

Postmodern Winemaking



Four Ways to Make White Wine

Most but not all contemporary white wines focus on freshness and purity rather than embracing aromatic integration through refined structure, soulfulness and graceful longevity.

I love modern Mosel wines so much that I cannot keep them in my cellar. I buy them, I drink them. But I believe there is an aesthetic difference between the beauty of these wines and the profundity of great Cabernet. Would you rather have lunch with actress Angelina Jolie or philosopher Bertrand Russell?

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It's time for me to confess that white wine can deliver profundity and age-worthiness—and before modern styles emerged in the 1960s, that's what most serious white wine was up to.

I find it useful to divide white winemaking into four distinct style categories, each with its own approach and goals. I will state the four methodologies in reverse order of their historical chronology because today's methods are more familiar, allowing me later to illustrate by contrast the traditional methods of bygone eras.

In subsequent columns I will focus on a practitioner of each of these methodologies. **W&V**

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METHOD NO. 1



LAETITIA VINEYARD & WINERY

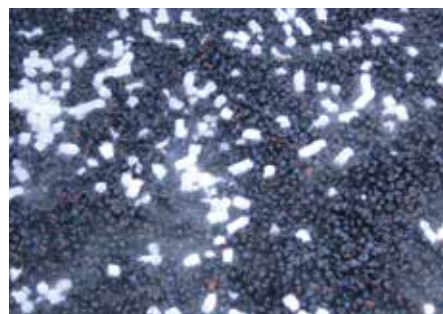
Night harvesting is part of the reductive winemaking style favored by modern vintners.

Totally reductive. From crushing to bottling, inert gas protects grapes, must and wine from oxygen at every point.

Example: New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc.

Desired outcome: Intense, fresh varietal aromatics, thiols and esters. Lean, focused palate with bright, refreshing flavors. Ready for consumption.

Techniques: Night harvesting, dry ice blanketing during crushing, gentle whole-cluster pressing with inert gas blanketing, free run, sulfited must, cold fermentation, immediate sulfiting post fermentation, suppressed malolactic fermentation, fining to remove tannin (if necessary), early sterile bottling under screwcap closures, immediate marketing.



Dry ice is used to blanket wine grapes during crush to prevent early fermentation.

Comments: Because this methodology allows no access to enological uses of oxygen to refine tannins, great care must be taken to prevent tannin pickup and avoid harshness and reductive vigor, which might lead to sulfides in the bottle. This style was impossible to make before World War II, which ushered in innovations including bubble-pointable sterile filtration, an artifact of atomic energy.

METHOD NO. 2

Hyper-oxidized must, reductive post fermentation.

Example: Typically used for aromatic varieties where density is not prized, such as in German Mosels.

Desired outcome: Lean, age-worthy aromatic varieties with high native phenolics that can otherwise generate peroxide, which oxidizes terpenes.

Techniques: Juice is initially unsulfited, given one to three saturations of oxygen that is consumed within two hours—often in concert with gelatin fining and flotation of solids. Post fermentation, the resulting wines, which are low in phenolics, are handled reductively as in Method No. 1.

Comments: Winemakers are often shocked to see brown, muddy musts transformed into lean, fresh, straw-green wines of great freshness and longevity.

METHOD NO. 3

Structured wines incorporating tannin as a positive element.

Example: Muscadet *sur lie*, Savennières.

Desired outcome: Multi-dimensional, age-worthy wines that, after an initial pleasant stage in which the wine shows well based on fermentation bouquet, may experience a reductive adolescent phase before blooming into maturity five to 10 years later.

Techniques: Tannins are intentionally introduced through variety and site soil selection, skin contact, hard pressing and sometimes well-cured, untoasted oak in the fermenter. Lees are stirred frequently until tannins are enrobed by protein, as in milk chocolate.

Comments: Resulting structure integrates aromas as in red wines.

Hand stirring of the lees is part of this historic winemaking method.



Some inventive winemakers are tinkering with clay fermentation vessels in the United States, but the first clay jar wines embodied a different style that could take 10 years to reach maturity.

METHOD NO. 4

Clay jar wines (known in Italy as “orange wines” and in Georgia as *qvevri* wines). Generally made from semi-aromatic varieties.

Example: Kakheti Rkatsiteli, Friuli Ribolla.

Desired outcome: Highly complex, tannic wines resembling alcoholic tea requiring five to 10 years aging to smooth out and open up. The wines appear oxidized, but they are actually quite reductive.

Techniques: Crushed grapes in their entirety, including juice, pomace, seeds and stems, are sealed in a clay jar buried in earth and racked off after six months. Spontaneous alcoholic and malolactic fermentation, high phenolic extraction, lees contact. Little or no oak influence, though oak uprights are sometimes employed during aging.

Comments: This is the oldest form of winemaking. It dates back 8,000 years and was not widely practiced in contemporary winemaking until its recent resurgence. It is said that a *qvevri* was buried when a son was born and opened and consumed on his wedding day.