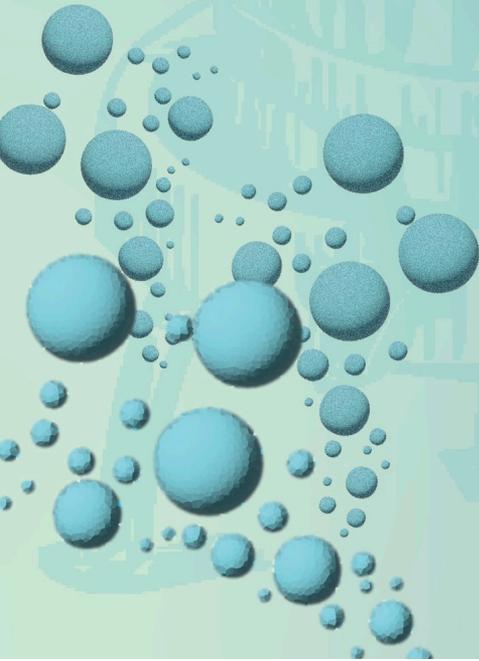


DIRECT PRESS

February, 2024

LOW
ABV



“The jihadist movements of nonsulphured wines, green, underripe wines, low alcohol, insipid stuff promoted by the anti-pleasure police & neo-anti-alcohol proponents has run its course as another extreme and useless movement few care about.” -Robert M. Parker, Jr.

So much of the natural wine movement and my own love of wine is directly opposite of this mentality, that it's hard not to laugh at this quote, probably going on a decade since it was uttered. Though it contains all the vitriol of Rush Limbaugh, Robert Parker was not a right wing talk radio host but a lawyer for a bank who became “the most influential wine critic in the world,” to quote the NY Times. Parker essentially made his name by creating an overly simplistic way of rating wines using a 100-point scale. He then employed that scale to champion the types of wines he loved; often the richest, most fruit-forward, and alcoholic wines in the world. Given the reductive nature of his approach, it's no surprise that it gave way to a homogeneity where wines from all over the world were trying to taste the same in order to score higher in his reviews.

Can higher alcohol levels in wine be attributed to the enormous rise of Robert Parker's influence that began in the early 1980s? According to a study by the American Association of Wine Economists, every country in the world saw a jump in the alcohol levels of wine from 1992 to 2007. The US, Argentina, Australia, and Chile, respectively, saw the biggest jumps. The EU, meanwhile, barely cracked 13% abv on average and only did because of Spain's much higher numbers. But how much of this is driven by climate change and how much is driven by market demands? The data seems to point more towards human intervention.

To explore what this all entails, this month we're featuring wines with no more than 11.5% alcohol by volume (abv). For many this will be a nice transition out of Dry January. On the cold, snowy January days we were auditioning wines for this month's selections, I was questioning the theme, wondering if big, beefy wines would be more suited to the chilly temperatures. Instead it reinforced why many of us have been seeking out these wines to begin with: they were rejuvenating, not fatiguing, and full of flavor and personality. They felt like a sign of life, like a crocus popping its petals through the gray blanket of winter.

There are many advantages to low alcohol wines. A 14.5% abv wine has about 25% more alcohol than an 11.5% abv wine, which you will likely feel the next day. But a 14.5% wine—a Chateauneuf-du-Pape or a typical California Cabernet for instance—also has more limited food pairing options outside

big, rich meals. When I'm picking out wine to have on hand for the week, I go for wines that will go with whatever we might decide to have for dinner, so versatility is key. A wine for a weeknight meal with lower alcohol often fits better with how I eat. Occasionally I'll fry up a ribeye where I need a bigger, structured red, but usually we're eating things like risotto, soba noodles, roast chicken, pierogis, or Thai takeout. Spicy foods, in particular, go best with lower abv wines since alcohol will only dial up the painful aspects of the spice. If I'm out at a wine bar or having wine without food, the lower alcohol content is also advantageous. I find it more fun to plow through a bottle with abandon instead of needing to pace yourself with something dense and intense.

Historically speaking wine was typically lower in alcohol than today. For much of human history wine was a source of hydration, safer than water, and often wine was diluted with water to make it more suitable for this purpose.

In Ancient Greece, it was not to dilute wine with water. Even Thomas Jefferson diluted wine until the 20th century. In the 19th century, wine became a regular bourgeois luxury, instead of reserved for special occasions. Wine also had to compete with all sorts of other beverages of the time, like Coca-Cola and beer. The target audience for more delicate, dry, low alcohol wines.



Tom Lubbe of Matassa

The rise in alcohol with technological

wine is directly correlated with the amount of sugar in the grapes. From 1980 to 2007 the average sugar content at harvest in California rose 11%. Rising global temperatures mean more sugar, but it is not enough to explain the increased alcohol in wine. Part of this was choosing to let the grapes hang longer and maximize ripeness. In California the conditions allowed grapes to hang way past typical ripeness, almost becoming raisins. With cellar manipulation, these overripe grapes could make the big, smooth reds that had become popular. We also have to look at yeasts. Yeasts are what convert sugar into alcohol, and until the 20th century all wines were fermented only with whatever wild yeasts were on the surface of the grapes, present in the vineyard, or living in the cellar. If the cellar was too cold or the yeasts weren't very strong, the wine would still have sugar left over, meaning lower alcohol. Grapes with too much sugar at harvest were in danger of not fermenting fully. These limitations went away with the commercial, industrial yeasts that

was considered barbaric with water. Even Thomas Jefferson did it. Today, wine where a big, macho wine purchase for the middle one reserved for special had to compete with all ages like soda. A nation ers may not be the target delicate, dry, low alcohol

hol mostly coincided advances. Alcohol in

became widespread in the 20th Century. They are far more efficient at turning all the sugar into alcohol. Modern temperature control also helps keep the yeasts in the ideal range for fermentation. Chaptalization—simply adding sugar to the grapes to boost potential alcohol—is a very old, very common practice in colder years, legal in many regions where the wines would be in danger of not selling below a certain abv. All of these factors led to a steady climb in alcohol percentage.

As with anything, though, the excesses lead to corrections, and nowadays winemakers can fine tune things in ways that lead to dry wines with less alcohol that aren't short on flavor. Much of this is the result of vineyard work. Managing the leaves in the canopy changes how much sunlight gets to the fruit, resulting in more sugar. Many growers find that using organic and biodynamic practices lead to grapes that are more mature and flavorful earlier on, allowing them to pick at lower sugar levels without getting the green vegetal notes that can accompany underripe fruit. Also, working with varieties that are suited and adapted to where they are planted helps immensely. Initially I thought this month would be overrepresented by wines from cooler climates. And while we have wines from Austria and Canada, we also found wines from the warmest parts of Europe, like southern Italy, southern France, and Spain. Some of this is because varieties that have been in an area for centuries have adapted and can achieve maturity before the potential alcohol gets unwieldy.

Between changing consumer tastes and the chaos in the natural world, it's unclear what to expect in the future. Climate change is producing results that are anything but consistent. Importer Steven Graf notes that “the Loire in particular is an interesting example of a place that traditionally struggled for ripeness, then saw vintage after vintage with wines well above 14% abv, and now in 2023 are again producing wines of 10 and 11 percent.” Many regions are dealing with sheer unpredictability, but climate change also has at least made it possible to have wine from regions that were previously too cold to ripen grapes—like Quebec. For instance, we're featuring a Gamay from Pinard et Fils that they can only make in years when it's ripe enough. Even so it only registers 9.5% alcohol. But an open mind towards wines like this allows for more styles, voices, and places—the opposite of Robert Parker's era of conformity.

The desire for lower alcohol wines is not a new thing, and it is hardly at odds with pleasure or flavor in the examples we've found. Subtlety and detail are what I love about wine, and lower alcohol levels often give me more of this. Do I intentionally discriminate against higher abv? No, but there's something

liberating about seeing a wine that is less than 12%. I'll probably drink more of it and at a faster rate, so my liver may not exactly be convinced, but I like the rustic pleasure of a wine with humble ambitions. Wine that doesn't need to bludgeon me, wine that is ok with me ignoring it in favor of the food, the company, the setting. A friendlier companion, as it were, a touch more polite but still up for anything.

Cheers,
Jonathan

Cyclic Fulcrum 2020

Catalonia • Spain

Press 4 Mix/White

Aberto and Joshua have a passion for fermentation. Cyclic Beer Farm started in 2016 in Barcelona, drawing inspiration from traditional Belgian lambic beers, and expanded into fruit fermentations, ciders and wines. Right off the bat, what's clear is that this crew likes making playful, thirst quenching stuff that is interesting - say no more! All fruit is sourced from a handful of organic growers in Catalonia, and "Fulcrum" was made in collaboration with an American winemaker who splits time between making wine in Argentina and Catalonia.



It may be power of suggestion, but "Fulcrum" has a very beer-like presence, in its refreshing nature, but also in the, dare I say "hoppy" herbaceousness. It's generous, mild and fun on the palate, with a juicy, clementine and camomile tea kinda feel. Super refreshing at 9.9%, it's the sports drink of the month.

Bruno Sant'Anna

Edgar Brutler Sefu White 1L 2022

Crișana, Transylvania • Romania

Press 4 Mix/White

Edgar's winery is located in the historical and much disputed territory of Transylvania, officially incorporated into Romania, more specifically the region of Crișana. His family first arrived in Transylvania in the 1850's from Stuttgart with the influx of Swabians from Bavaria. After a few back and forths due to political

unrest his family resettled in the region with the help of the restitution of some land. With the words of wisdom from his grandfather, “a family with two or three kids needs 1000 liters of wine a year,” their family winemaking practice was established. As a child Edgar had his sights set on becoming a musician, but after the reality of the hours of practice and a small percentage of openings for professional musicians Edgar pursued a professional education and training as a winemaker. Now he is able to utilize his musical prowess with his professional winery training to make wine that is influenced by improvisation and feeling with the precision of much larger industrial wineries.

The ‘Sefu White’ is a co-fermentation of Chardonnay, Riesling, Furmint, and Tămâioasă Românească. Edgar presses the grapes with long and high pressure to manage tannin and extraction to avoid solids and unwanted material that would lead to off flavors. The wine is then fermented in large oak barrels and large stainless steel, and is bottled unfiltered, unfinned, and receives a small addition of around 20ppm of sulfur at bottling.

I found the ‘Sefu White’ to be floral, rustic, wild and refreshing upon opening the bottle. After taking a few sips I found the wine to be saline and mineral with green apple notes of tart refreshing acidity. There is also an elegant lactic note shining through giving structure and versatility. *Jeremy Hernandez*

La Senda Vindemiatrix Tinto 2022

Castilla y Leon • Spain

Press 4 Mix/Red

We’ve been following Diego Losada’s work for a little while and we’ve always loved the rustic charm of his wines. After studying organic chemistry at university, he turned to a more natural and intuitive approach for his own project, encouraging biodiversity in the vineyard and rigorously managing yields.

Vindemiatrix is the gateway into the fascinating world of La Senda, sourced from 7 old-vine parcels. In most of these vineyards, red and white grapes are inter-planted, so Diego co-ferments the different native grape varieties, as was done in the past. In this case, the blend is mostly Mencía with a splash of Palomino and Doña Blanca (10% each). The soils are mainly clay-calcareous, and the elevation is around 550 meters. Grapes are partially destemmed, macerated for a few weeks, then fermented and raised in unlined concrete tanks. The finished wine is bottled without fining or filtration, and only a small dose of SO₂.

The resulting wine is light and shows its refreshing fruit with clarity and poise. A touch of smoke and earthy spice keeps it savory and layered. *Bruno Sant’Anna*

[Domaine de L'Idylle Savoie](#) [Mondeuse L'Identite Du Ter-](#) [roir 2022](#)

Savoie • France
Press 4 Mix/Red

The Savoie is about as picturesque as a wine region can be, and the Tiollier family has been a fixture in these parts since 1840. Their vineyards, some over 60 years old, are planted on steep, southeast slopes in the bottom flank of the valley, facing the Alps. Mondeuse is the type of variety that communicates the process quite clearly, and so partial destemming plus fermentations at cool temperatures ensure freshness and clarity here. The wine is aged for about six months in vats, giving it time to manifest a briny salinity alongside its floral aromatics (violets, verbena) and peppered red fruit. It's a total delight. Approachable, complex and so satisfying. *Bruno Sant'Anna*

[Julie & Toby Bainbridge Cu-](#) [vee Crush 2022](#)

Loire Valley • France
Press 4 Red

After founding their estate in Anjou, France in 2012 Julie and Toby shortly became favorites of the natural wine world. Making sincere, honest, and delicious wines at an amazing price point. These are very versatile wines to take to a party to impress your

friends or perfect for a weeknight crusher without sacrificing precision and beauty.

The 2022 'Crush' comes from certified organic Grolleau in the Loire Valley. The grapes are destemmed, macerated for 3 days, and aged for 6 months in stainless steel and fiberglass. The resulting wine is as light and refreshing as it is precise and balanced. Lovely typical bright red high acid fruit up front with elegant sage-like herbaceousness are kept in balance by just the perfect amount of light tannins. This is basically grown up fruit punch to pair with Taco Tuesday or Korean barbecue.



Domaine L'Idylle

Jeremy Hernandez

[La Rural Catalunya Ull de Lle-](#) [bre 2022](#)

Catalunya • Spain
Press 4 Red

We've featured more than a few Catalan stand-outs on these pages, and we're adding another to the list. Brothers Andreu and Xavi Padró started making wine under the name LaRuraL in 2018. Their folks have grown grapes for decades, but never sold their own wine. The vibrant Catalan natural wine scene along with inspiration and support from the likes of Oriol Artigas helped the boys

take the leap and leave their careers in architecture and mechanics and devote themselves to wine growing.

Bruno Sant'Anna

Moritz Kissinger Null Ohm Weiss 2022

Rheinhessen • Germany

Press 4 White

Moritz is a fourth generation wine-maker based in the Rheinhessen region of Germany. He is only the second generation to bottle his own wines after his father. He farms about 2 hectares out of 14 on the family's estate. His style takes a lot of inspiration from Champagne, Jura, and Burgundy which should give you an insight to why his wines taste and feel like they do.



Moritz Kissinger

The '0 Ohm' wines could be called his estate wines that take their names from a measure of electrical resistance, which these being set to 0 let the electricity rip! This is a 50/50 blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Blanc with a few days of maceration on their skins, but don't expect an orange wine. It gets 10 months of aging in barrel resulting in a wine that's full of depth, complexity, and seductive tension. There's a lactic quality on both the nose and palate, a bit of butterscotch, zippy lemon pith, ripping acid giving it generous lift and cut.

Jeremy Hernandez

Rabasco Cancelli Trebbiano d'Abruzzo 2022

Abruzzo • Italy

Press 4 White

This month we're heading to Abruzzo - the land here produces a stunning variety of wines due to its diverse microclimates - whatever you're in the mood for, you'll likely end up finding it in one of the four provinces.

Iole Rabasco is the woman behind Vini Rabasco - a small estate covering 3.5 hectares near Pescara in the heart of Abruzzo - the province closest to the Adriatic, only 40 kilometers away from Iole's vineyards.

Being this close to the sea you can feel the influence of the Mediterranean microclimate, while proximity and soil provides salinity, the mild winters and warm summers give birth to fruit that's never too ripe, striking a balance between tartness and sweetness - one that provides a freshness and joy in the wines.

Cancellino is the name of her Trebbiano d'Abruzzo cuvée, grapes grown on vines that are trained in the ancient Tendone method, a way that allows the plant to form a pergola as the leaf canopy develops and provides protection from the intense sun, undergo a short 24h maceration giving

the wine a light shade of orange with a fermentation that is then being finished in stainless steel to retain the freshness of the fruit.

At only 9.5% ABV the result is a striking combination of fruitiness, salinity and savoriness. Notes of yellow apples, tart apricots, preserved lemon and chamomile with a hint of spice come through as it develops with air.

For me, it's Italian spring captured in a bottle and as we're entering the second month of the gray winter season in New York - that is desperately needed. So when you pair it, think exactly of what you'd have sitting sea-side in Pescara - fresh seafood, a white bean salad, tomato pasta, and of course, lightly cured meats and salty aged cheeses. *Nico Haunold*



Iole Rabasco

[Pinard et Filles Autoportrait Gamay 2021](#)

Quebec • Canada

Press 2

On the forefront of Canada's low intervention wine scene are Pinard et Filles - also known as Frédéric Simon and Catherine Bélanger - who have been pioneering the art of making wine with a unique sense of terroir on 5 hectares of land in Quebec, Canada - and that means ongoing meticulous experimentation to showcase the Nordic terroir and climate of our neighbor north.

On five hectares of land the couple is experimenting with (for the area) rather uncommon *Vinifera* varieties such as Dornfelder and Savagnin as well as a variety of Hybrid grapes that hold up better to the extremes of the climate. Regardless of the vine, the fundamentals don't change: organic farming and a minimum of intervention in the cellar - creating wines that show-case the challenges of making wine in Quebec. The results are wines that are textbook examples of cool climate wine-making - lively, refreshing and complex. Fruit that is so perfectly ripe and balances the line between tartness and sweetness remarkably.

In this month's edition of Direct Press we've included Pinard et Filles's Autoportrait en Gamay, a grape variety you usually come across when drinking reds out of Beaujolais or the Loire. It's a 9.5% ABV expression of Gamay that brings up memories of a

time when the climate in Beaujolais was significantly cooler. Their relentless effort in chasing finesse in their wines shows - in fact, it's only been the second time this cuvée has ever been made. The last time the weather has aligned perfectly was in 2017.

Upon opening you'll find perfectly ripe rhubarb, raspberries, cherries and violets hidden behind a tiny amount of matchstick reduction on the nose disappearing after a few minutes in glass, showing a perfect balance of red fruits, earth and baking spices. High acidity making your mouth ever so slightly pucker and a long, pronounced finish are supporting fruit and driving it home - these are the kinds of wines that made me fall for lighter reds.

Be warned, their lightness can often be deceiving as they're so pleasant to drink that you sometimes forget to give them the attention they deserve, so do what's right: Wind down, put on a slow and relaxing record, pour yourself a glass and take it all in. can: it's not tannic, but more air will allow the subtleties to emerge. There is a really lovely tightrope walk between the sultry, darker tones of wet earth and black cherry with the more elegant, fine-tuned details. Boysenberry and red pepper flake notes add an important lift and overtone series to the wine. There is a long, haunting finish and a quiet, firm voice to this wine that rewards really sitting with it and letting it tell you stories. *Nico Haunold*



Frédéric Simon and Catherine Bélanger

Matassa Blanc 2022

Languedoc-Roussillon • Greece

Press 2

Tom Lubbe is a Kiwi ex-pat making wine in France's Roussillon and for several decades he has been lighting up the natural wine community with his Matassa label. These wines have become more sought-after in the past few years, and we hate to tell you, but the hype is well-deserved.

His philosophy in terms of farming has always been thoughtful and non-conformist. Worms and cover crops are what he sees as the most transformative elements in keeping his land healthy; he hasn't used any sulfur since 2015. Fires exacerbated by drought conditions came for his vines in 2022, wiping out significant portions of vineyards. In August 2022 he said, "apart from the vineyards touched by fire and wild pigs it looks like a lovely year so far."

The wines have a buoyant, lighthearted bent which belies Tom's earnest vineyard work and land stewardship. They are complex and reflect terroir but this is usually overshadowed by how delicious and pleasurable they are. Matassa wines rarely fail to deliver, on their own or with sophisticated cuisine composed on small plates with tweezers. Whether at Septime, Frenchette, or in Brooklyn apartments, they bring joy to the table.

The 'Blanc' is Tom's top white wine and is interestingly not named after a single vineyard site. The average vine age here is about 95 years. Grenache Gris is whole cluster direct pressed and Macabeu macerated for two weeks on skins are blended and aged on lees until bottling. This has all the trademarks of Tom's edgy, raw winemaking with a clarity and focus you'd hope to find in a winemaker's top cuvee. Fresh vibrant tropical citrus notes are balanced with the perfect amount of salinity and florality and rounded out by a luscious lactic note on the finish. Just try to keep your socks on!

Jonathan Kemp & Jeremy Hernandez

