

Ep 186 Orange and Natural Wines with Doug Wregg, Buyer at Les Caves de Pyrene (Part 1)



Janina Doyle 00:00:07 Welcome to Eat Sleep Wine Repeat, a podcast for all you wine lovers, who, if you're like me, just cannot get enough of the good stuff. I'm Janina Doyle, your host, Brand Ambassador, Wine Educator, and Sommelier. So, stick with me as we dive deeper into this ever evolving, wonderful world of wine. And wherever you are listening to this, cheers to you!

Hello, wine friends, and welcome back to another episode on Orange Wine and Natural Wines. And so who better to talk to than Doug Wregg, who is one of the directors and buyers of Les Caves de Pyrene and has been bringing natural wine, biodynamic wine, orange wines into this country for the last 30 years.

And so, my gosh, we've hardly even touched the surface in this episode. So, I'm not going to ramble on. Be prepared to learn about Qvevri. We're touching on Georgia. Of course, sulphites, minimal intervention and we will be discussing what foods pair well with orange wines.

Now don't forget there is a transcript, just go to the show notes and in the show notes, you'll also find all three wines, where tasting, their pricing and where you can get them. Equally, if you haven't been over to online retailer, Wickhams Wine, they are the sponsor of this season and you can use the code "EATSLEEP10" for 10% off your first order. So, what are you waiting for? Pour yourself that glass of wine and let's talk orange.

Janina Doyle 00:01:40 So, Doug, I want to pick your brain all about natural wine and orange wine, because I feel like you are the man to ask. But before we get into all of that, I need everybody listening to understand where you've come from and how wine grabbed you and brought you into this beautiful world.

Doug Wregg 00:01:58 Yeah, I'm self-taught. I sort of gravitated into restaurants because I didn't really have any career in mind. I was going to be a teacher originally, and English and history were my sort of specialities.

I loved the subjects but I hated teaching kids and having to do so much work. I'd never realised how much work teachers have to do in terms of preparation and planning every eventuality known. So, I did like food, but I didn't really know much about it, and I sort of appreciated wine without any knowledge whatsoever.

And then, one day, I was working in a family restaurant and I was given custody of the wine list, which had won some Egon Ronay Best London Wine List Award.

Janina Doyle 00:02:45 Oh, wow.

Doug Wregg 00:02:47 It was a bit intimidating.

Janina Doyle 00:02:47 And they went, Doug, you deal with it now.

Doug Wregg 00:02:49 Yeah, you deal with it. It's your baby. And I thought, but I don't know one end of a Sauvignon from a Chardonnay type thing. I sort of read books. And I was lucky to have Jasper Morris. He's great.

I just felt like wine was really sort of a cheerful subject with him and there were certainties that one could grasp onto. And then eventually just through tasting, making up my own mind, and eventually being able to write a wine list. I won the same award, 'Best Wine List in London.'

Janina Doyle 00:03:23 Congrats!

Doug Wregg 00:03:24 It gave me sufficient cockiness to go a bit further. And then, the restaurant eventually sort of started failing because of recession at the time. I applied for a job as a sommelier and it was for a fish restaurant called 190 Queensgate. And there were like 30 wines in the wine list. I thought, this is rubbish. I mean, what can you do as a sommelier with 30 wines?

One day I went into this cellar, a vaulted cellar underneath the pavement of Queensgate and I found a thousand bins mouldering away as it were, dating back to the 1940s.

Janina Doyle 00:03:59 Belonging to this restaurant though?

Doug Wregg 00:04:00 Belonging to the restaurant and not catalogued. So, I went through, did a stock take, catalogued and thought, I wonder what a 1961 Mouton Rothschild is. I wonder what a 1982 Cheval Blanc is. And some Richeburg from DRC at £80.

The prices on the stock sheet were just insane. And I thought like, but how do we sell it to a fish restaurant where people are having fish and chips, basically? And by sheer, I don't know, dint of bullying and persuasion, I just started to work my way through this vast cellar of just gorgeousness. And as is the remit of the sommelier, I was able to have a nip or two of wine.

Janina Doyle 00:04:42 Of course.

Doug Wregg 00:04:42 And I thought, my God, this is like what makes it incredible. These are celestial wines. These are classy. And it just made me think that wine was a thing apart. And there was much more to learn, even though I was just dabbling at the edges but I had enormous fun because I found that on the floor, people are so responsive.

I mean, they don't want to look at an 80 page wine list. They don't know one thing from another. What's a good vintage? What's a good estate? You know, what it even is? And communicating about it just gave me a bit of confidence. And yeah, it's something that I sort of carried on. I love the idea of talking about wine to people and demystifying it.

Janina Doyle 00:05:23 Teaching!

Doug Wregg 00:05:24 And teaching! Yeah, I definitely have a dormant teaching gene. What happened then? Oh yeah, then I went more on the food side. I went to a gastropub and opened it. And then, I just burnt out because working 80, 90, 100-hour weeks was killing me.

So, then I was offered a job by Eric and who was then partner Liz at Les Caves de Pyrene, which was a three-person wine band based in Guildford specialising in wines of Eric's home region, which is the southwest, the Gascony, Tarn-et-Garonne, Pyrenees.

And well, say the rest is history. I mean, we survived by the skin of our teeth for about like seven or eight years. And now we're a worldwide phenomenon without investment. It's all been just natural organic growth.

And I suppose in the early 2000s, we've carved a niche for ourselves as a specialist in organic, biodynamic and natural wines, which culminated with us opening our wine bar called Terroirs in Charing Cross, that alas closed. And then off the back of that, another four or five wine bars and a partner company in Italy and one in Australia.

Again, without investment, we just grew. Eric had lots of fantastic ideas, which were really exciting, some which saw the light of day and some which never did. And we're now like a stable company, having survived the pandemic and came out even better on the other side, even stronger. We're in a good position, I think, and we're handing the next generation of Cave de Pyrenies, I guess is how I describe it.

Janina Doyle 00:06:59 I love that.

Doug Wregg 00:07:00 It's very much a company owned by the people who work there. So, it's a sort of communist system or collective system of 14 directors and 14 people who work every day for Les Caves. They get up in the morning and they're working for themselves effectively. And that's, I think, a really positive model for any business.

Janina Doyle 00:07:18 And if I'm right, you are the director of sales and marketing?

Doug Wregg 00:07:22 I'm not anymore. Now, I'm the director of marketing. Sales, my colleague David, took that over from me six years ago. I think it was six or seven years ago. So, I'm marketing and buying as well. So, I sort of switched when I gave up the sales side, I switched much more to buying. I mean, my main thing is writing is our blog.

Janina Doyle 00:07:43 To teach.

Doug Wregg 00:07:44 To teach through the back door. To teach subtly. Yeah. I think when natural wine became a phenomenon, I was like more of one of those teachers who would have like a bit of chalk in their hands and just throw it at people. I just wanted to make something stick. So, I was quite wanting to convert people to the wines and now I'm just really laid back.

I like to teach in the sense that I love to talk about wine as if it was just a normal thing, like, it could be music or art or politics, geology, whatever it might be. For me, wine just touches on so many subjects that are interesting to me and would be interesting, at some level, to some person. And I just want to make it relatable rather than something abstract in a bottle and pretentious.

Janina Doyle 00:08:33 Obviously, Les Caves and you have been bringing in these natural wines for a really long time, almost that has been helping shape this energy where younger generations are really, really interested in natural wine.

But there is still sometimes a conversation around this, like, what the hell is natural wine? Because people kind of take it off in different tangents. So for you, would you be able to teach, enlighten our listeners what you believe and what you know is natural wine?

Doug Wregg 00:09:04 I always say it depends which day of the week you are doing, depending on the time of the day. I deliberately don't have a consistent definition.

Janina Doyle 00:09:14 Okay. What do we get today?

Doug Wregg 00:03:16 Today? I mean, someone asked me for a simple definition and I was still talking for 40 minutes and I didn't come to the end of the sentence. So, I'm going to avoid that. I'm going to say that natural wine comes from natural farming, by which I mean organic, sustainable, bio-dynamic, chemical free in the vineyard as far as possible and brought to the bottle.

The grapes are selected and the wine is made without any additions other than maybe a little bit of sulphites and brought to the bottle without any chemicals, minimal filtration or other sort of techniques.

So, it's actually in the sense that it's not denatured by excessive manipulation or lots of process or additions and compensations. It's almost like saying, well, it's not what it isn't. If you think of wine, it's a made product and it's often a product and products are shaped to be consumer friendly. Natural wine isn't that necessarily. It's more a reflection of the vintage in the place and the nature of the process and the nature of the vigneron who makes it. And you say, well, for better or for worse, this is what happened.

But I would also insert the fact that no vigneron wants to make a crappy natural wine. Really, they don't. They don't want to make a wine which is natural and crappy. They want to make the best possible wine they can make. And they believe the best possible wine they can make, the truest wine they can make is the one with the fewest manipulations. And that these wines have an incredible energy that only something close to nature could have. It's that you don't taste the artifice, the process, the processing in it.

So, when you're drinking it, it seems seamless. It seems to be you're drinking something straight from the vineyard. That's unique. It's singular. And it's pretty vague as well, because I always say that natural wine, when you taste it, you think this is real, this is natural. You could put it into numbers if you'd like. And, and you can explore technical details of how it's made but it's less interesting than the sensation of it being natural and the enjoyment and pleasure that it gives.

Janina Doyle 00:11:30 So, the questions that you've explained are all the positives and we're gonna open up some wines anyway so people will know how delicious they are. But one of the questions often is the shelf life. If we are not adding additives or preservatives, sulphur obviously is a great preservative that is going to allow your wine to stay fresh and not oxidise and the whole point of natural wine is either not adding any or adding very little.

So, what do you say to people that either straight away make the comment that there is no ageability of these natural wines or they're going to oxidise. What is your opinion? What do you feel from tasting so many natural wines over the years?

Doug Wregg 00:12:10 Truth is always more complicated. I remember being interviewed by a wine magazine and they said, is it true that natural wines don't age? And I said, well, in a lot of cases, particularly red wines, they're not really meant for ageing.

And the headline, the sub editor for the headline 'Wregg Says Natural Wines Can't Age.' It's precisely what I did not say. And it's so frustrating. Of course, some are made for juicy, easy drinking...

Janina Doyle 00:12:37 The glou glou wines.

Doug Wregg 00:12:38 Yeah. The carbonic glou glou.

Janina Doyle 00:12:40 Is that a word?

Doug Wregg 00:12:41 Yeah. Glug, Glug. Yeah. They're made for drinking now like Beaujolais Nouveau style, like, just simply juice pressed quickly bottled to be drunk, put a little bit of carbon dioxide to be drunk now and chilled. Definitely.

But there are wines like take a Vin Jaune from the Jura. I mean, that's released after seven years. So, those wines, often made without any sulphites whatsoever, will last 100 years. They will last longer than most of us.

So, it depends on the purpose the wine is being made for. White wines, particularly, especially ones that undergo long lees ageing, like, a long time under the lees, a long time in wooden barrels, ageing oxidatively before release, they're like born in oxygen, they live in oxygen, and they don't die in oxygen.

So, they have a longevity, some of them, which can be 15, 20 years. Conventional wines don't. Conventional wines, because they are protected, firstly, the quality of the grapes that goes into them is probably not as good if they're not organically and biodynamically farmed.

Secondly, they tend to be stripped off the lees. They tend to be filtered. There's nothing to protect them. Only thing to protect them is sulphur. Exposed to air, they die almost immediately. With some exceptions, I have one great story of going to Austria in about 2017 and visiting a cellar and the winemaker pulled out a bottle of 1955 Sylvaner and he poured it and he said, "What do you think of that?" And I said, "It's still alive." And he said, "Yeah, it has 350 milligrams of sulphur." And I said, "It's still dead."

Like, it never was alive. It was completely pickled in sulphur. In a hundred years time, if it hasn't completely evaporated through the cork, it'll still be in this inert stage. And it was impressive that you could say it was functional as a wine, but it was completely disgusting in the sense that you could still taste a ton of sulphur. I wonder, is there any point in doing that?

At the time, I think this was just standard practice in places like Austria and Germany. White wine, you sulphured and you sulphur and you're sulphur. But I tend to think that, especially, you can taste sulphur as well at very low levels, people don't realise it. But certainly, for white wines, about 50-60 parts per million and you're allowed up to 210.

And I'm sure a lot of parts per million, I'm sure a lot of wines have well above that. It just scalps the wine, it scars the fruit, it makes it really unpleasant. And yes, in a sort of metallic way, the wine will

be preserved in that shape. But wine is a living thing and natural wine is really a living thing and it must be mutable. It must change from day to day. It must change in the mouth because it's full of active living organisms. It's a microbiological construct, if you like, and a beautiful one. And that's what makes it interesting for people like me is that I want to have the same wine constantly. I don't want it to be invariable from bottle to bottle.

I don't want to be invariable from glass to glass because then glass one to glass sixes are identical. But imagine, you had six different glasses in one bottle. That's exciting to me to see the way the wine develops, to see its arc even within one bottle.

Janina Doyle 00:16:02 Yeah, I think giving it a performance, it's more than just a story. And yeah, I always think, whether it's the change of temperature, whether it's a wine that's a blended grape, it's wonderful when your initial reaction to the wine completely changes to the end, because then it just creates your memory. The memory bank is going to stay and that's the joy.

Wine is a natural product. Grapes, they came from the earth and it's beautiful when it's just more than just pouring a glass. I think that wine is something that no other drink product can give with its ability to adapt and change and evolve with one bottle.

Doug Wregg 00:16:39 I like to think it's sort of analogue and a lot of winemaking is digital. It's trying to create like a fake perfection. But for me, it's actually more like a live performance. So, I've been listening to a lot of music from my favourite band and I've listened to all the albums and they're like produced. And then, I listen to them live and they're so much better live because the imperfections are what gives the character to the whole performance and it makes those songs to me, the very same songs, infinitely better when you hear them live with all their edges and tweaks and whatever.

Janina Doyle 00:17:14 And even imperfections, actually. When we think about human beings, nobody is perfect and our favourite people are imperfectly perfect or perfectly imperfect. I always say you don't want super, super smooth all the time. So, okay, that's super interesting.

Now, I just want to touch on sulphur before I move away from that. Because of natural wine, you don't get certified. There is obviously movement and certain areas that are a little bit vague. With sulphur, I know, it is like the raw wine fair. I think as long as a wine is under 70 parts per million, in theory, then it's allowed to be shown. Am I right?

Doug Wregg 00:17:50 I think it's under 70 for white and under 50 for red.

Janina Doyle 00:17:56 Right. And for you, do you feel that that is again, you mentioned at 50, 60, after that, then you can kind of really start tasting it. So, do you feel like that is an appropriate level for you where you feel like the wine is as natural as it can be?

Doug Wregg 00:18:11 I think it depends on the wine and the vintage, but I think technically, legally, it has to be below 10, not to say contain sulphites in the bottle. But 10 is very unlikely, particularly for white wines. They require maybe a degree of protection.

I feel it's totally arbitrary if I say that I like whites below 50 and reds below 20. But that's me. That's not in any particular rule. There is a Vin Nature Society now in France. It was formed by a lot of

growers who were annoyed that people were jumping on board the natural wine bandwagon. As far as they could see, they weren't fessing up on their farming practices and their winemaking practices. So, they established upper limits of 20 or whatever, 20 and 10 or something like that. I can't remember exactly what it was.

I'm not a person who believes in policing things. I also believe that to admit people who are slightly outside is fine because only that way are they going to go on a journey and discover that using less may make more interesting wines.

For me, from a taste perspective, I really like zero sulphur wines when they're bang on. I mean, it's an incredible thing when it's right. It's not always right and there are a lot of faulty things – a lot of things that happen along the way. And fair enough, we all acknowledge that there are bretty, mousy, VA wines, but when they are on song, there is nothing like them.

And I can't make it a hierarchical thing. I can only make it this sort of distinction of when I taste it, I go, wow. That's it. That is like an epiphany or that sets a reference point from my palate that it's going to be really difficult to grow back from.

So, the very first natural wine I ever had, Zero-Zero wine was like, I don't even know whether I like this, but I will never forget it. And actually, it did reconfigure the way I tasted wine because I started looking for edges and imperfections as beautiful things within the wine. And the more I found them, the more enchanted I was. And the more those wines felt real to me.

Janina Doyle 00:20:20 Okay. It's super interesting. Now within the natural wine category, winemaking process, orange wines often have been made because there's an incredible history for orange wines. So, can I ask you before we actually start opening up some orange wines that we have to let people know what actually is an orange wine?

Doug Wregg 00:20:46 An orange wine or an amber wine is literally a skin contact wine. So, our red wines, our skin contact wines, and so are pink wines. But basically, it's wines made from grapes that one would commonly think of as white grapes in which the juice macerates with the skins for a variable length of time to extract colour, orangey, amber, golden, and tannins and structural elements.

But having said that, and here we say there's no such thing as a white grape variety, because if you look at something like Pinot Gris, the skin is not white. The skin is purpley, almost pinky. If you look at Gewurztraminer, which we're gonna try later, the skins are really orangey in colour.

And so, it's totally arbitrary to call them white grape varieties any more than if you look at the spectrum of red grapes, some are light blue and some are black. And of course, the wines that result from them are incredibly different.

Obviously, the deeper skinned white grape varieties often make richer, more unctuous sort of orange or skin contact wines. But I guess, like if I was to say, oh, here's an easy definition. Orange wines are like red wines or white wines made in a red wine style using the same technique as you would make a red wine. And often the results, if you close your eyes and taste them blind are more similar to red wines than they are to white wines. But there's such a vast spectrum.

Janina Doyle 00:22:28 So, many different styles as well.

Doug Wregg 00:22:31 Yeah, we have 150 different versions of the different wines on our list. And some are almost juicy like orange juice. And some are rich and tannic and deep and long lived and everything in between.

Janina Doyle 00:22:45 So, what we're gonna do is we're going to go through a few orange wines. I want to start with a wine that has just been staring at me saying, drink me, drink me. And this is the Christian Binner. It's a Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer orange wine called Si Rosé. Am I right?

Doug Wregg 00:23:08 Si Rose.

Janina Doyle 00:23:08 Oh, Si Rose.

Doug Wregg 00:23:09 Not Rosé. With Christian, there's like a thousand plays in words, which I'll take you through. Some are very silly as well. But Traminer is the rose because it smells of roses, like tea roses. And Si Rose is like, it's a French play on words for cirrhosis.

Janina Doyle 00:23:32 Okay.

Doug Wregg 00:23:33 I know it's a bit silly. And then it's also the Si bit is an allusion to the fact of global warming that this is a Mediterranean wine made in Alsace using Mediterranean methods.

Janina Doyle 00:23:45 God! Okay. So, this wine, first of all, it's quite clearly gonna be quirky, absolutely. It's a mixture of vintage 19, 20, 21 and 22. It's cloudy, but you can actually see the yeast, the sediment moving through the wine.

You know what it reminds me of? The light is shining through the window and I'm looking at this wine. Do you remember those lava lamps that were really, really cool, like 20, 30 years ago or 40 years ago? I used to have one and you could just see the gloop moving around. There is real genuine movement in this.

It's amazing and it's a phenomenal, beautiful colour. This orangey, pinky, peach colour. Anyway, it is crazy. Lovely and aromatic and peachy. Whilst I'm having a little sip of this, can you tell me about this crazy natural wine or even natural winemaker quite clearly and what are they doing in the winery with this?

Doug Wregg 00:24:50 It's a non-vintage wine. So, the process started around 2016 as the idea of a solera, or a reserved perpetual as they call it in France. It was a homage to that basically as summers in Alsace, which is a very hot, dry and sunny place, you're getting warmer and warmer in a way perhaps runs a more Germanic style of aromatic wines.

Maybe they play on this fact that grapes ripened by the sun, why would you discard their skins, which have so much power in them, so much aroma, so much material potential. So, why not use those?

And it's becoming an increasing feature of winemaking throughout Northern Europe. We would never have said, ou never get the ripeness to make an orange/ skin contact wine. And now it's not at

all problematic. Taking the two perhaps best grapes or for me two of the best four grapes to make skin contact wines being Gewurztraminer. Actually this is Traminer Rose, I think it's called.

Janina Doyle 00:26:00 Is this a mutation or a slight clone of Gewurztraminer?

Doug Wregg 00:26:08 Yeah, I think it's called Traminer Traminer Rose basically. And you see it a bit in the Jura as well, occasionally in other parts of the world and Northern Italy. And then Pinot Gris. Pinot Gris, literally, you can macerate for two days and you can get this extraordinary pinkish colour. And Traminer has this sort of almost coppery colour.

I mean, between them, they're quite sort of similar when you macerate. Very much done according to vintage. Because it's meant to be an average style, one vintage will have eight days. They'll be co-fermented. Eight days of maceration and it pulls out enough colour.

Next year, if it's a hotter year, it will be eight months. So, cooler vintages get less maceration. Hotter vintages get much longer maceration. And then they're combined. And then they're supplemented with the reserve wines from the previous years, which will also be quite similar because every other year, it's either a disaster or a feast in terms of Alsace at the moment.

When you taste it, it's like being transported to a beautiful, warm Mediterranean climate. I mean, I don't think of Alsace particularly when I'm trying this wine. But what you said right at the beginning, I totally agree with. I drink with my eyes as much as anything now. And when I stand it on my balcony and put it in a glass, the way the light catches it, although it's cloudy as F, it's so transparent in terms of its intention. It's swirling with matter and material and it glows. It literally glows. And that makes it incredibly appetising.

So, when I put it in my mouth, I just feel like it's like food. It's really, really nourishing. It's got a beautiful spice, it's got sort of warmth. It's thoroughly exotic. And I like it because the best sort of grapes for skin contact are low acid grapes. What you lose in acidity, you gain in a wonderful bitterness and like this breadth of structure. So, it just fills your palate. It just envelops your tongue. And I think it's a very sensual, sexy wine, basically.

Janina Doyle 00:28:18 This is definitely a super, super sexy wine. What I really, really love about this is not just the aromatics. They're so lively, but not in your face, but then the texture of the wine is super, super chalky at the same time.

So, one of the things that comes with skin contact is that you are gonna get tannins. That's one of the things you get. But here, it's not really giving me any tannic grip. It's just adding this lovely chalky texture. And the freshness, it's light, it's bright. So, it's on the nose. You've got this orange sherbet musky peach thing going on.

And you mentioned spiciness, ginger, I'm just getting ginger completely. But then the palate has this kind of grapefruit acidity. And I can confirm for anybody who has tasted natural wine and is like, I don't like natural wine when it tastes like cider. I don't like it when it's mousy. All of these other potential faults or just not a flavour profile that someone likes. This is just soft and textural and vibrant, and pretty and looks gorgeous in the bottle as well.

Anybody wanting to taste a wine that's really yummy, I think actually for everybody, I don't think this wine is going to put anybody off. I think anyone, whether you just like your Pinot Grigio, or you like your Sauvignon Blanc, this is fine. This is not extreme. It's not challenging. That's the word I'm trying to say. It's just yummy.

Doug Wregg 00:29:52 Yeah, it's seductive, I think. And it starts with a colour and it ends with a palate. And it's so mellow in the way that you feel about it. It makes you feel really, really good. As I say, sometimes you put some in your mouth and you think, I want to drink it because it's really nourishing.

The balance of all the different parts this year has made it much lighter as well. It can be quite a 14 percenter, but I think I can't remember what this is, 13. So, it's dialled down a little bit because the cool vintage sort of came recently.

It's also got a little sliver of Riesling, which I think gives the little citrus like scorpion flick, whatever. As I say, otherwise you've got these like richer, softer grapes. I think having a little bit of citrus just keeps it sort of honest and fresh.

Janina Doyle 00:30:45 I love this wine and I love the label and I love everything about it. I love that it's different. I love it's got a story. I think it comes from Grand Cru sites as well. This is super high quality fruit. How much would somebody have to pay to enjoy this beautiful bottle of wine?

Doug Wregg 00:31:00 Now you stumped me. It'll be around £30.

Janina Doyle 00:31:04 £30 a bottle. Okay. Everybody, in the show notes, I will put the pricing of these wines and where you can get them from with a link so that you can experience them as well.

Now this is from Alsace. I know they're going towards a lot more organics and actually biodynamics is a conversation, but for me, I don't think of Alsace as a natural region or even orange. For you, where do you think around the world – and of course, you're going to say Georgia. We'll get to that in a second. Apart from Georgia, where in the world do you think are the hot pockets for orange wine and natural wine?

Doug Wregg 00:31:43 Central Eastern Europe, definitely. Slovenian, Friulian means Istria. That's sort of area. That has like 200 years of history. So, there was a very famous Slovenian priest called Matija Vertovic. He travelled around Europe and he had his vineyard up in Vipava Valley, in Slovenia.

He was very much a proponent of local grape varieties. But one of the things he wrote about was skin contact. So, I'm not sure if this is the first, perhaps just the most extant book on winemaking and skin contact, but he was internationally famous as well.

He believed that skin contact gave a certain balance and breadth and depth to the wine, but not too much. He was very much a proponent of four to six days of maceration. And obviously, I don't have evidence, but I pretty well suspect that everybody in Eastern Europe and a lot of producers in Italy worked with a sort of skin maceration in various ways.

There's an Italian expression, *Vino Giallo*, yellow wine, orange wine. It's all the same thing. Because I think technically speaking, who had destemmers and stainless steel tanks in the 19th century? Nobody, of course.

What was the easiest thing to do? Just chuck a whole bunch of grapes into a pot. Because also, wine was not an exportable commodity. It was never going to travel further than the kitchen table or the village.

I suspect wine was always natural and white wines were pretty well always yellow or orange wines, whether they were through deliberate skin maceration or through natural oxidation, working in with open clay pots or whatever it might be.

This was a fact of life. But I suppose if you think about wine culture, you think about the Mediterranean. I mean, it obviously came from Georgia through Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt to Greece, and then across the Mediterranean.

But I suspect that orange wines or skin contact wines were the fact of life. In terms of the modern culture, then as I say, you go to Slovenia, I suppose, modern day Friuli, Croatia, and then you arrive with Gravner, Josko Gravner, famous Italian producer who was making conventional wines for a long time. Then he went to Georgia, I think around the 1990s and was sort of totally bitten by the bug there, fell in love with the idea of making wine in clay pots called Qvevri, brought them back and made his own skin contact version.

And the rest is history. He influenced a guy called Radikon, who influenced Princic and then there was a whole movement of Friulian-Slovenian producers and pretty well that spread across Italy from north to south.

But I suspect there are also other movements. I mean, I think people locally were making these sorts of wines, but I think it just put them on the critical map. And I think when Gravner started doing it, he was pretty well repudiated by every critic, everybody, all his supporters, people thought he'd taken leave of a sentence. They thought the wine was awful weird. The colour itself is so shocking.

And I think the first time anyone encounters orange wines, and I've been working with them since the early 2000's, is that people's eyes, they sort of light up, but they pop out at the same time. They're shocked because they think the colour is wrong. It's not on the spectrum of a white, red, rosé. It's different.

Janina Doyle 00:35:26 They don't teach us that in the WSET either.

Doug Wregg 00:35:28 No, no, not for years. Natural wine was not acknowledged. Georgia was not acknowledged. But orange wines were definitely the wrong colour. Then at some point, maybe it was Simon Woolf's book help. But also, I think, there's been a consciousness in restaurants that these are phenomenally gastronomic wines and the methodology of course is obvious when you think about it, but I think we tend to compartmentalise everything in wine because it just makes it easy for people to learn about it.

But actually, all the things I've ever learned about wine through doing WSET, I've unlearned them all because they were drastic oversimplifications or just plain wrong sometimes. It never took account of the culture of wine. And the culture of wine stretches back 8,000 years, but teaching about wine seemed to be a photograph of the last 20 or 30 years.

All this technology which makes modern products has been irrelevant in the history of wine. It may be where we are now, but people are now moving the other way. People are rediscovering the past to look for the future in an odd way.

Janina Doyle 00:36:35 And that is where we look to Georgia, the cradle of wine. And so, I've poured myself this bottle of – Oh, my God, do you want to even pronounce it?

Doug Wregg 00:36:43 So, Solikouri is the name of the grape variety, but it's actually a play on words. It is always a play on words. Underneath that is the name of the village. So, every Georgian producer who usually has like half a hectare or one hectare of vines always puts the name of their village where their few rows of vines are.

This is one hectare of vines in a tiny village in central Western Georgia. The region is called Imereti. The grape variety is called Solikouri, but in Georgia Tsolikouri would always be spelled with a 'T' in front of the 'S'. So, Tsolikouri.

Janina Doyle 00:37:20 I'm glad you mentioned that because again this happens a lot with Georgian grapes and spellings.

Doug Wregg 00:37:27 The person who was perhaps one of the most influential growers in modern Georgia, by which I mean, post 2005, was Soliko. This is like a homage to Soliko. Now, this is an involved story.

So, in Eastern Georgia, where the majority of wine is made, in Kakheti region, east of Tbilisi, the wines traditionally are one that invariably are skin contact, deep amber wines made from very long macerations on the skin, using grape varieties such as Rkatsiteli, probably the biggest planted grape variety in Georgia, and Mtsvane.

And they're always profound amber wines, which have had anything up to six months on skins. In the west of Georgia, Imereti and all other regions, they don't use that. They don't use the stems. They also only use a proportion. 10% of skins against 90% of juice. And therefore, the wines there are lighter, almost more European in style, shall we say.

But the terroir is different. So, it's much cooler, it's much more humid, much rainier in the west, and the soil is different. It's more like limestone clay, whereas in the east, it's hot continental, hot, hot summers, cold, cold winters, and different grape varieties.

So, completely different heritage, grape varieties, east and west. So, Rkatsiteli, thick skinned, full of tannin, quite neutral. It really gets his personality through the maceration, whereas in the west, they're much more aromatic grape varieties; Tsolikouri, Tsitska, Krakhuna, and others.

Anyway, this is Tsolikouri, the western Georgian grape variety from Imereti, but made as a homage to Soliko, who was a guy who had a winery called 'Our Wine,' who lived in Kakheti and made traditional Kakhetian deep amber wine.

So, it's a play on that. So, Ramaz, who makes this wine, always makes no skin contact wines, except for this, which is this homage. So, he's showing that this grape variety is handled in a really beautiful, gentle way, four months on skins, but only for like 20% of the whole wine. And you get this beautiful

balance of something which has almost satiny corduroy, soft velvety tannins. And then, beautiful freshness underneath, which is a classic Imeretian style of winemaking.

And it's made in the Georgian style of buried qvevri, but terracotta clay pots, big ones buried in the cellar, used to be in the vineyard, but they moved it into the cellar. It stays with the skins for a certain length of time, and then it's transferred, I guess, or racked into a clean qvevri where it ages to the point where it wants to be bottled. That's it basically.

The Georgian thing is the skins are the mother of the wine and the wine rests with mother over the winter. Then when it's taken away from mother, the skins always fall to the bottom of these beautiful big old clay pots and settle right at the bottom.

They're not really doing much there. Only when the wine is fermenting are they punching down, like, they're making a red wine. So, they're just punching down the cap with big poles. And then after malo, they'll put it in a clean, qvevri terracotta clay pot and they're at rest, basically on the fine lees and then it's bottled.

Janina Doyle 00:41:15 It's really interesting. You can see that it hasn't had a crazy amount of skin contact or loads of maceration time or punching down because it's medium golden with a hint of orange, isn't it? It's pale in comparison to some. I'm really surprised.

Of course, I've never tried this grape variety, but for me, I've got this real nice honey note, but then it's still really lovely, just kind of apple pear freshness and a bit of yeastiness. That's going not only on the nose am I getting a little bit of that but the texture as well, but it's a really light wine. Again, for somebody who's never tried orange wine, who is scared or just doesn't like orange wine when there's too much grip or tannin, this is also a really nice wine to try. Is that why you picked this for me to try?

Doug Wregg 00:42:08 Yes. Yeah, I picked these wines because I think they're really well-balanced in their particular ways. I mean, they're distinctive, but this is really silky to me. It's really fresh and elegant.

I don't think I would necessarily start with a Rkatsiteli wine or something really hardcore, deep amber, full of astringent tannins. Yeah, there's a place for those wines, but I think there's a recognition even in Georgia that sort of the world turns and adjustments in winemaking have to be made.

And I think Georgians now, increasingly love to drink European wines and you get a sense they're moving towards freshness in the winemaking, less extraction, less tannin, and more immediacy. Yeah, to bring out the grape variety as well, because if you macerate something to death, what's the original, where are the nuances in the wine?

I think, for me, this is like delicious slow cooking. It just brings out flavour. And I think the best orange wines are like that. As I said earlier, they move in the mouth. They change. There's always something different every time you sort of chew it around. I think that's really intriguing.

Janina Doyle 00:43:20 And this is beautiful. And the worst thing is where I've literally just opened them as we are talking. And this is my only comment, instant reaction. Everyone, you'll have to

check out Instagram and later on when I have them in a nice glass after maybe a decant. But yeah, beautiful length. I like the freshness and the lightness of this.

And if you don't like aromatic wines, too perfumed, too pretty, like the other one, which I adore. But if that's not for you, then this is actually a little bit more citrusy, a little fresher, a little more savoury in comparison. I love how entirely different they are. How much would this set us back? Any guesses?

Doug Wregg 00:44:00 About 27-ish probably.

Janina Doyle 00:44:07 And anybody asking about qvevris, these clay pots, they've become so popular now just all over the world, people are playing around with different ageing vessels. What do you think is the advantage of fermenting your wine in a qvevri, using them in the winemaking process?

Doug Wregg 00:44:26 Well, actually, they're quite rare, because there's only five producers of qvevris who are pretty legit. I mean, you can make slightly more commercial style, but they have to be hand built from scratch, hand thrown.

The guy I visited twice, he's in his 80s now and his apprentice is his son. He's like 55. He wasn't even allowed to touch qvevri until he was around 50. So, it's a UNESCO heritage protected sort of like a designation or whatever they call it.

Janina Doyle 00:44:57 Yeah, Intangible...

Doug Wregg 00:44:59 Intangible Cultural Heritage, I think. They want to set up schools to teach it, but no one really wants to make qvevris as a career. But they're beautiful, huge vessels. And I think the thing about them is that when they go in the ground, that's it. They're not coming up unless they're broken or something like that.

So, they're not like amphora in that you can transport them around. You can't move them around the winery. Once they're there, they're sealed in the ground. And there's something rather wonderful, both really and symbolically.

So, the real side is that wine stored underground is being stored at a constant cool temperature. So, in the summer, that's very, very good. And even wineries, unless the temperature is controlled, the temperature will go up and down, but qvevris will always remain fairly constant.

Symbolically as well – the Georgians began symbolism and Christianity. A qvevri is meant to represent a woman. This is a bulbous, almost pregnant shape. The vines obviously have their feet in clay. The qvevris are made of clay. The wine is like whatever, and then goes into the woman, and then it's given birth. And then hence the mother, the material is the mother, and then it's put on its feet. It's a child. And then you drink it in a clay bowl. So, it's clay to clay to clay. Also like Adam is a man of clay. So, they play on that sort of religious conceit as well.

And of course, also remember that Georgia is the most, perhaps the greatest wine culture in terms of it is endemic in everyday life. It's like they're supposed to say they eat wine. I mean, they sort of eat wine. They think wine. It's part of everyday life. And I think that's really important. And the hospitality of course is integral. Wine is always on the table – births, deaths, whatever. Celebration

or parties, you're just drinking wine and you tend to be drinking one style of wine as well. They're not trying to make 20 different cuvees. It's just like the one wine from that one pot for the table.

Janina Doyle 00:46:45 That's fascinating. So, I was entirely wrong. Well, some people are using qvevris around the world, but of course to transport them is very difficult, but I guess it's amphoras. It's different terracotta pots or even cement eggs. There's lots of it. Yeah, amphoras are different. They are normally above ground, much smaller, and have handles.

So, that's actually super useful, I think, for people actually understanding because I think a lot of people go, what is the difference between amphora and qvevris?

Doug Wregg 00:47:25 Yeah. I think the other thing is that qvevris are made from local clay. There are four or five places in Georgia where the clay is always sourced from the nearest river or it has to be a particular sort of clay and when they're fired at a thousand degrees or whatever like that then they're sealed with beeswax on the inside.

If you look at tinajas in Spain, completely different sort of clay, no sealing and they're much smaller, usually 250 to 400, maybe litres max. A qvevri can be anything from 2000 litres to 10,000 litres. The shape is incredibly different as well.

Traditional amphora, which was for transporting grain and water, were really slim with two handles. They are sort of more Roman ones. The Dolio, big almost plumped, almost round. Amphora, again, are completely different.

Of course, I think the shape of any vessel, whether it's wood or clay or cement, has a profound effect on the wine. The amount of contact the wine has with the vessel, the amount of air that's inside the vessel.

It's no coincidence, I think most orange wines are made in sort of like wood or cement or amphora because of this sort of micro oxidation, this little amount of air that softens and rounds and enriches the wine and gives it its sort of flavour profile.

Janina Doyle 00:48:15 Amazing. Thank you for educating me on the qvevris. They are fascinating. After this, I'm going to go and do my own research. I think there's so much to learn about them. Let's finish off with the last wine, which we were talking about Gravner. We were talking about Radikon. We were talking about some of the big names.

And for me, I think this wine from the winery Judith Beck, she is a big name for me when I think of natural wines, orange wines. Is that just my perception? She's a real go-to for me.

Doug Wregg 00:49:24 I think she's part of a group of producers in Austria. I mean, for me, Austria is such a mature wine culture, not old, but it is mature and responsive. Groups of growers get together, taste each other's wines, offer each other help, throw around ideas.

And she's part of a group called Pannobile which they're based in the Burgenland. There's a dozen producers and they just taste each other's wines. And they tend to work more naturally. All of them are certified organic, usually biodynamic: 'Demeter' or whatever.

Judith, like so many Austrian producers, took over her father's estate and the fathers were always making pretty classic, pretty conventional wines. Yeah, 'very' to put it mildly. And then, Judith and like-minded people, they travel around the world. They got ideas. They had a much more modern take on wines. Then they would go back, rebuild the winery and implement what was most important was biodynamics. We're in this sort of Steiner country, big time here.

She makes a more classic range, but it's still very natural. And then she makes much more experimental, zero sulphur wines and something like this, which is a grape variety. I think she likes it and a lot of other producers love it because it's just such fun.

As I say, it's the best one to play with in terms of doing skin contact wines. And more and more actually, sort of more evolved whites have a certain proportion of skin contact, could be like usually around 10 days, but some quite pale like a Welschriesling could almost have no colour whatsoever. I mean, but it just doesn't take a lot of colour. But then a Traminer, 10 days, takes that much colour. And I think that shows you why it's such a favourite grape variety in terms of working with skin.

Janina Doyle 00:51:20 I mean, this one is floral as hell. You sniff it and it's like lilies, jasmine, but then also even going to, like, there's a touch of like coriander. It's so aromatic. This out of all of them is the most full bodied. And I get this really lovely mouth feel, but it's got this kind of lime zest, again, energy, which I've really enjoyed across all three. But seriously, really, really floral. It's fun, but there's quite a lot going on here.

Doug Wregg 00:51:56 I think Oz Clarke was describing something like being spring and autumn in a single glass. And the flowery element of this is like spring and the sort of plush apricotty, spiced apricot and peachy fruit, that's autumn. That's literally the trees in the orchard just dropping stuff on the floor. But the colour makes me think of late summer. It's just a golden wine in terms of all that.

And something we haven't probably mentioned is these are great wines gastronomically speaking. And Georgian, of course, you get 16 dishes thrown on the table and you have it with vegetables and mushrooms and meat and whatever. I mean, you go to Burgenland, basically they have this with meat, like you can have it with chicken or even beef.

Believe it or not, you can call that wine that works amazingly well with bigger, richer, bolder flavours because they are that themselves without being obvious. And actually, if they are quite aromatic, then they're toned down by whatever you're eating with.

Janina Doyle 00:53:01 I mean, I love the end.. of course, they still have these beautiful acidity as well as texture. Again, I would often pair it with things like mackerel or salmon to really kind of cut through.

But also I quite like orange wines unless they're super, super tannic. So, especially these that have some really lovely aromatics with a lot of Asian cuisine, noodle dishes, I think can be really, really nice.

I mean, it may be what goes together, grows together, all that. Mediterranean dishes, if we think about Baba Ganoush and lots of those kinds of more tapas-y Mediterranean dishes, I think can be really, really nice. I don't know if you have any specific dishes that just jump to mind, but in my head, that's what comes out.

Doug Wregg 00:53:40 No, I absolutely agree. I mean, I don't know why I always default to thinking of what's on the table in Georgia for what goes with orange wines, because everything's on the table. So, everything goes.

Janina Doyle 00:53:54 Basically, yes. If you want to do a whole load of food on the table, get some orange wine.

Doug Wregg 00:53:59 Yeah, exactly. But I think they are so versatile because if you're feeling the mood for a white wine, but you want something with a bit more structure, it's obvious to go with something like this.

I sort of went off the rosé a bit. I mean, I used to drink a lot of it, but it's so triple filtered, sulphured and whatever. They're often completely innocuous and dilute. This gives me my rosé thrill. If I need the colour, I've got the colour. I've got a colour that I love that excites me, gets my appetite stimulated. And then you've got the versatility as well of little bits of tannin, nice little bit of citrine, loads of fruit, loads of spice.

But it sort of dances around. These things don't really smack you on the head with obviousness. Yes, of course, Traminer is the most obvious grape variety probably in the world, but the way it's done is so beautiful and tasteful. It's so refreshingly moreish as well.

Janina Doyle 00:55:01 How much with Judith Beth Traminer that we're tasting, which is 2023?

Doug Wregg 00:55:06 £24, I guess.

Janina Doyle 00:55:08 Nice. Just to finish off this episode, for somebody who has never really had orange wine, what would you say to them going out and getting their first bottle? Is there a place that you think they should try first or something that would make them feel more comfortable to start?

Doug Wregg 00:55:25 A lot of restaurants now offer orange wines, one or two by the glass. Try them both actually. I mean, I think, you need to keep on trying. I think a lot of people hated natural wines originally because they had a bad experience, like, that was like really horrible, pretty VA natural wine.

But there's tens of thousands of wines out there. Don't dismiss things on first acquaintance and you know everything is different. So, I think with orange wines, bear in mind, the spectrum of orange wines is as wide as the spectrum of whites and red.

So, there are thousands of different wines and multiple different styles. Tell me what you like in terms of wine, I'll find you an orange wine. I mean, not that I'm just offering myself totally for this sort of thing, but there will be orange wines for you. The idea that they're bitter or tannic or anything you've read about them, unread them.

Use your senses to really appreciate them. Let the wine come to you. Don't superimpose preconceived ideas about what wines are going to taste like until you've actually had them and have them by themselves, have them with food, work around them because it could be an acquired taste.

I mean, I acquired it almost immediately, but not everyone loves the very first orange wine they try or the second wine even, but persist. And then in a way, I do believe this, that your palate is shaped in a particular way.

And as soon as you have something which reconfigures your palate, then all bets are off. It's almost like you start again with wine. That's what started with natural wine, like, I liked everything in blocks of flavour that I could understand. I want big, mellow blocks. And then it was like I wanted edginess. I wanted viscosity.

With orange wine, it's like I got out of the thing of thinking it was white. It's not a white wine. Sort of like red wine. Not quite like a rosé. It is what it is. It's orange. It is the fourth colour in the spectrum. But even within the spectrum, the narrow spectrum that it's in, it's still a wide enough spectrum.

So, I think the brain tells us very much what we're going to taste and what we like to taste. We need to re-engage the brain in a positive way. Firstly, I think all the love for the colour. The colour is amazing. Drink it outside and see how wines like this capture the light. If that doesn't get the juices flowing, I don't know what will.

Janina Doyle 00:57:59 Perfect. Beautiful, beautiful summary.

Janina Doyle 00:58:05 Do let me know if you want to go deeper into the world of natural wines, whether it be more in the history of orange wine or biodynamic practices, as I really feel that this is such an interesting topic and there's so much more we could discuss.

Now, next week we are continuing the conversation with Doug, but we are hopping across the pond to the Pacific Northwest of the United States to the Oregon wine region, renowned for its exceptional Pinot Noir.

But to finish off, as always, a wine quote, and this is from Alice Feiring, the author of *Natural Wine for the People*. And she said, "Natural wine is like jazz. It's raw, it's alive, and it speaks the language of the soul."

I couldn't agree more after sampling these three super energetic, vibrant orange wines. Now don't forget, if you are getting value out of these podcasts, please like them, leave some stars and a review if you can on your podcast app as this helps the podcast become more discoverable. Now wishing you all a super vibrant and energised week. Until next Monday, wine friends, cheers to you!