

# SEKHINA

## What is real Pét-nat? Thoughts about the re-birth of the méthode ancestrale

Article by Gábor Kasza (Founder and CO-CEO of Sekhina Design)

### Natural wine and low intervention in the modern age

The pét-nat phenomenon is a strange occurrence. It is an almost forgotten, old wine-making method that has made a comeback into fashion in recent years. It is both old and new. Not only is it fashionable, its popularity is growing. Its increasing presence is largely due to the growing number of natural wineries, and the people who embrace a [low-intervention approach](#). **Thanks to some great inventions – such as the crown cap as well as thinner-walled pressure-resistant glass bottles – its appearance has changed a lot over the centuries.**

In the old days, it was probably more difficult to handle the opening, transportation and the installation of the bottle. Perhaps this method was also neglected because the result could be very inconvenient to drink. Very pure, and brilliant sterile wines, adopted a technocratic approach that became the prevailing trend at one time. Fortunately, this view now seems to be changing and this noble beverage can now surely take its rightful place. We hope that Sekhina's invention is also helping the cause.

### The history, culture, and the controversy of pét-nat wines

Compared to many other winemaking techniques, pét-nat doesn't have an extensive [history](#) or a well-documented tradition of widespread use. It also has no **stable contemporary culture, which is not the problem of the century**, but it is worth clarifying several issues, so we can further develop the pét-nat culture.

It seems that the natural wine community is (understandably) trying to expropriate the pét-nat phenomenon. Otherwise, it might be so popular that it will be tainted by the world of commercial brands. Although the field of processed wines has a tradition of sterility, the market can sometimes be stronger than the principle. Just think of the craft beer revolution. How many years did it (only) take for the marketing and sales managers of multinational industrial breweries to come out with those dreadful industrial dry-hoppy IPAs, fake lambics, and other fancy beer specialties?! It IS a real danger. Most likely due to the fact **that it is possible to make pét-nats with wine-making additives and selected or cultured yeasts. I've tasted a few of them. The result is not bad. It's just like any other technical intervention wines: artificial taste, mannered but superficial, fewer depths, length, or vibrancy.**

This phenomenon is perhaps already being foreshadowed by the reappearance of [Prosecco col fondo](#), unfortunately not yet in a strictly regulated form. Prosecco that now wants to be a pét-nat? Or was it already just like that? Or are we just getting a little tank of sparkling wine with some added lees instead of a real pét-nat? In any case, it is safe to say that in the last few years, Prosecco's marketing is also trying to ride the waves of the growing consumer appetite for naturally sparkling wines. And it sees – rightly, I might add – the emergence of good pét-nats as a dangerous rival.

## **What is méthode ancestrale?**

Making a real pét-nat means following the [méthode ancestrale](#). It is sparkling wine that has been fermented directly in the bottle without interruption and undergoing a second fermentation. It is created from pure grape juice, without the addition or removal of anything – by that, I'm mainly thinking of the lees.

## **The pressure of pressures**

Many people have seen a great potential in pét-nat. However, the story seems to have been stalled by the difficult opening procedure. The winemakers' answer to the problem was not to develop a tool – as we did – but to try to find a solution using winemaking techniques. They thought, if the pressure and foaming are too high, make it lower. Unfortunately, the result is often at the expense of quality (and – for the winemakers at least – quantity).

## Solution no. 1: disgorging

Disgorging (**dégorgement** in French) is a good process to reduce pressure and foaming. However, you lose quite a few components. It reduces the certainty that the pét-nat we open has not been opened by anyone else before; manipulating the outcome. With disgorging, the pét-nat loses its purity and goes through some kind of shock. It's similar to the stress of filtration and bottling, which wines sometimes don't forget for months. Or maybe never do. This takes the wine in a slightly different direction.

There's quite a peculiar, perhaps a bit disingenuous technique of not removing the lees completely to retain the hazy, unfiltered natural wine feeling. **In my opinion, disgorging is justified if the drink is intended for long aging.** This is particularly suitable for "moderate" pét-nats, as after two years the lees may not produce pleasant aromas (e.g. bread crust). In such cases, however, it may be worth following the example of méthode traditionnelle by removing all the lees in this way and aging the wine without it. Assuming that the raw material has this potential. In other words, a more exciting result can be achieved.

Disgorging is however not a good solution **for fruity "juicy" pét-nats, as you lose the "fibrous" texture that gives young pét-nats one of their main, special characteristics.** Some people may be put off by this hazy quality, but don't be afraid. In the case of organic raw materials, the lees or sediment contains downright healthy elements. Nobody is shocked anymore – to use a beer example again – when they taste unfiltered IPAs. Not to mention the unfiltered wheat beer (Hefe Weissbier), which has similar lees that are responsible for the exceptional texture and flavor, and therefore is part of the whole drinking experience.

Of course, I understand that the dry materialistic science term 'dead yeast cell' does not inspire much confidence. We are not drinking anything dead, but rather encountering a powerful presence of the naturally occurring lees. But I will come back to this later.

## Solution no.2: bottling with low residual sugar

Another solution is to bottle the juice with just little residual sugar, which will result in lower pressure. Unfortunately, you lose a lot of taste with this too. **Only the appropriate level of pressure will develop that dense, tiny-sized bubble structure that is so characteristic of high-quality sparkling wines. It is not just for the enjoyment of the wine drinkers, but it's also a major factor in the whole fermentation process:** pressure plays a role in the development of deep and special aromas, in shelf-life, and is an important element in the overall balance.

It would be more advantageous for the consumer to be informed about this on the label. Either by laying down a policy that says low-pressure pét-nats are not pét-nats, or classifying them separately and indicating their character, calling them by different names. Could we call them Frizzante col fondo? I find the [Frizzante vs Spumante](#) legislation a good example, which can be transposed almost exactly.

According to EU regulations: "Frizzante wines have between 1 and 2.5 bars of pressure at 20°C. They are defined as semi-sparkling by law and are classified as still wines. Spumante wines have a minimum of 3 bars of pressure at 20°C. For quality sparkling wine, for example, one with a PDO or DOC, the minimum pressure is 3.5. Most fully sparkling wines, such as champagne, crémant or sekt, are sold with a pressure of between 5 and 6 bars."

As the wine world is wide and has many dimensions, the pressure and opening questions are more complicated and depend on different circumstances. As it was just mentioned above, the power of pressure inside the bottle depends on the temperature as well. For every wine, there is a perfect serving and drinking temperature. The recommended temperature to open a pét-nat is 12°C although it might be easy to open a certain type of pét-nat at 4°C. In this case, we could only feel the unbalance of the wine at this low temperature.

The foaming of pét-nat is in relation to the quality and quantity of the lees, the body, the spine of acidity, as well as the pressure inside the bottle. Moreover, the type of grapes, terroir, and vintage is crucial in this matter. The quality and quantity of the lees are shapeable by some winemaking techniques, but all kinds of manipulation are prohibited in low-intervention winemaking.

## What's the difference between pét-nat wines and Champagne, Cava, etc...?

The common attributes of [pét-nats and Champagne](#) (or other types such as Crémant, Cava, etc.) are the tiny bubbles, hence, they are all in the sparkling wine category. However, pét-nat is made from ripe grapes (in better cases), so their fruitiness is characteristic of them. It has a natural richness that reminds you of fruit juice or jams. The yeasty taste of the lees is also slightly different.

It is therefore a mistake for the winemaker to try to make his drink resemble Champagne, or for the consumer to expect the same taste. Personally, I am not a fan of Champagne or similar drinks (basically of the *méthode traditionnelle*), but I love pét-nat (*méthode ancestrale*). Especially if it's a nice juicy one. |

Unfortunately, there are a lot of bad pét-nats, because they seem easy to make. It doesn't require a big investment, just some pressure-resistant bottles, and a crown cap. It's tempting for small wineries in particular because they can create a unique and valuable product with a small financial investment and seemingly little work.

Almost any winemaker with an open mind – whether professional or amateur – is tempted by the idea of pouring a little juice from the grape into a bottle before it has fully fermented. Unfortunately, it's not so simple to know when and what to add. **Once the process has started, it's out of your control. That's why it's so very important to have good-quality raw materials.**

Also, it is a brilliant challenge for a winemaker to get a feel for the pét-nat from the must. After all, it is the last chance to adjust and shape the drink. I am not referring to chemicals or winemaking additives, of course, but to the layers of raw material harvested at different times or the cuvées of grape juices of different varieties. Pét-nat is also a wine, so almost all known wine contaminations can appear in some batches. The most common contaminant is hydrogen sulfide, which is easily recognized by its sulfurous, thermal-watery smell. This fermentation fault is mainly due to a lack of nutrients (nitrogen).

## The interesting indicator: smells of natural wines

During winemaking, the various barnyard odors could be interesting in older barreled red wines, but it is not the case in terms of young wines. Those smells are usually

indicative of contamination, of an environment that is not clean enough. **Pét-nat wines however do not resemble barnyard smells, but rather human ones. It might be bizarre to say, but pét-nat's indicator scents are closer to the odors of the human body.**

Maybe that's why, after consuming a good pét-nat, everyone's erotic charge may rise which I attribute to this particular fragrance, in addition to the vibrancy and refreshing effect. This scent might trigger some kind of subconscious reaction. It's a distinctive smell, but not good if it's too strong or wild.

To use a beer example again, diacetyl gives a buttery, butterscotch-like flavor to beer. It's good on a small scale for some ales (and less good for most lagers), but to a larger extent when it appears, it can be perceived as an impurity. So is this body-fluid smell, which I think is peculiar to pét-nat. At least, I've never smelled it in this form in any other wines. It's sexy but only in moderation. The borders between smelly, undesirable, unpleasant, and delicious aromas vary slightly from person to person. But NEVER accept it as good and drinkable if a pét-nat is smelly, unpleasant, or repulsive. Not even when they say "it's because it's natural" and "natural wines are like that". Nope. Good natural wines are delicious, and deep, and have exciting layers, and organic flavors. **They play on a much wider scale than techno wines.** They require much more work and attention, furthermore more skill and sensitivity. This makes them more valuable both materially and spiritually. **But if a wine is flawed, smells unpleasant, or tastes bad, we just have to say it as it is: it is simply flawed and awful. It is in the same category as flawed conventional wine, neither is more valuable than the other.** It should be poured out, back to Mother Earth.

### **What makes a good pét-nat?**

Pét-nat is a wine too, so obviously, a **great pét-nat has the same characteristics as great wines.** It is important to have a good balance, exciting and varied layers of aromas that follow each other in a harmonious transition with depth, length and a lasting aftertaste. Interestingly, even very young pét-nats need aeration. It takes at least 5 to 15 minutes for the drink to acclimatize. But even over a longer period of time, a minimal change in the aeration can be felt.

A few extra good things are coming your way when you use the SEKHINA pét-nat opener. **We believe it is important that our opening method is a gentle and slow**

**process so as to explore and preserve as much flavor as possible.** During the opening process, the lees that have settled on the bottom of the bottle are gently, but not completely, stirred up, resulting in successively more dense layers as you go down. We stir up the last fifth of the bottle explicitly and distribute it as a final pour. This makes for the peak at the end of each bottle. **This process is what we call: the pét-nat ceremony.**

**Good pét-nat is refreshing both mentally and physically.** Therefore an important element of a good pét-nat is the right or high acidity. Without a strong spine, the pét-nat becomes flabby, so there is no great experience while tasting it. **If the pét-nat is balanced, the experience will be inspiring, stimulating, and rejuvenating.** It gives you a real "don't stop me now" feeling. **It makes you happy, relaxed, and honest very quickly.** To make the effect as intense as possible, you need lots of tiny bubbles, high clarity, minimal sulfur, and high vibration.

## Categories of pét-nat wines

Although pét-nats do not yet have established breed names, like Champagne according to its sweetness like brute nature, deux, etc., I group pét-nats by their nature, because that is the only categorization that makes sense to me here. Thus, I distinguish moderate, juicy, and heavy pét-nats.

**Juicy** is the middle, but of course, there are transitions, because there are some that are moderate but a little bit juicy, some that are juicy but a little bit heavy, and so on. Juicy pét-nat tastes like drinking fibrous juice but with different flavors of different fruits. Sometimes it's just a new flavor that comes out over time and then disappears. Or different flavors come out in the bottom part than in the cleaner part at the beginning. It has a vital, extroverted, colorful sunshine vibe. The perfect drinking temperature is between  $8^{\circ}\text{C} < 12^{\circ}\text{C}$  degrees, normally like a still white wine.

In contrast, the **moderate** pét-nat is more subdued. It's more like other sparkling wines, also because the grapes are picked at an early stage of ripeness, like Champagne. This gives a lighter and more acidic, but less fruity flavor. These pét-nats are more austere, more distant, and more introverted. They have the perfect drinking temperature, like champagne:  $4^{\circ}\text{C} < 7^{\circ}\text{C}$  degrees.

**Heavy** pét-nats, on the other hand, differ in that they are heavier, and not so lightly refreshing. A bigger body appears. They are mainly made from blue grapes, [Lambrusco](#)

can be a starting point for understanding. Heavier, but an excellent accompaniment to meatier, heavier dishes. An excellent pairing with a steak on a terrace in the summer heat, for example, when a full-bodied dry red wine would be too much in the sweatiness. But one thing's for sure: you'll get a much better taste experience with wine than with beer. It can also be enjoyed on its own. A thicker, stronger, stoutish more stable feeling of life. The perfect drinking temperature for a heavy pét-nat is between  $12^{\circ}\text{C} < 16^{\circ}\text{C}$  degrees.

As you can see, there are a lot of questions surrounding contemporary pét-nat wine culture. I do hope though that my thoughts will inspire others to taste them in their most authentic form, and that together we'll further develop the pét-nat wine universe. Pét-nat is a natural beauty. Let's treasure it, let's leave it as a beverage of unclouded honesty and creativity.