

## *The AOC label and natural wines*

Comparative reviews of the film *Natural Resistance* by Jonathan Nossiter (2014), and the book *Le vin et l'environnement* by Geneviève Teil et al. (2011)

**Anne Sophie Trebuchet-Breitwiller,**

— Are you aware that you're playing  
outside the rules?

— I try to stay positive, Jonathan. I don't like being  
against, I want to be for. The others can do what  
they like, I want to be for something.

— So what are you for?

— I am for respecting nature. If I don't have that  
conscience, that responsibility of taking care  
of my land, how can I expect nature  
to give back with consistency and quality?

J. Nossiter, *Natural Resistance*, 2014

This article is a review of Jonathan Nossiter's documentary entitled, *Natural resistance*, which was released in 2014<sup>1</sup>, by comparing it to a study by a socio-economics research team that was published in 2011 under the title *Le vin et l'environnement*<sup>2</sup>.

The film and the book both take an interest in natural wine. What we call natural wine includes wines that are organic or biodynamic, as well as some vines that are grown according to low-input agriculture which tries to limit or even avoid the use of pesticides. Wines without sulphites can also be included in the

natural wine category. They will only be featured at the end of this comparative study: in our two studies, what interests us are the methods of production. Nossiter's film is focuses on a handful of Italian winegrowers who are committed to alternative and militant wine growing (if we are to believe the director and the protagonists), while the sociological study is interested in the production of wine in France without the use of pesticides, concentrating on the work of wine growers. So the vine is at the centre of the issue in both cases.

The film and the book share a common pragmatism in their approach: they focus on the protagonists, they listen and record the arguments, discussions, controversies in which they are embroiled. What makes the book and the film interesting lies in the way they tell the story of the positive phenomenon of the production of natural wines in France in Italy. Like Elena Pantaleoni, the wine-grower quoted above says, I like being "for" something. So I won't review Jonathan Nossiter's film as a piece of documentary film, neither will I review the essay by Geneviève Teil (et al.) as a work of sociology. That is simply not my point here. However, I would like to use these two studies, both of which I consider to be top notch, to approach the issue that interests me in a positive manner.

This issue, the production of natural wines, is in fact not as new as it seems, but the fact is that it has, up until now, remained relatively unexamined. The work of Teil and Nossiter thus thankfully fills a void. The film and the book, in particular when they are compared, provide a lively, rich and precise perspective on what is perhaps the most important and critical event in contemporary wine growing.

### **The film**

The director of *Mondovino* who was a sommelier before he went into film making, showed

a serious interest in oenology – if only to point out where it had gone off the rails. Many scenes in *Mondovino* were shot in cellars (like the famous interview with Hubert and Alix de Montille). In *Natural Resistance* on the other hand, almost all of the scenes take place outside – one of the counterpoints that Nossiter favours shows one of the only indoor scenes being shot in a cinema. Between *Mondovino* (2004) and *Natural Resistance*, which was produced ten years later, a shift seems to have occurred. In an attempt to concentrate on what appears to him to be the sharpened tip of resistance to the globalisation of the market and the taste of wine, the production of natural wine, the film maker goes back upstream, like his characters, from the cellar to the vine.

*Natural Resistance* thus introduces us to four wine growers or families of wine growers: Corrado Dottori and Valeria Bochi in their property La Distesa in Le Marche, Giovanna Tiezzi and Stefano Borsa in their property La Pacina in Tuscany, Elena Pantaleoni in her property La Stoppa in Emilia-Romagna, and finally Stefano Bellotti in his property La Cascina degli Ulivi in Piedmont. These properties are located in the north and centre of Italy. The owners that we meet have, for the most part, inherited these properties. And it is in the vineyards that Nossiter chose to film them. And this is also apparently where they themselves wanted to be filmed, when the film maker questions them about their work, their ambitions and difficulties.

They talk straight to the camera about how they don't put chemical products or weed killers in the vines. They talk about the roots of the plants that must go very deeply into the topsoil and the deeper soil, the authenticity of the wines, the particularities of the places and the time they don't want to waste. They talk about the forty centimetres below ground where most of the animal and plant life on the planet lives, the hummus that real agriculture,

legitimate culture, they tell us, needs to rebuild every day. For the rest, they refer to themselves as peasants who work the land. They explain that it is the land talking through the wine, the wine growers are but the intermediaries that try really hard to “*respect what nature gives us as much as possible*”. This is also why, during the vinification process, they opt for natural fermentation, not adding yeast, or any other outside ingredient, because they want to make wine that “*contains just what the grapes give us*”. They also talk about how they feel they are the guardians of the properties, the vines they have inherited, and that they wish to pass on one day in their turn.

The strength of the film (relative to the book for example) lies in the way it shows us the incarnation of this wine growing in the bodies and faces, young or not so young, unique, worried at times but happy, glowing in fact, and at times very charismatic. Stefano Bellotti is a star in the making! And the camera shows the landscapes. From his house on the hills, Dottori shows us La Distesa: “*It is one of the most traditional areas of the Verdicchio, he tells us. In France, they would be considered the “premiers crus”. If you look closely, there are very few vines. That is typical of the Marche region. It's not like in the Langhe, the Montalcino or the Valpolicella regions, where they plant vines everywhere. Here they have maintained biodiversity. There are forests, there is corn. There are fields with sheep. It's important because biodiversity in agriculture is always better than intensive monoculture. Even in wine.*”

A little later in the film, Bellotti directs the camera to the earth, to the vine first of all, the object of his patient work for the past thirty years. He holds the earth he is so proud of in his hand and shows it to the camera. The quality comes from its lightness, the way it crumbles in his fingers. Then – in a move that has become a classic for anyone who has been following recent controversies in wine growing –, he compares his soil to that of a

neighbouring wine grower, whose land is next to his. This wine grower is not a bio-dynamist like Bellotti, instead he uses the full arsenal of traditional wine growing: weed killers, fungicides, chemical fertilisers, pesticides. The camera now moves into Bellotti's vine, the inter rows are full of weeds and grass. The wine grower insists that there are fifteen different types of grass; unlike his neighbour's inter row (on which the camera zooms) where the land seems naked without one single weed.

Bellotti picks up his big spade and easily sticks it into the land around his vines, turning over a nice sod: the land is light, moving, airy and dark in colour, "there is plenty of humus", the wine grower tells us, showing the amount of grass and weeds that have already been "digested". However, the spade has trouble getting down into the soil of his neighbour's plot, and Bellotti manages to dig out a block, lifting it to the camera. The colour is light, it is smooth and even shiny where the spade entered the soil. It smells of "washing powder" says the wine grower, who smells the sod before lifting it up for Nossiter, who is behind the camera. His own soil, when he goes to get a little crumbly, dishevelled sod "*smells mushy*!" On the neighbour's land, Bellotti finally says: "*It is completely asphyxiated. It is totally compact. It is obvious that the sod is impermeable. It cannot absorb any water or air. From a bacteriological point of view, this land is deadlier than mine.*" "*Life and death*", he concludes, with a fistful of his own soil in one hand and a piece of his neighbour's land in the other as the camera zooms in.

These interviews filmed in the vineyards are cut with short cinematic scenes but also, at regular intervals, with scenes of discussions around a table, and over a drink in Giovanna Tiezzi's Tuscan garden, or in Elena Pantaleoni's garden in Emilia-Romagna. This is where we hear the diverging and shared opinions. Bellotti works in bio-dynamics,

the others apparently are organic. Giovanna Tiezzi and Elena Pantaleoni produce wines without sulphites. But neither the protagonists nor the director spend too much time on the methods. Something else brings them together, something less tangible, harder to imitate than a mere label. Elena Pantaleoni refers to it as an ethic.

So let's come back to the question asked above: what are they "for"? It would appear finally that they are "for" an agriculture that doesn't pollute, that doesn't ruin the land, and an agriculture that truly nourishes, according to Bellotti. They are "for" respecting nature in the strongest sense of the term, where the winemaker takes a step back and lets nature do its work. They are in favour of a living earth, "an earth that speaks" through the wine. They are for "respecting everything", co-workers and consumers alike, according to Elena Pantaleoni. They do not agree on the subject of price, but they all seem to consider that the question of price cannot be separated from their work ethic. It would also seem that they are "for" friendship, good food and long discussions. And the playing children, spinning and racing around these discussions are living proof of their search for a certain "*joie de vivre*", which is the "*most basic of foods*" as Bellotti good naturedly points out.

There is one sensitive issue however: for the 2009 harvest, Giovanna Tiezzi and Stefano Borsa (Pacina) left the Chianti AOC. "*Why is that?*" Nossiter asks. "*Because... Enough!*" Borsa replied laughing, but he didn't elaborate. In the same way, Corrado Dottori has had, and continues to have some of his wines turned down for the Verdicchio AOC, because they do not match up in terms of colour for example. Elena Pantaleoni did not leave the AOC system and neither did Bellotti apparently.

The issue is a source of tension for the protagonists and perhaps between them also.

Nevertheless they all agree that the problem is not what they are doing, neither does it come from the wines they produce – they are real terroir-produced wines –, the problem comes from the Italian AOC system. They are extremely hung up on norms and the AOC commissions let in “*absurd wines*”, Elena Pantaleoni tells us, and then they reject true terroir wines! And it is surely a misunderstanding – an idea that Bellotti formulates positively during a discussion in Giovanna Tiezzi’s garden, later on: “*The French, he says, have an expression, the “terroir”. The real, deep meaning of our AOC, should be the “terroir”. Taken to mean where a place connects with a taste*”.

### The book

The book by Geneviève Teil *et al.*, *Le vin et l’environnement*, precisely makes this point about the current AOC controversy and that involves the French wine business also.

The book is the result of a sociological study carried out in 2005-2006 by researchers from the INRA and the École des mines, as requested by the Minister for Ecology, Housing and Territorial Management on the question of wine without pesticides. The French situation at the time was as follows: France was in joint fourth place along with Italy for pesticide use in Europe. It should be noted that fruit growing is overall the biggest consumer of herbicides and pesticides, and its health and environmental impact was beginning to be called into question. Winegrowing, that used only 3% of useful agricultural land, concentrated 20% of consumption of these products<sup>3</sup>!

Using two hundred interviews with industry experts, the sociologists reconstituted the maze of practices in which natural wines managed to

create – or not create – a commercial existence for themselves. Their first task was to establish a timeline of the production of natural wines in France. Chronologically, “organic wines” (wines that come from organic or biodynamic agriculture) were the first, the production chain was set up back at the start of the eighties. Then in the early nineties, a type of “low-input” agriculture was put in place, an answer from the authorities to the organic movement. Then, a movement that started in the eighties and has grown and grown to the present day, wines that come from a “terroir” that include the characteristics of organic or low-input agriculture. According to the writers, both of the first options have run into dead ends. The “organic for organic’s sake” was destined to run out of steam in a product with so many qualities, they explain. While low-input agriculture was a victim of its own success: it got drawn in by the demand for wines to “conform but cheaply” and soon became a sort of camouflage for existing practices that it didn’t question enough making it easier for the organic lobby to criticise a label that was not demanding or checked enough.

In an almost dialectical fashion, a third way appeared, that of the terroir-based wine, and the first two found themselves being passed out. According to the writers, producers of terroir-based wines are, among the two first groups, the ones who have best managed to incorporate the environmental and social preoccupations contained in organic, biodynamic and the stricter part of low-input agriculture into a new definition of the quality of their wine. But they are also, often, winemakers that are committed to producing a more authentic, natural or personal wine and that, in order to do so, have gotten closer to their colleagues in organic and low input agriculture. They did so due to the technical solutions provided by these colleagues, or in a more open manner, due to the benefits of

sharing mutual frustrations and hopes. In doing so, they created a community that asks questions – like the one we saw in *Natural Resistance*.

The controversy then rebounds into a debate on the *appellations d'origine contrôlée* or AOC label. Just like we saw in the Nossiter film, producers of natural wines were quick to criticise the AOC system, to the extent that some even left it altogether. In France, like in Italy, it is not a question of criticising the institution of AOC as such: producers of natural wines are often landowners with their own vineyards and almost all take the AOC system seriously. What they call into question is the way in which the AOC is organised and understood. These regulatory details and the modalities of labelling are under fire.

As a result, there seems to be a habit in France, like in Italy, of considering the AOC as a standard: the wine is good if it is what we expect it to be, in other words, if it is typical of its appellation. This typical nature is produced by putting a number of things in place: inside certain zones, the varieties of grape are dictated, as well as the maximum volumes produced or level of production. Other aspects of the work in fact, like the growing methods, whether pesticides are used or not, whether the harvest is mechanical or manual, are left to the winemakers themselves. Producers of natural wines are causing a certain amount of upheaval in the way the AOC label is perceived. First of all in terms of cultivating methods, they criticise AOC guidelines for being too lax: for example, according to them, AOC regulations should require manual harvesting, or ban chemical weed treatments, at least for the *grands crus* and the *premiers crus*. And overall standards need to be raised if we want the AOC label to remain synonymous with quality in wine-making. At the same time, and with regard to other issues, producers of natural wines feel that the regulations are too rigid: this is the

case for example when they ban certain varieties of local but “forgotten” grapes, that the winegrowers are thrilled to rediscover.

The divorce becomes official when the use of cultivating methods that respect the terroir produce wines that do not comply with the standards of the appellation, to the point where they are turned down, or when winegrowers choose to work with “forgotten” varieties or terroirs. In both cases, producers of natural wines who refuse to toe the line leave the AOC label and market their wines as “vins de table” or “vin de pays” in France. These “vins de table” or “de pays”, are sold at prices that are unprecedented for such wines and are even sold more expensively than wines that have the AOC label. This means that the hierarchy of quality and price that is inherent to the AOC system is called into question.

This is the state of crisis that is revealed on screen in *Natural Resistance*, and is also explained in great detail in *Le vin et l'environnement*. With the onslaught of the natural wine movement, the AOC as an institution is increasingly being seen as a god with feet of clay. The sociologists are worried that the tension that is emerging in the winegrowing industry will discredit the system. The AOC label surely needs a revamp, but it remains the only system currently in place that strongly supports French (and Italian) wines in an international competitive market. From this angle, the solution seems to be placing the concept of terroir at the heart of the definition of AOC – as is suggested by Bellotti in *Natural Resistance*, and which seems to be the general consensus among the French “resistants” also. Nevertheless, things are not that simple. It involves a shift from a normative definition (where conformity to a standard is measured) to a much more pragmatic definition of quality. It means giving up on a relatively fixed and reassuring result (typical-ness) and going

with the truth of the “how” – or at least giving it precedence. The risk being that if we do nothing, the AOC labels will be progressively disqualified, even the premiers crus, or the grands crus...

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1. Jonathan Nossiter, *Résistance Naturelle*, DVD, Rezofilms, Paris, 2014.
2. Geneviève Teil, Sandrine Barrey, Pierre Floux, Antoine Hennion, *Le vin et l'environnement*, Paris, Presses des Mines, 2014.
3. These figures appeared in the initial report by the writers and come from an INRA source: *Pesticides, agriculture et environnement – Réduire l'utilisation des pesticides et en limiter les impacts environnementaux*. INRA-Cemagref, 2005.