead to appropriation, altering it in one's own image.

## Clear Opacity and Infrapolitics

The dangers mentioned above are real and well-recognized by the Syndicat's creators, who seem to embrace these paradoxes. Natural wine is identified as an alternative to standardized products from the agro-industrial world, having been built outside or against dominant agro-industrial norms. The Syndicat believes that the label guarantees alternativeness. As Carroget has stated: "If there's no label, natural wine no longer exists because everyone will be making it." This position is understandable at a time when natural wines are enjoying media and commercial success, as such success also brings the risk of being co-opted by the agro-industrial sector. The paradox here is that normalization or standardization is being employed to protect the movement against taste and practice standardization. However, one can also understand the position of those who want to retain a certain degree of opacity to avoid being too transparent in the face of adversaries who might appropriate and distort the natural wine movement.

This desire for opacity, in this context, should not be understood negatively. What is opaque is not necessarily unclear or imprecise. Opacity here serves as the guarantor of the ethos of the winemaker, who creates wines that are inevitably unique, carrying their own individuality. This happens even within the framework of Vin Méthode Nature. The method is clear, but the background remains blurry, opaque, personal—woven from personal and collective experiences, human and more-than-human relationships, and sustainable practices. This can be protected by the label. Opacity, as we propose to deploy the concept here, refers to the personal and specific arrangements that cannot be fully integrated into the Vin Méthode Nature framework, even though it is meticulously respected. "Clear opacity" can thus be understood as a productive oxymoron.

We could even go further and ask how this discussion relates to the one on infrapolitics and the "hidden transcript" described by James C. Scott (2013). By working to establish a label with state representatives while maintaining a critical stance toward agro-industrial models, are the winemakers engaging in a form of resistance that involves circumventing dominant forms of control by creating their own norms and autonomy, all while seemingly playing by the dominant rules? Could using the language of the dominant (norms) be viewed as a "hidden

transcript,” a strategy that involves appropriating authority to turn it to their advantage and give it new meaning (Foyer, 2024)?

All of this might make sense if we acknowledge that these winemakers offer a way out of the plantation system (Chartier, 2021)—a system where cultivating one organism means exploiting or killing all others (Haraway and Tsing, 2019). Through their practices and their ways of being in the world (Mariani, 2024), natural winemakers stand in opposition to the ecological simplification of the plantation. They advocate for ecological complexity (agroforestry, mixed plantings, the introduction of animals into vineyards, etc.), reject rigid discipline in favour of indiscipline (some even seek to rewild the vines; Pineau, 2023), and oppose controlling nature with a philosophy of trust and letting go (specifically in their handling of fermentation processes).

By rejecting the plantation model, natural winemakers challenge certain orientations of public institutions, wine research organizations, state services, and even consumer preferences. Rather than depleting soils, humans, plants, and other non-human entities, they aim to nurture, care for, and protect them (Chartier, 2021; Pineau, 2019). The challenge lies in protecting what some might call a movement, rather than just a method—though the two are intertwined and not mutually exclusive.

Protecting this movement likely involves safeguarding the method, meaning what happens in the fields and in the cellars. A critical question remains: how to maintain this clear opacity, this hidden transcript, so that natural wine can continue to shape the future of viticulture? This is perhaps one of the major challenges the Syndicat will need to address in the coming years, particularly as various environmental crises demand the kind of responses that natural winemaking practices offer.

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