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Sulfur in Winemaking: Industry Divided Over Impact on Taste and Quality

Industry experts weigh in on the contentious topic of sulfur use in wine production

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The debate over the use of sulfur in winemaking is not new but continues to spark intense discussions within the industry. This compound, used for centuries to stabilize and preserve wine, divides producers, winemakers, and enthusiasts regarding its

impact on the taste, texture, and aroma of the final product.

The controversy was reignited recently after statements by Anders Frederik Steen, a natural wine producer from Ardèche, France. In a video shared on social media, Steen described the use of sulfur as a practice that "kills" wine, although he acknowledged that some organic producers achieve high-quality results despite using it. His firm stance has once again raised broader questions about how and when this compound is perceived in wines.

Industry professionals agree that sulfur has a noticeable effect, but perceptions vary based on factors such as the taster's genetics, the type of wine, and the amount added during production. Generally, sulfur seems to influence texture more than the direct flavor of the wine. Rebekah Wineburg, a winemaker in Napa Valley, explains that high levels of sulfur can "tighten" the wine, creating a short and dry finish. Paul Wasserman, a natural wine expert, adds that this effect can manifest as dryness or bitterness on the palate.

The threshold at which sulfur becomes perceptible is typically between 30 and 50 parts per million (ppm), according to some professionals. Opinions diverge when levels exceed this range. Alice Feiring, an author and advocate for natural wines, notes that excessive amounts can impart unpleasant aromas, such as smoky or sulfuric notes. However, others, like Patrick Cappiello, owner of Monte Rio Cellars, argue that sulfur is nearly imperceptible in bottled wines and that controlled additions can improve the wine's profile, making it cleaner and more structured.

The timing of sulfur additions also matters. Early applications, such as during grape pressing, tend to integrate more seamlessly into the wine, whereas additions just before bottling are more noticeable. Wasserman highlights that high levels at this stage can "mute" the wine, limiting its ability to evolve over time.

The impact of sulfur also depends on the type of wine. White wines, due to their delicacy and lower tannin content, are generally more sensitive to sulfur additions. Conversely, in red wines, tannins tend to mask the compound's effects, though excessive amounts can make the wine seem closed or lack vibrancy.

Despite disagreements, most experts agree that sulfur is not an absolute "villain." Instead, it is a tool that, when used moderately, can protect the wine's quality against issues such as oxidation or uncontrolled fermentations, particularly in years with challenging weather conditions. Christy Frank, co-owner of Copake Wine Works, describes sulfur as a "corset" that shapes the wine without fully restricting it. However, she also points out that its absence can lead to more relaxed styles that some palates may prefer.

Although the sulfur debate seems unending, many in the industry advocate for a balanced approach. The shared goal, according to Cappiello, is to produce high-quality wines that appeal to both connoisseurs and new consumers without resorting to extremes that could alienate the public or other producers. Ultimately, as Wasserman suggests, the use of sulfur should be viewed as an aesthetic choice rather than a source of division within the sector.