



## Organic and Biodynamic – more than just buzzwords



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As consumers become increasingly concerned about what they eat and drink and the impact of their choices on the environment, the **organic food and beverage market has grown** steadily. This trend has also been reflected in the wine market<sup>1</sup>. However, organic wine **production and packaging pose unique challenges** such as various restrictions and regulatory requirements.

Challenges around the **labelling** of these wines seem to be **particularly problematic**. The up-and-coming “consumer conscious” market offers wine products with labels including terms such as “natural wine”, “organic wine”, “wine without sulphites”, “biodynamic wine”, “vegan wine” and “wine with low environmental impact”<sup>2</sup>. This is a mare’s nest of terms for both consumers and producers to navigate. For consumers, it is **important to be able to differentiate** what the various terms mean for the purchased product while for producers the challenge lies in the **legal aspects** that need to be adhered to when using these types of terms on the label.

This blog post aims to clarify some of the mainstream “consumer conscious” terms used in wine labelling specifically looking at **organic and biodynamic wines**.

## *What are the differences between organic wine and biodynamic wine?*

This section will focus on the definitions and fundamental differences of the two main “consumer conscious” classifications. These are 1) organic wine and 2) biodynamic wine. When delving deeper into these production techniques it becomes notable that the production requirements for these “consumer conscious” products seem to centre around a list of restrictions specifying what should **not** be done, rather than things that **should** be done.

- Organic wine

Organic wine is wine made from **certified organically grown grapes**. **All agricultural products** such as pesticides used in the vineyards as well as winemaking additions in the cellar (including oenological additives such as yeast and fining agents), **are certified organic and contains little or no added chemicals**<sup>3</sup>. The use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), synthetic fertilisers, pesticides, and other chemicals are limited or prohibited. Generally, this system of farming practices often utilises **natural alternatives** such as manure for fertiliser and ducks for pest control<sup>3</sup>.

For a wine to be labelled as organic, it must be **certified by an independent certification body** and the exact requirements of what is allowed and what is prohibited will depend on the certification body used.

- Biodynamic wine

Biodynamic farming is a more rigorous form of organic farming, and is based on principles first established by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), the founder of the biodynamic approach to agriculture<sup>4</sup>. Biodynamic farming is **often seen as a life philosophy: striving to emulate a natural ecosystem and seeing the vineyard as part of an organic living body**. It is based on anthroposophy – a spiritual movement centered around the premise that the human intellect has the ability to contact spiritual worlds<sup>5</sup>. What has this to do with wine? Well, biodynamic agriculture is based on the concept that the human being is the link between the earth and the cosmos, bridging the gap between the spiritual and material world<sup>4</sup>. **It sees soil, plants, man and all the natural and cosmic elements take part in a holistic view of agriculture. The aim is to balance the vineyard with the natural ecosystem, taking**

**into account the wildlife and the natural habitat as well as the cycles of the moon and planets<sup>4</sup> rather than a pure set of cultivation techniques.**

Growers usually embrace the philosophy and use it to guide their agricultural practices. Great attention is paid to introducing a large diversity of plant and insect species in an attempt to create a balanced environment for the vines. The winegrower aims to give back to the vineyard more than what is taken out of it through harvesting – ultimately creating a self-sustaining system. **Biodynamic viticulture also renounces all synthetic pesticides and rather uses approved biodynamic preparations<sup>6</sup>.**

Currently there are no rules or regulations for biodynamic farming, but there are **private independent certifying bodies** that can certify a vineyard as biodynamic.

### *Legislative considerations and third-party certification bodies*

At the time of the writing of this blog post South Africa had no legal limitations pertaining to the organic production process. There is a draft policy out on organic farming ([National Policy on Organic Production draft 10](#)), however it is unclear when it will be promulgated by the government.

In South Africa, wine can be labelled and sold as organic, however, regulations require that the consumer must not be misled (more information in the [Foodstuff, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act \(no. 54 of 1972\)](#) and the [Consumer Protection Act \(no. 68 of 2008\)](#)). Therefore, **substantiation of the claim must be provided when asked**. This can be provided by third-party certification bodies that audit according to standards set by foreign governments (the two main standards are those of the EU and the USA).

- Organic wine

The biggest headache regarding the use of the term “organic wine” is that the **requirements vary depending on the country and its associated standards**. The companies below offer organic certifications according to various international standards.

CERES certified (<http://ceres-cert.co.za/index.html>)

ECOCERT (<https://www.ecocert.com/en-ZA/home>)

Control union (<https://www.petersoncontrolunion.com/en>)

LACON (<https://www.lacon-institut.com/en/>)

- Biodynamic wine

Demeter international is the only official certifier of biodynamic products at an international level. They provide a set of standards for production and processing to which producers have to adhere to, if a wine is to be certified.

DEMETER (<https://demeter.net/>)

### *Consumer purchasing behaviour and acceptance of organic wine*

Consumers are increasingly concerned about where and how their food and drink is produced, and are prepared to pay a premium price for products considered as healthier to the consumer as well as the environment<sup>1</sup>. Several studies have investigated consumer behaviour towards organic wine, analysing motivation, attitude, and willingness to pay<sup>1</sup>. Interestingly, these studies have found contrasting results. **Some of the studies found that the organic certification had a positive impact on consumer wine preferences, whereas other studies found that consumers were either indifferent or that consumers had a negative perception of the organic certification.** It seems that there are specific market segments that have a strong preference for organic wine<sup>1</sup> and it is advised to **market to these specific niches of consumers when producing these types of products.**

### *Global market analysis and trends for organic wines*

The global growing trend of consumer preference for healthier, more environmentally friendly products is likely to continue. In 2013, organic wine made up 1.5% of all wine consumed, by 2018 this figure had **increased** to 2.6% and it is predicted to reach 3.5% by 2023<sup>7</sup>. In 2021 the global organic wine market was valued at almost 9 million USD with an **expected compound annual growth rate of 10.2% from 2022 to 2030**. The anticipated market value of the organic wine market by 2030 is 21 million USD<sup>8</sup>. The top organic wine producing countries are Spain, France and Italy. It is projected that by 2023 **Spain will increase its hectareage** by 50% which is three times the size of its 2013 hectareage, therefore **increasing its stronghold in the organic wine market**<sup>7</sup>.

## *South African organic wine market*

The South African organic wine production capacity and international market share, relative to other countries, is very small. There are various contributing factors. Firstly, **organic farming is known to be labour intensive and expensive**<sup>7</sup> with much of the expenses circulating around the process of getting certified.

Another inhibiting factor is the **weak domestic consumer demand**. The average South African wine consumer is less concerned about the environment, and more concerned about the price; reluctant to pay more than R100 for a bottle of wine<sup>7</sup>. Due to economic difficulties in the country, this is not likely to change quickly, rather producers focus on the global organic market.

## *Organic Sauvignon Blanc*

One drawback of organic wine production is the **limiting use of sulphur dioxide which is a very effective antioxidant and antimicrobial agent**. The absence of this preservative often (but not always) results in poorer ageing potential of wines. However, when crafted mindfully and carefully, the ageing potential of these wines can be just as good as its non-organic counterparts. However certain aroma impact compounds present in Sauvignon Blanc are sensitive to oxidation and acid hydrolyses (breakdown) meaning that these **sought-after aroma nuances will not last long** resulting in a change in the aromatic composition of the wine. In general (and depending on the intended style of the wine), it is advised that organic Sauvignon Blanc wines be marketed for early consumption so the consumer can enjoy the varietal character before these impact compounds start to diminish.

## *Other “consumer-conscious” wines*

Below are quick summarising definitions of some of the other trends seen in the “consumer-conscious” segment.

- **Natural wine:** Wine made with **as little human intervention as possible** (i.e., no heavy machinery, limited additives, occasionally no filtering or fining). Internationally it may be used as an unofficial term to describe organic or biodynamic wines<sup>9</sup>.
- **Vegan wine:** For a wine to be considered as vegan, **no products derived from animal origin** can be used in the viticultural or vinification steps. Therefore, even if a wine is certified organic

or biodynamic, it may not necessarily be vegan<sup>10,11</sup>. [BeVeg](#) and [V-Label](#) are companies that offer third party certification.

- **Sustainably produced wines/Carbon neutral wines:** There is no consistent definition or set of practices, but various associations each with its own certification and subsequent rules exist<sup>12</sup>. This can be from a **carbon neutral winery, grapes grown in vineyards that prioritise water and energy conservation to wildlife and ecosystem preservation**<sup>12</sup>. In South Africa the Wine and Spirit Board, the Integrated Production of Wine (IPW) scheme and Wines of South Africa (WOSA) formed a collaboration named [Sustainable Wine South Africa \(SWSA\)](#)<sup>12</sup>. IPW provides guidelines for sustainable Viti-viniculture which can be accessed [here](#).
- **Fairtrade/Ethical wine:** Wineries that are certified fair trade **strive to protect the worker's rights** and produce products that meet social, economic, and environmental standards. The wine is certified by [Fairtrade International](#).

## References

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