

Wine Manipulation: Part of the Process, or Evil-Doings?

There is an old saying about laws & sausages: You don't want to watch either one being made!

You can probably add wine to that list. I once witnessed a crush of Gewurztraminer grapes at one of the Maryland wineries. Two seconds after the sweet and fragrant grapes began to be crushed, fruit flies swarmed the scene in Biblical proportions. It wasn't possible to keep those little suckers out of the crusher, and soon you were able to see them in the juice, conveniently displayed through a small glass window.

Kinda gross, but certainly no match for Scrapple. Obviously you can't bottle the wine with a few thousand fruit flies in it, so the juice was filtered. And so that wine took the first step down the slippery slope of wine manipulation.

Most people would agree that filtering out the fruit flies was not only preferable, but necessary. But when does manipulation become too much? That, my little grape-nut, depends on you. It should be obvious, but I will state it anyway: all wine has been manipulated to some degree.

Wine can literally make itself, which is almost certainly how it was discovered in the first place. If you purchase a flat of organic grapes (organic grapes still contain wild yeasts on their skins), smash 'em up a little, dump them into a vat and walk away, within a few weeks the grapes will have turned into something resembling wine.

It is not rocket science. Yeast works with the sugar in the grapes to produce alcohol. You would not want to drink this mess, as it would be neither appetizing nor particularly safe.

But even the idea of filtering out particulate matter can be a subject of debate. Many of the best wines are unfiltered; wine can be "racked" to remove the juice from the sediment. Hand crafted wines are usually very lightly "fined," sometimes with some very odd ingredients.

Fining is a process of adding something to the wine that attracts the light sediments or tannins, much as you add Clarifier to a swimming pool. Fining ingredients can be pretty strange, including Bentonite, which is not a whole lot different than kitty-litter, egg-whites, milk, and Isinglass (those of you that know that Isinglass is sturgeon bladder, move to the head of the class).

Aggressive fining and filtering can, and does, remove much of a wine's character. Factory wines are filtered aggressively, resulting in wine that is sterile and without much personality.

The real hot-button issue is the more advanced forms of manipulation. These may include de-alcoholization, acidification, re-acidification, micro-oxygenation, powdered tannins, oak-chips, and the ghastly "mega-purple," which is highly concentrated grape juice added to give color and fruit to an otherwise lacking wine. If you want know which wines contain mega-purple, look no further than the big-name brands in your local supermarket.

The down-the-rabbit-hole opposite of this heartless manipulation is Biodynamics, which utilizes significant, albeit entirely natural, manipulation of the *vineyard*, but a virtual hands-off

approach to the making of the wine. Google the term *biodynamic* for a very entertaining few minutes.

So, what's better: manipulation, or no manipulation? Let me put it to you this way: I have always felt that the greatest chefs of the world are the ones who allow the ingredients to speak to them, and then coax the best and most natural flavors from those ingredients, though certainly Chef Ferran Adrià of Spain's famed El Bulli Restaurant throws this theory for a loop.

Is there any reason to suspect the same is not true of wine and winemakers? Again, the answer should be obvious!