

Orange Wine

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Alternative, avant-garde, elite, hipster, call it what you like, but trust me - once you go orange you don't go back!

Definition

Orange wine is a complex concept – in terms of both definition and sensorial analysis (sight, bouquet, taste). The same as whites, it is made of white grape varieties. This is also the only thing these two types of wine have in common. The main characteristic of orange wine is (obviously) its color that can vary from golden to copper nuances. Vinification of orange wine is in essence an artisanal method of winemaking, which is why some orange wines (and their winemakers) enjoy their cult status.

The 4th color of wine

When it comes to white grapes, the usual



process of vinification entails: grape harvesting and selection, crushing, pressing, cold alcoholic fermentation with standardized yeasts in closed stainless steel tanks, adding of fining and preserving agents, filtration and finally bottling. Now, with this being said – you can totally forget about it! Most things you know about whites do not apply to orange wine.

Winemakers who make orange wine work in harmony with nature and their wines are categorized as: natural, organic or biodynamic.

Natural wine is made with a minimum of chemical and technological interference; organic is the one with a certified stamp; while biodynamic wine is made in accordance with Rudolf Steiner's principles. Moreover, some winemakers follow Maria Thun's lunar calendar according to which full moon discharge period is the best for pruning, decanting, bottling and all the work in the cellar. It might seem a bit odd, but orange wine is kind of a spiritual thing.

The story about orange wine starts in the vineyard. Grapes are grown with minimum intervention and maximum care. Quality is more important than quantity, which is why sometimes winemakers practice the so called green harvest. Green harvest is basically the removal of green (thus the name) and unripe grapes in order to reduce yield, but increase quality of remaining grapes. This practice allows plants to put more energy into remaining grapes, resulting in more favorable chemical compounds. Among other reasons, this is why climate characteristics of vintages play insignificant role in terms of grape quality for these winemakers. They impact the quantity, but not the quality meaning that on a bad year winemaker will make less wine, but the caliber will stay the same.

Another specific practice makes a key difference in vinification of orange wine – the usage of wild

(one's own) yeasts. After harvesting and destemming, slightly crushed grapes (skin and seeds) and grape juice are ready for fermentation. Yeasts are agents that induce alcoholic fermentation by turning sugar into alcohol (or simply grape juice called must into wine). Also, they are a very delicate issue in winemaking. Winemakers can choose to use selected yeasts or to make their own, wild yeasts. On one hand, selected yeasts reduce the risk, but add standardized features. For example, most Istrian winemakers use selected yeasts for vinification of *malvazija* and end up with wines of very similar sensorial attributes.

On the other hand, wild yeasts bring out the unique flavor of certain terroir. So how do winemakers grow their own, wild yeasts?



Actually, it is very simple. What they do is harvest a certain amount of grapes a week

before the actual harvest and allow them to ferment spontaneously. When in the process of fermentation, these grapes serve as a starter culture for grape juice to ferment. This practice enables wine to keep main characteristics of respective grape variety, but with higher probability of spoilage than with selected yeasts.

When it comes to orange wines, fermentation of grapes and grape juice usually takes place in open wooden vats, without strict temperature control. After fermentation, when must is turned into wine, comes the crucial part of vinification of orange wines.

Maceration & aging

Maceration and aging are crucial stages in orange wine production. Maceration is a part of the vinification process during which grape juice is in contact with both grape skin and seeds in order to extract color, tannins and flavor.



Historically, all wines were macerated because this is a natural way of wine preservation. However, in today's practice, long maceration is typical for red wine, during which reds get their color and flavor intensity. Whites are typically macerated from few hours to up to a day. Orange wines go through an extremely long period of maceration, which is why they are often called red wine in white color. It can go as long as few months before the remaining grapes are pressed. Here the art of winemaking makes all the difference. From this point on, it all depends on individual styles of winemakers.

And believe me, they tend to get very creative.

Orange wine is generally aged in wooden vats/barrels, amphorae, and ceramic or clay vessels of various sizes. Each material adds specific features to wine. Wines aged in wood are smoother than the ones aged in ceramics, which tend to be bit astringent. I remember tasting a wine from Georgia made from their indigenous grape, aged for years in amphora and I still precisely recall its distinct taste. You would, too – it tasted like biting into a quince. That particular wine will be ready to drink after 20 years of aging, only then it will become well rounded. These amphorae are lined with beeswax and buried into ground neck-deep and grape juice is put inside together with grapes (skin and seeds) and stems. Possibilities are infinite! One thing is sure, though - each wine has its own bold character.

Imagine Istrian *malvazija* macerated for 80 days and aged for two years in a wooden vat? It's a wine of dark golden color with amber nuances – it literally looks like liquid old gold in a glass. Its rich bouquet reveals intense scents of an Istrian summer day – hay, ripe apricots, almonds, red soil. Even though this wine has a sweet nose, it is absolutely dry in the mouth with expressed fruitiness of *malvazija* grapes. Its taste is opulent and velvety, reflecting aromas of the bouquet and terroir.

People of the 4th color of wine

Orange wine is a niche in terms of both market and oenophiles. First of all, it is so time-consuming and expensive to make that it will never become a mainstream. Secondly, its aficionados are not numerous, but are forever lost for regular white wines. As I said earlier, we are talking about wines with character. There is a festival called Orange Wine featuring exclusively orange wines. First edition was held in Izola, Slovenia this spring. The most fascinating thing about it is that you can witness how characters of wines match personalities of winemakers. Unbelievable, but true! If you are interested to learn more and to try some of

these extraordinary wines – Orange Wine is the place. There you have all the people of the fourth color of wine together – winemakers and their fans. Did I mention that the festival was officially opened in a church? I told you orange wine is a spiritual thing. It presented some of the most important wineries such as: Batič, Clai, Čotar, Prinčič, Klinec, La Castellada, Mlečnik, Movia, Radikon, Roxanich, Zidarich, etc. As you can see from the names of the cellars, they come from Italy, Slovenia and Croatia. These countries are also the pioneers in orange wine production. However, central person of this philosophy is Joško Gravner – a winemaker from Collio (region on the border of Italy and Slovenia). He is considered a cult individual for orange wine making. Gravner is very radical in his approach to wines. He is also the one who uses those aforementioned amphoras (made especially for him), buries them in the ground and ages his wine for an extremely long period of time. Finally, Gravner's wines are the most appreciated within this group of people.

How to appreciate orange wine?

Drink, drink, and drink! The more wines you drink, the more you understand – about grape varieties, process of wine making, individual philosophies, different styles of wine, winemakers, about life... If you don't know where to start, contact Pleasure Seekers Croatia – they'll show you the way!

