

# The Breath of Life

## ANALYZING—AND TASTING—AN APPROACH TO WINEMAKING THAT MAY PREVENT OXIDATION

by Deborah Parker Wong

**OXIDATION IS A GARDEN-VARIETY** wine fault: one that's easily recognized and, thankfully, rarely encountered in most commercial wines that have been filtered and sulfured before they hit shelves. Thanks in large part to the modern, reductive school of winemaking—one that follows the “less is more” rule of thumb—commercial wines are more likely to suffer from various forms of reduction than from oxidation.

When I'm tasting and evaluating wine for quality and style, those that demonstrate liveliness always seem to stand out. I know them when I taste them, as they seem to be innervated by some intrinsic quality that's not listed on any tasting rubric I've encountered. Simply put, they seem “alive.”

Until now, I've never attributed that superlative quality to anything in particular. It could be ideal vintage conditions, a particular approach to farming, soil type, or the “whole” (meaning the totality of the terroir) simply being greater than the sum of its parts. Until we fully determine the parameters of the link between soil and the quality of the final products, attempts to qualify the influence these complex microbiomes have on wine is mere conjecture.

Anecdotal though it may be, grape variety can't help but enter the picture. That aforementioned “aliveness” seems to appear more often in red fruit-dominant varieties, as well as black varieties picked on the early side. I'm always hopeful, but outside of Petite Sirah, I rarely encounter it in deeply black-fruited wines that have been made reductively.

Case in point: A good majority of Chilean red wine is made this way from internationally grown grape varieties following the Bordeaux model. While they're clean and often demonstrate superb varietal typicity, adept use of oak, and tremendous style, aliveness isn't a quality I ascribe to many of these wines. Of course, this hasn't stopped me from tasting, exploring, and enjoying wines from Chile on every possible occasion.

During a recent tasting with Odfjell winemaker Arnaud Hereu, who joined the winery in 1997, the wines positively vibrated in a



PHOTO COURTESY OF ODBELL

*Horses in the Biodynamic vineyards of Odfjell in Chile.*

way that stopped me in my tracks. Granted, the lineup—all from the Chilean estate's four Demeter-certified vineyards—included a rather rare and monovarietal old-vine Carignan from an ancient vineyard in the Cauquenes region of Maule Valley, along with Carménère, Cabernet Sauvignon-dominant blends, and a seamless Syrah/Malbec/Carignan blend.

According to Hereu, much of the 300 hectares of Carignan planted in Chile contain low-yielding, head-trained, and dry-farmed bush vines. The Odfjell vineyards are farmed Biodynamically and production is low on intervention, but Hereu has evolved the resulting wine style using a more aerobic Burgundian approach, introducing controlled amounts of oxygen early in the vinification process. These wines tend to be more stable, as this controlled exposure acts almost like a vaccine protecting them from further oxidation.

This all prompted what felt a bit like an epiphany: Could oxygen be the key to making wines that shimmer with life? I, for one, have now added it to the long list of factors that may determine whether a wine seems dead or alive. **ST**