

Defining Clean Wine

“Clean Wine” are the natural wine buzz words of late, but what does that really mean? Most importantly, do we at Natural Merchants sell clean wine brands? You bet! Depending on your definition, which is confusing at best. The backlash against the marketing lingo being used by some newer wine brands has been harsh and heavy over the past two months with headlines mostly declaring that “Clean wine is a commercial scam.” So what exactly is a clean wine? Our basic definition has always been our commitment.

Farming Practices

- 100% Certified [organic](#) or [Biodynamic](#) grapes-grown without the use of synthetic chemical pesticides or herbicides
- The winery production must also meet organic standards-from ingredient tracking to equipment cleaning
- Sourced from family owned and operated vineyards-there is a story behind every bottle, and a family behind every winery.
- Some wineries are [Dry Farmed](#), using no irrigation
- Fair labor practices-All wineries are socially responsible producers with a deep respect for their employees’ welfare through healthy and fair working conditions.
- All wineries practice various forms of sustainability and are leaders in their regions for environmental initiatives. From photovoltaic panels to filtered rain water in micro-irrigation, each winery strives to reduce their carbon footprint and become better citizens within the wine world



Winemaking

- Minimal intervention-letting the grapes and the winemaker dictate the final product vs. adding coloring, flavoring or other ingredients to change the wine’s profile
- No heavy manipulation of the wine including the use of a centrifuge or reverse osmosis
- Low or no [sulfites](#) added-more on that below
- Only [vegan](#) fining agents used-no animal byproducts – more on the filtered vs. unfiltered debate below

Our wines from Europe & South America are carefully selected from family owned wineries. Real people and real stories behind every wine.

All of our wines are at a minimum:



Made with 100% Certified Organic Grapes



Grown and produced without the use of chemical pesticides, fertilizers, herbicides or additives



Low or no sulfites added



100% Certified Vegan or Vegan Friendly-no animal byproducts are used in production

Certification of Clean Wine

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Nope, not a thing. Clean wine has no legal definition, nor does it carry any sort of certification declaring that the wine is indeed “clean.” At Natural Merchants we have always been a proponent of transparency. That’s why we’re all about certifications. All of our wines at a minimum are certified organically grown. The organic certification is done both in the country of origin *and* complies with the USDA organic standards. That’s important to us because legally, only wines that comply with the U.S. National Organic Program (N.O.P.) standards can be labeled as such:

Wines Made with Organic Grapes can say so on the front label



No Sulfites Added Organic Wines can carry the USDA seal

How many times has a wine salesperson or a wine shop owner said “this winery has always practiced organic farming techniques, but they don’t want to pay for certification.” It’s then up to the buyer or consumer to do their own research on the winery and wines, if they can find the information. And did that winery suffer the consequences of a rough year of mold in the vineyard, or did they intervene at the last minute with a chemical fungicide? Wineries that hold an organic certification are subject to forces of nature, and may indeed lose a crop now again again as a result. **We choose to leave no room for questions, and the certification helps us to guarantee that what you see is what you get.**

Elements of a Clean Wine

Unlike food and other beverage products, wine is not regulated by the Food & Drug Administration, so does not currently have to contain ingredients on the label. There are around 60 additives legally allowed in conventional wine production. These can include Velcorin (a chemical microbial agent used to prevent Brettanomyces and other spoilage) Mega Purple (a grape concentrate used to color and flavor-correct red wines) and oak chips (to mimic oak aging in wines actually fermented in steel tanks). **We look at these additives as ways that winemakers are manipulating the final product, often to ensure the wine tastes the same from vintage to vintage. Our wines on the other hand can vary greatly from year to year, depending on the weather and other factors of the vintage.**



Let’s take a look at the potential ingredients in our organically grown “clean” wines, in addition to 100% organic grapes:



Sulfites

Yep, sulfites are an additive, used for preservation against oxidation and stabilization. So, depending on your definition of “clean wine,” that knocks most of our wines out of the running straight away. Up to 100ppm of sulfites are added to our wines labeled as Made with Organic Grapes. We import all of our wines, and they have a mighty long journey from the vineyards of Europe and South America to the shelves of the local wine shop. Still white wines are particularly finicky in transit and they don’t much like sitting on a shelf without refrigeration either. No one wants to see a brown, white wine on the shelf, and that scenario gets mighty likely with wines coming from overseas. Our winery partners continue to work on perfecting no sulfite added still whites that can meet our quality standards, but we’re not there yet. **For the record, conventional wines can have up to 350ppm of sulfites added, though many probably never venture that far. And, most, if not all brands out there currently being marketed as “clean wines” definitely contain *some* added sulfites.**

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But red wines are a different story. For those who prefer a “cleaner” wine, we offer numerous red wines, and one sparkling Prosecco (the bubbles help as a preservative too!) that have No Sulfites Added and carry the USDA organic seal. Why is that particular seal important? **Because the USDA requires a sample of all wines requesting to be labeled as [USDA Organic](#) to be sent to their U.S. laboratory for testing of the sulfite levels prior to label approval.** To carry the USDA Organic seal, the *total* amount of sulfites-which in this case would only be naturally occurring from the grapes themselves-must be under 10ppm, and most come in at 0-3ppm.

Do sulfites cause hangovers, and therefor do “clean” wines prevent them from happening? While the jury is still out as to what in wine (and other forms of alcohol) actually causes hangovers, we do know that if you drink enough of *any* alcohol your head might hurt the next day. **Sulfite sensitivity** is rare, but real for many. According to the FDA, [1 in 100 people have a sensitivity to sulfites](#). Sulfites are also commonly found in many processed foods such as dried fruits and potato chips. This is an age-old debate, but many feel better about drinking wines without added sulfites, and if that’s you, we have you covered with our [wines with No Sulfites Added](#). [Find out more about sulfites in wine.](#)

Yeast

This is controversial to be sure. Do clean wines have to be fermented only with indigenous yeast? In other words, yeast that comes from the vineyard and winery itself, not added. We recently conducted an audit of our winery partners about their use of yeast and found that it was definitely not a black and white issue. Many of our wineries utilize only “spontaneous fermentation” with the wild, indigenous yeast coming in on the

grapes themselves. Others cultivate yeast from the vineyard itself and add it to the fermentation process for more control. Some wineries prefer to be able to protect certain aspects of the wine, such as the fruitiness of a naturally sweet bubbly, which they feel can only be accomplished by adding carefully selection strains of organic yeast. And some are using many of these techniques in some combination based on the particular wine in question. **There isn’t one answer to the yeast debate, but [check out our extensive article here](#) if yeast is your thing and you have specific preferences.**



Fining Agents

Want wines that are unfinned and cloudy in your glass? We have some of those! But if you’d rather have a glass of wine that is crisp and clear, we want you to be able to have that as well. Our winery partners who fine their wines use vegan fining agents including Bentonite Clay and pea protein powders. They work the same as non-vegan fining agents (which include as mentioned above Isinglass which is made from fish bladders and egg whites). The powder is sprinkled on top of the wine, and it acts like a magnet to attract all of the particles they don’t want in the bottle. That sediment floats to the bottom of the tank and is left behind when the wine is siphoned out. For the natural wine enthusiast, try our [Naken orange wine](#) from Austria that is cloudy, unfiltered and full of fun, or a red wine from [Inkarri](#) in Argentina or [Koyle](#) in Chile that are unfiltered and full of body, but no floaties.

Are Completely Clean Wines Even Possible?

We don’t usually use “clean wine” as a term to market our wines (though we’re sure the word has snuck in somewhere over the past 15 years within hundreds of blogs and other marketing materials!), but we thought we’d take a deeper look at *our* truth behind the term. **We think our wines are pretty darn clean, and it’s always our goal to *come clean* about everything used in the wines’ production-from vineyard to glass.**

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