

# Natural Wine as Protest Art

How a Bastion of Privilege Became a Platform  
for Progressive Political Expression

By Andrew Sullivan



In the natural wine movement, where it's common practice to advocate for regenerative farming, sustainable food systems, low-intervention winemaking and a culture of inclusivity rather than pretense, there's a growing group of winemakers who stand apart in the scope and purpose of their work. A new ethos is emerging that bridges the traditional ecological value system of natural wine with a call for social justice and economic reform—and a subtle punk rock middle finger to the system. While these young artists blend deep knowledge of cellar-science with a profound respect for the hard work of farming and the magic of fermentation, their practice extends far beyond standard liberal advocacy for the environment to a collective call to reform our social and economic framework. Small is not only beautiful, it's the only way forward. Driven by their understanding of the role of viticulture and a sense that we need a major course correction, this new generation is crafting arguably the most creative and meaningful wines in America.

### *The Environmental Roots of Natural Wine*

The culture of environmental sustainability is baked into the origin story of natural wine. The rapid adoption of pesticides such as DDT after WWII led the Beaujolais chemist, biologist and wine merchant, Jules Chavet, to publish a series of poetic studies warning how chemical manipulation in the vineyard and in the cellar stripped wine of the subtle characteristics that define terroir. His work influenced Marcel Lapierre, Jean Foillard, Jean-Paul Thévenet, and Guy Breton—coined ‘the Gang of Four’ by Kermit Lynch. These winemakers made outstanding wines with no chemical additives, no cultured yeast, no fining, no filtration, and no sulfur additions. ‘0/0 was used on cellar notes and tasting sheets to identify these wines in the early 2000s, and the term “zéro-zéro” began to spread beyond Beaujolais and the Loire. A new circuit of wine fairs emerged in Europe, with La Dive in the Loire and Raw in London, providing a stage for these early actors. A small group of California farmers and winemakers (led by Paul Frey, Kevin Kelley, Steve Edmunds, Tony Coturri, Darek Trowbridge, Jared Brandt and Randall Graham) championed this ‘additive-free’ or ‘natural’ approach in California. The financial crisis of 2008 left winemakers looking for work and simultaneously drove interest in high-quality/low-cost alternatives to Burgundy. An excess supply of grapes, antsy winemakers and a shifting ethos dovetailed to rapidly elevate this new category of ‘zero-zero’ or ‘natural’ wine. And *a lot* of people jumped on the bandwagon.

### *Low-Intervention's Low Barrier To Entry*

The rapid growth in natural wines opened the market to many and pushed existing players to scale operations. The advent of urban wineries in the Bay Area sourcing local grapes allowed winemakers to remain connected to urban culture and a supportive community while practicing a

previously pastoral craft. Natural wine's emphasis on quality grapes from the vineyard over chemistry and mechanization in the winery, the use of neutral (aka 'used') oak and easier access to facilities allowed more people to make wine. No longer reserved for those with pedigree and privileged connections, a bevy of new winemakers gained access to the inner sanctums of wine culture—and many crashed head first into the cellar's glass ceiling. High demand for wine coupled with a lower barrier to entry, however, created an opening in this historically cloistered club, and the number of natural wine labels exploded.

But quantity and quality don't always dance well together.

*“Many new natural winemakers and their followers are more interested in the aesthetics rather than the ethics of this movement.”*

*- Joe Cambell*

The land rush resulted in divisions: newcomers embraced experimental wines with profiles that were traditionally considered flawed. Battle lines were drawn between 'natty' vs 'natural' to differentiate 'fun' wines from 'serious' wines. Others simply backed away from calling themselves 'natural winemakers' to side-step what they now saw as a negative association. The popularity of natural wine also generated a performative commercial community that was capitalizing on the wave of hipsters gravitating towards natural wines. As Joe Campbell so eloquently puts it, “many new natural

winemakers and their followers are more interested in the aesthetics rather than the ethics of this movement.”

### *‘Nature’s Got It Right’*

But a subset of this new wave cut against the trend, doubling down on the requisite rigor of small-scale farming and artisan winemaking. Collaborating closely with farmers or farming vineyards directly, this new generation intentionally cultivated hands-on practices with the belief that *quality does not scale*. Deep participation in the entire process—from planting to bottling—exposed them to the fundamental role of farming in determining the character of a wine. They saw the many subtle ways that chemicals and mechanization had worked their way into even the most 'sustainable' vineyards. It wasn't just about their practices as a winemaker, it was about their participation in a broken agricultural and capitalist system—a system that embraced the very social, environmental and economic issues that had driven them away from mainstream culture and into natural wine. For these new winemakers, changing practices in the natural wine market isn't just a statement to the wine industry: it's a form of political protest. Their entire approach to winemaking is an artistic statement to our broader society that we can build our lives on different principles that focus on health, art, sustainability, diversity, inclusivity and deep community. By using what has historically been a bastion of power and privilege as their platform, their wine is an artful act of subversion and a poetic statement about the essential role of craft in a healthy society.

## *Environment, Equity, Community and Solidarity*

Perhaps no other winemaker embodies these ethics more than horticulturist and winemaker, Chris Renfro, through his 280 Project. Using the public vineyard at Alemany Farm at the 280/101 freeway interchange in San Francisco (hence, The 280 Project), Chris mentors BIPOC and LGBTQ apprentices through his viticulture and enology program, where he anchors his students in the land and teaches them how to farm, harvest and transform their food. It is difficult to adequately articulate the depth of the social and economic protest at the heart of Renfro's work, but as winemaker and 280 Project collaborator, Matt Niess, put it, 'the work [he's] doing goes beyond just making wine—it's about challenging a system. A system that's working exactly as designed, but designed for the wrong priorities.' Renfro and Niess are leading a west-coast effort to transition from European-based vines to native and hybrid vines that require no spray, no irrigation and are resilient enough to survive our increasingly unpredictable weather patterns. But as Niess notes, it goes way beyond sustainability.

*“What is land and wine without the people—all of the people. We all are sharing such an incredible world and it would be a huge waste if we didn't focus on enjoying it together.”*

*- Chris Renfro*

Through his 280 Project, Renfro aims not only to transform the culture of wine, he aims to change the dynamics of race in America. Through farming, making wine, and sharing the profound communal experience that wine enables, Renfro believes we shed the veil of race and connect fundamentally as people. And more than anything else, Chris wants everyone to feel valued and supported. And he's not just talking about it, he's doing it.

Think about that: Chris Renfro could use any platform to make this point, so why did he choose wine? Because wine is linked to hetero-normative, white male control of land, food, wealth, status, privilege and power. And Renfro, through his 280 Project, is artfully presenting an alternative worldview—one that is inclusive, supportive, communal, creative and fair. Acceptance, education and sharing are at the core of Renfro's value system. He doesn't want to shut anyone out, he wants to bring everyone together —through wine. As Chris put it, “What is land and wine without the people—all of the people. We all are sharing such an incredible world and it would be a huge waste if we didn't focus on enjoying it together.”

But how did he decide that viticulture could be a change agent?

Chris spent many of his formative years in Germany, where a teacher took him under her wing and taught him the magic of horticulture. The world of plants was full of wonder, but free of hate and racism, and also a world of hope for Chris. The Black child visiting farms in Germany grew into a young horticulturist in the USA, who saw how explicit forms of oppression were more subtly embedded into the culture and systems of America. Including the culture and systems of

viticulture. Control of food, land, wealth and education were interwoven threads of power and health—none of which Black Americans enjoyed. So when Chris got a chance to farm land in San Francisco, he planted vines. And not your standard European varietals, but native hybrids. Varietals you've never heard of. Marginalized vines. Radical vines.

The 280 Project, managed by Rita Manzana, is an incubator for racial equity by empowering BIPOC and other marginalized communities through horticulture, viticulture and winemaking. By coupling a common agricultural and culinary experience with a shared vocabulary of taste, Renfro is leveling the racial playing field. And by ushering cohorts of apprentices through in groups of 6-8 and partnering with Assistant Professor Beth Forrestel and industry icons like Steve Matthiasson and UC Davis, he's creating skilled teams that are supported beyond their work at Alemany. Renfro's collaboration with Matt Niess of North American Press combines two of the more politically and environmentally progressive wine efforts in America. Renfro's collaboration with Niess at Filoli vineyard is not only a wine experiment, it's a social statement. Sourcing from nearly 120 hybrid varieties that were considered worthless to the wine industry, they're showing that these forgotten grapes and the marginalized communities that turn them into wine both have incredible value. All proceeds from the L'Amalgame they make from these grapes go directly to funding the 280 Project's apprenticeship program, training people who have been historically locked out of the wine world. Says Niess, 'Demonstrating that we can build our lives and businesses on different principles is the point. It's not about seeking approval from the establishment. It's about challenging a system and showing that another way is not only possible but produces something worth celebrating.' The way Niess and Renfro are advocating for environmental sustainability and social justice is one of the most poetic and powerful political statements through wine in history—and it's happening right under our noses. It's exactly this type of deep activism through wine that makes our local culture and the wines being produced here so unique.

## *The Queering of Wine Culture*

This undercurrent of creative protest through natural wine is particularly strong within the Bay Area's queer winemaking scene, where a small group of women are collaborating and supporting one another while offering the mentorship they themselves once struggled to find. But again, it's not just about being queer and making wine: it's about toppling the barriers of access to

*“Creating my own label allowed me to move with intention, build a career on my own terms, and help show that there's room for many different stories and identities in wine.”*

everything wine has represented and restricted. Learning the craft, accessing the grapes and facilities, launching their own labels and opening bottle shops and wine bars goes beyond just 'breaking through'—it's about reimagining the role of wine in our culture. As Terah Bajjalieh put it, “Part of why I started my own business is that, as a queer Palestinian woman with ten years of industry experience, at that time the traditional paths didn't always feel built to support the kind of growth and contribution I wanted to make. Creating my own label allowed

*- Terah Bajjalieh*

me to move with intention, build a career on my own terms, and help show that there's room for many different stories and identities in wine." But this didn't happen by accident. As founder of the queer-owned wine bar, minimo, Erin Coburn put it, 'There's intentionality in creating opportunities for 'others' in an industry that historically gatekeeps and where action and practice matter more than political advocacy. When we started in 2015, I only knew one out queer natural winemaker. Ten years later this list is long, and these winemakers are known not just for being queer, but for producing high quality, highly sought after natural wines.' Corrine Rich of Birdhorse Wines notes, "Just seeing fellow queer individuals in wine marketing can be a really powerful thing for people just starting on their wine journey - to know that yes, there are indeed safe spaces out there to break into the industry and paths to growing a career while also being a member of the LGBTQ community."

Finding safety in the straight, white box of wine wasn't just hard for women and BIPOC winemakers, queer men had their own struggles. Industry renaissance man, Wolfgang Weber of En Cavale Wine, nearly bypassed the industry due to his own issues with cellar culture. Despite a largely positive experience with cellar-work, there was a deep disconnect with the dominant straight male culture in wineries. So Weber left the country for the city to pursue other opportunities in the wine industry. The rise of urban wineries and the growing popularity of natural wine bridged the Bay Area's alternative culture with the wine industry and offered Weber a second chance. As Weber notes, "I've found loads of inspiration in the energy and resilience of our local community. Queer people have always been tapped into the currents of community and resilience; that's some real terroir right there. As Harvey Milk said, 'You gotta give 'em hope.'"

*Queer people have always been tapped into the currents of community and resilience; that's some real terroir right there. As Harvey Milk said, 'You gotta give 'em hope.'*

*- Wolfgang Weber*

This new pool of talented winemakers isn't just changing the face of winemaking, they're rewriting the historical narrative of wine. Winemaker Coral Wang is calling attention to the erased history of Asians in viticulture while Bibi Adams and Justin Ward are actively expanding the reach of wine their own way, posing the question, 'Is everyone welcome at the table? Really?' Meanwhile Louie Seamus of The Vanguard, who co-organized one of the first natural wine tasting in the United States, is deconstructing the heroic model of the winemaker by excavating the various 'supporting' roles that many women have played and exposing the critical interplay of everyone in the entire chain of production.

The queer wine movement in the Bay Area is far more than a protest against an industry that has marginalized and dehumanized them, however. The queer community has brought the joy of celebrating our unique selves into the staid chambers of wine culture. The queering of wine culture has injected a much-needed sense of fun, acceptance and playfulness into our local wine scene. These winemakers are not only creating space in the market for their community, they are redefining the cultural semiotics of wine.

## *Wine That's Made in the Vineyard*

In addition to queer/BIPOC winemakers and activists like Renfro and Niess, there are people like Brent Mayeaux who are subversive in their own ways. For a growing number of talented young winemakers in the area, winemaking is more about community, sustainability and an alternative vision of how to live than it is about the wine. And it's not just about friends and environmental policy: it's about having intimate knowledge of and relationships with the people involved in every aspect of the process. That's real quality control.

***“Natural wine is inherently risky. It's inherently radical.”***

Acceptance of imperfections, however, is another value of this group, and Brent Mayeaux is unique in this regard. Mayeaux burns with a near religious fanaticism in his search to make great natural 0/0 wine. It's all about meticulous fidelity through the entire process and the courage to risk everything to achieve the absolute highest result a vintage can possibly yield. And that, for Brent, is only possible when nature is allowed to speak clearly through the wine. ‘Conventional wine or use of sulphur raises the floor, but lowers the ceiling,’ Says Brent. ‘You won't have the failures, but you won't have the grand successes either. Natural wine is inherently risky. It's inherently radical.’ Mayeaux's work to preserve the purity of a great vineyard rests heavily on a foundation of an exacting dedication to organic farming, a concept that is much closer to the French word for winemaker, ‘vigneron’, which translates more accurately as ‘wine grower.’ The distinction between viticulture and enology that has been so rigid in our culture is disappearing with these new wine growers. It's the intersection of the best farming of the best location and the lightest touch in the cellar that opens the portal to greatness—to true terroir. So Brent's wines are inconsistent by design—hitting an occasional off-note is a risk he's willing to take if he wants his wines to sing. Mayeaux is the most passionate advocate of an uncompromising approach to natural winemaking I've met, and his approach to making wine is an extension of his philosophy, ethics and way of life. And here's the point: the passion and dedication that's behind many of our local wines is driving another revolution in quality.

***- Brent Mayeaux***

## *Is This Really a Movement?*

The quiet way in which this community has ‘opted out’ of the mainstream concept of not only how to make wine, but how to live their lives and conduct business, is both profoundly radical and, yet, easily overlooked. No one is holding up signs and shouting for change. They are not interested in or in need of validation or recognition. They are creating their own sub-communities, sub-economies and sub-cultures that are aligned with their ethics—which very well might be the ethics we need to get out of this mess we're in. And their combined rejection of

racial, gender and economic norms certainly feels like a budding movement—even if no one's calling it that. As Mayeaux put it, 'To me it's just kinda obvious: in the way diversity in the vineyard is beneficial, diversity in our communities is necessary for resilience.' But the type of refreshing solidarity and commitment to collaboration we're seeing among certain groups goes beyond like-minded people gravitating towards one-another—it's the type of cooperative culture that's necessary when you're pushing against cultural norms.

## *Sustainability, Slow-Food and Farm-to-Table Ethics*

Interesting wines clearly express the personality, philosophy and soul of the winemaker. The concept of 'terroir' can be elusive, particularly in such a comparatively young wine region as California, where growers are just beginning to understand where and why certain varieties thrive. But a key component of the French understanding of terroir considers the cultural context in which a wine is made. I often think of this as the ideas you have in your mind while drinking a wine that elevate the experience—the story. Through this lens, these local natural winemakers are creating a compelling new layer of terroir: the intention behind a wine. Their wines go beyond all current definitions of our 'sense of place' and incorporate a sense of purpose.

I trained to cook professionally in the Bay Area and grew up in Berkeley, the birthplace of the slow-food/farm-to-table/sustainability movement in America, where restaurants go through great lengths to describe how their vegetables, meats and poultry are sourced from organic farmers within a 50 mile radius. It is painfully ironic, however, to see the ethics of this movement stop at their wine list. Our bottle shops, wine bars and even our restaurants most ardently advocating sustainability continue to favor shipping highly subsidized wines from across the world—wines that are often mass-produced, chemically-laden and highly manipulated. It's time for our local distributors and retailers to include wine in their definition of food and support our local artisan winemakers.

This is an uncomfortable topic to address. Race, gender, economics and our environment are not only complex and often divisive, they are existential. And that is what I find so moving and inspiring about these artisans: they aren't just pointing out the problem, they are modeling an alternative. We like to talk about wine as art, but we don't always like to talk about what that art is saying. Wine as protest art makes you stop and think, because wine has always been seen as a cultural bonding agent. But this wine is different and goes far beyond promoting ecological health to promoting equity and recognition of the problems with our core values. And if the story behind a wine elevates our experience of it, I can think of nothing more moving than the stories these wines tell. If we don't talk about their uncomfortable work, not only will we fail to fully appreciate their wine, but one of the more important movements of our time will flow right past our lips.