

IT ALL BEGINS WITH A HUMBLE GRAPE

Plunkett Fowles, Sam Plunkett

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Look into a winemaker's bag of tricks and you'll find such things as skinny milk, horses' hooves, egg whites and fish guts. Sam Plunkett, Chief Winemaker at Plunkett Fowles, reveals to Essentials' Emma Westwood the magic behind winemaking. Hubble-bubble, toil and trouble...

When listening to Sam Plunkett of Plunkett Fowles run through the steps of winemaking you'd be forgiven for thinking he's a wizard. The alchemy that goes into the processes — the 'live' nature of the maturation, the spectacle of sensory illusion that then turns into something entirely different — would have the teachers at Hogwarts running for their research manuals. But Sam prefers the label of 'artisan', that of a skilled manual worker who crafts and moulds a finished product by hand. 'Yeah, I like that word,' he says with a look of satisfaction and assurance.



■ STEP ONE: HARVEST

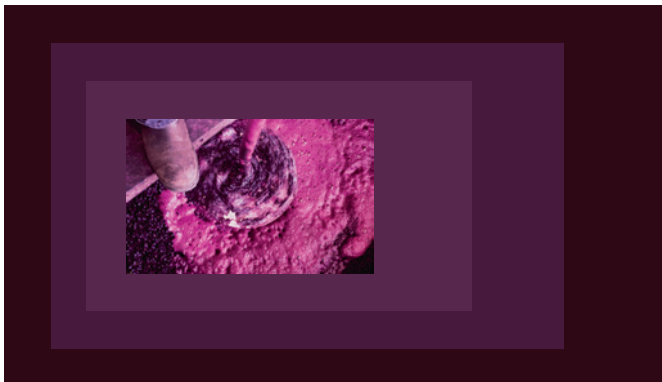
‘Squeeze a grape and then tell me what you see.’

Sam has taken us among the vines, wedged between shiraz and cabernet — not a bad place to be. A rabbit scurries one way and the autumnal sun smiles down on us, a stark contrast to the pelting rains that had pummelled the area only a few days before.

For Plunkett Fowles, harvest comes in the form of machines rolling in, technological advancement being a proud and prominent part of their winemaking. ‘If I’m worried about the weather and the fruit going mouldy, I can ring up Trevor and say “let’s haul the harvester out!”’, justifies Sam. ‘It takes three to four hours to pick a 20-tonne truckload by machine. Handpicking would take about 50 people and an eight-hour day. The challenge is where do you find 50-odd people at the drop of a hat? With hand harvesting, what you tend to do is say “I *think* we’ll be ready to pick in the middle of next week” and then you make your 50 phone calls and you line it up and, come hell or high water, you do it. That’s an example where I think technology lets you make a better winemaking decision.’

Sam makes no bones about the fact that the harvesting day is vital. He describes such decision-making as being ‘emotional’, something where he relies on the gut over the head. Especially with recent rains throwing a spanner in the works of a potentially perfect vintage, Sam has been trudging up and down his vines (at least) twice a day, squeezing, tasting and looking at his fruit from all angles until he *feels* the time is right.

‘I look at a particular vine,’ he says, referring to the leafy row in front of us, ‘and I say to myself “It looks green and healthy, absolutely no mould and disease, the crop’s easily spread with nothing bunched up anywhere, and there’s this dappled light where there’s a mix of fruit sitting in the sun...” There’s all sorts of magic going on. There are different things metabolising, creating colour and sugar and flavour...’ Sam’s eyes sparkle and, pardon us for saying it, but we can see the wizard coming out in him again.



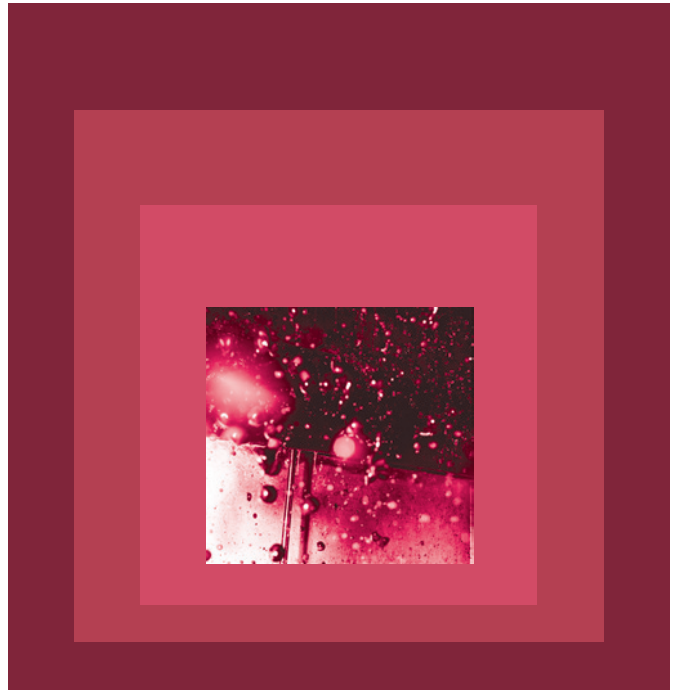
■ STEP TWO: CRUSHING & PRESSING

Let’s jump back a bit, where we were squeezing that berry between our fingers...

By squeezing out the juice, Sam wanted to demonstrate how, even from a red-coloured grape, the juice runs clear. So how is red wine made? Well, the key is in the skins, which contain the colour. To make red wine, the fruit is crushed then put into a fermenter — juice, pips, skins and all. The inky red of the skins creates the luscious hue and flavoursome taste of the different varieties of red wine. *Voilà!*

To make a white wine, the grapes are crushed in the same way as reds, but then moved into a press that gently squeezes the berries to separate the juice from the white skins. These skins are thrown away or fed to the sheep within about four hours of picking.

So, in a nutshell, white wine is made from fermented juice only, while red wine contains not only the juice, but also the pips and skins.



■ STEP THREE: FERMENTATION

‘Making wine is a process of evolution, of building on what Mother Nature has provided,’ explains Sam over his shoulder as we clamber behind him. ‘I like the fact that yeast is alive. I don’t particularly like cooking but I’ll make bread because the yeast is alive and changing. There’s something about steering that evolution that’s incredibly satisfying.’

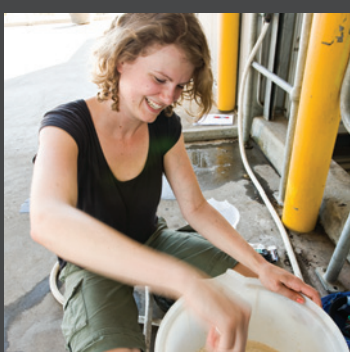
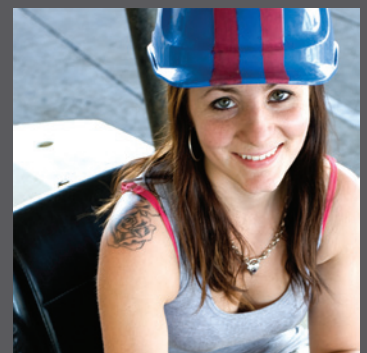
The fermentation process for red wine happens within one week while kept at room temperature (which helps accelerate the ferment and also suck more tannin out of the skins). White wine can take up to one month at a cooler temperature (which helps maintain the ‘pretty fruit taste’) before all the sugars have turned into alcohol.

We are now climbing along a raised walkway where we look down into some huge fermentation tanks, the kind where Sam tells us the more ‘cultured’ ferments take place. The foam on top of the white grape juice below — approximately five to 10 millimetres thick — seems to have a momentum all of its own, churning and moving to a current powered by yeast. ‘The yeast is eating hungrily at the sugar and turning into alcohol, and pumping out carbon dioxide,’ Sam says of the intense activity occurring beneath us.

If we were lucky, we would have seen a pattern forming, like a dot painting, rising up through the foam of one of the tanks, but Sam says it’s usually only a one in 50 chance of this happening. ‘When you do see it, though, it’s absolutely beautiful.’

In contrast to such random beauty, Sam ushers us into a warehouse where oak barrels come stacked to the ceiling. Stick our noses into one of these barrels and we’re confronted with a less than agreeable foam and a smell that could be described as ‘baby poo’. Sam can’t help but laugh at the screwball expressions on our faces. This is where the wild ferments take place, the ‘less cultured’ ones, who are running free and doing ‘crazy stuff’.

The oak of the barrel will eventually become a characteristic of the wine. ‘When you’re smelling that barrel and thinking, “I’m smelling a red”, you’re actually smelling a red and going “It’s smelling like oak”,’ explains Sam. Think about it. It does make sense.





■ STEP FOUR: BLENDING & FINING

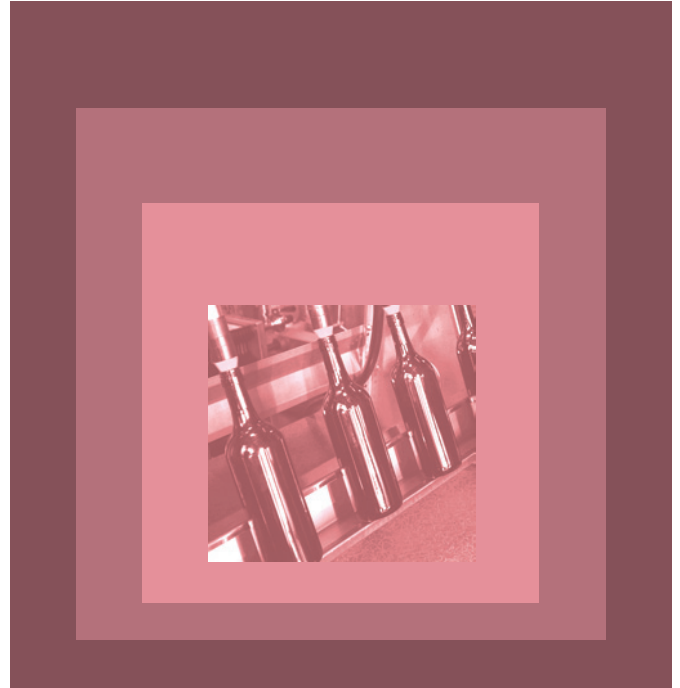
In order to give us a feel for the blending and fining of wine – where the winemaker gets to ‘reveal’ characteristics of a particular drop – Sam takes us into his magic cube...

‘You’ve got to imagine the wine as a three-dimensional thing that you can crawl around inside of,’ he says with great enthusiasm. ‘There’s aroma, the flavour, and the shape and texture of the wine. Shape and texture is the most exciting thing for me. That’s when you’ve got the thing in your mouth and you’re inside it, and it’s a bit dinted over here or a bit raspy and ugly over there.’ Sam’s hands fly through the air as he constructs his imaginary model. ‘So you might bash that dint out with some shiraz to fatten out the palate and you might fine it with an appropriate protein like egg white or even fish guts to rub off those aggressive tannins over there, and then you might add a bit of acid to extend the palate and give the wine more length.’

After crawling around inside Sam’s hypothetical prism for a moment or two, we get his drift. He’s what you could call ‘a wine panelbeater’. Then Sam becomes more specific and explains his *modus operandi* for the Plunkett Fowles product suite.

‘With Stone Dwellers, we’re trying to be representative of the region so we don’t muck around with it too much – we just let the flavours of the region show themselves. Ladies Who Shoot Their Lunch has stronger fruit flavours, so we blend in some gewürztraminer to give it more perfume and we put it in barrels with stinky yeast to give it more texture. 490M needs to be more approachable with not too much flavour as this can be overwhelming, so we stop the ferment earlier, make sure there’s less tannin and allow the sugars to soften the taste of the acid.’

According to Sam, our bodies inherently react negatively to tannin, as ancient poisons were tannic in nature. Therefore, the full-bodied, bloody reds are definitely an acquired taste. ‘Like we’re accustomed to the pain,’ jokes Sam.



■ STEP FIVE: FILTRATION & BOTTLING

As the bottles fly along the production line, miraculously labelled and ready for packaging at the end, Sam struggles to talk over the noisy machinery in concluding his tuition.

Apparently, one of the frequently asked questions about wine concerns preservatives. ‘The cool thing about wine is its alcohol because it’s naturally a preservative,’ tells Sam. ‘Red wines are chock-full of tannins and that’s a preservative, too. The amount of preservative we use is in such low levels because the wine inherently wants to look after itself.’

Sulphur dioxide is the main preserving additive used today, although its usage harks back to Roman times. ‘They’d pick up elemental sulphur and burn it in the wine barrels to keep it sound. It kills the bugs and hoovers up the oxygen that the bugs like.’

And what makes our teeth and lips turn black when drinking red wine? It’s the anthocyanin (pigment) contained in tannin. ‘When the blokes see that rim around women’s mouths, they think “happy hunting ground”,’ says Sam with a wink.

With bottles under our arms and heads spinning with information, we wave off Sam and thank him for a most enlightening afternoon. Such passion has certainly rubbed off on his new students, and knowing more has made the value of wine seem further pronounced, as well as the flavours and characteristics of each mouthful.

Sam Plunkett may not be an actual wizard but, hell, to call the winemaking process anything less than magical would be sacrilege.

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