

COTURRI WINERY

Common questions about sulfites, natural yeasts and organic wines



What's the big deal about sulfites? The issue of sulfites in wines is complex, and has been hotly debated for years. While sulfur has been used for centuries, it wasn't until the 40's, that sulfites became a major ingredient of winemakers as a preservative and sterilization tool. Since then, sulfites have been correctly criticized and regulated for their excessive use and their latent health consequences.

Where are sulfites found? Sulfur commonly occurs in the vicinity of volcanoes and hot springs. The sulfites used in winemaking are a residue of natural gas and petroleum crude. Sulfur is an essential element to life – the human skeletal system, our bodily fluids contain minor components of sulfur; and it is said that sulfites are naturally occurring in all wines in small amounts.

What other foods have sulfites? It is a widely used preservative found in the food supply of a diverse range of products such as dried fruits, bacon, orange juice concentrate, seafood (shrimp and crabmeat), processed potatoes, cornstarch, caramel coloring and wine.

Are sulfites dangerous? Yes, the Federal Drug Administration considers three million Americans sensitive to sulfites - for asthmatics and headache sufferers, sulfites can trigger painful and life threatening episodes. The [FDA](#) banned the use of sulfites on salad bars, fresh fruits and vegetables. Sulfur dioxide is also a dangerous component in atmospheric air pollution and acid rain (yes, the same stuff - obviously in a different context - but illustrates the need to be aware of SO₂'s toxic potential).

What laws regulate sulfite usage in wine? In 1988, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) required a warning label - "Contains Sulfites" on beers, spirits and wines that exceed 10 parts per million (ppm) threshold of sulfites. Wines that contain less than 10-ppm sulfites do not need this warning.

Does Coturri Winery add sulfites? No. Never have and never will. Since 1979, Coturri is one of the few pioneering wineries in the United States that has never had a "Contains Sulfites" warning. Most all of our wines have (zero) 0 ppm – sulfites - NOT DECTABLE. [Click here](#) to see an actual BATF waiver for the 2000 Forsythe Vineyards Zinfandel.

Why doesn't Coturri add sulfites? Natural wines taste better. Wines without added sulfites have bright fruity flavors, earthy characteristics, and herbal essence of heathers, sage, lavender, and traces of the finite minerals from the vineyard soils - what the French call "terroir". The greatest distinguishing factor between exceptional wines is soil. The earth is what gives a wine its character and what a winemaker strives to reveal in the bottle.

Why are sulfites used in winemaking?

- Wineries with large-scale productions take in grapes from multiple vineyards from various regions. When grapes are trucked for long distances they need the sulfites to keep the fruit "fresh" and to impede a premature fermentation. As well, the grapes from these vineyards are not necessarily consistent, and sulfites help normalize the grapes.
- Winemakers also employ sulfites to manage the fermentation process and aid in creating a homogenized product. Sulfur dioxide is added during the crush to purge native yeasts that grow naturally on the grape skins. Once the wild yeasts have been eliminated a commercial yeast strain is added that is sulfite resistant to start the fermentation. This produces a wine that is consistent and malleable.
- Sulfites are used as a preservative to insure a long shelf life, and protect wines from temperature extremes, and other conditions that would otherwise "cook" a natural product.

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How are sulfites used in winemaking? Winemakers' use sulfiting powders or gases to introduce sulfur dioxide into their wines. Free SO₂ is used to inhibit wild yeasts on grape skins from starting natural fermentation during the crush, and for microbial stability at bottling (i.e., add shelf life). Sulfur dioxide is also widely used to reduce oxidation (i.e., "browning" from exposure to air). Typically conventional wines will contain anywhere from 80 to 350 parts per million sulfites.

Do non-sulfited wines contain harmful microorganisms? No. Because of its alcohol content no human pathogen can survive in wine. So it is impossible for microbe growth in wines to make you sick.

What negative effects do sulfites have on wine? Excessive sulfite use embalms wine, diminishes its bouquet, suppresses its raw fruit flavors, and can leave unpleasant aftertastes. Even modest sulfite treatment can have a sterilization effect that in essence kills delicate fragrances and flavors and deadens the taste of wine by destroying the vitality of its living natural yeasts and organisms.

Is wine alive? Absolutely, the raw products – wine grapes and natural yeasts – are alive at the harvest, and they continue to live and grow during the fermentation. Ideally a winemaker strives to make the grapes continue to live on in the form of a liquid wine, bottled and aged till the perfect time comes to finally drink it – often years after the fruit was first picked. By their very nature, wine grapes will automatically change into the delightful and mysterious product that it is. It isn't necessary to improve upon this natural process and human interference is best kept to a bare minimum for perfection.

What is the shelf life of Coturri wines? If properly stored in a cool, dark cellar, Coturri wines will last for decades. We have vintages at the winery that date back to 1966 that Tony our winemaker made with his father. These wines are still very much alive and delightful to drink.

What are Organic Wines?

Under the recently enacted USDA National Organic Program, (7 CFR part 205), has set out three new wine categories: "100 percent organic," "organic," or "made with organic grapes". "100% Organic" wine is made from organic grapes and without the use of added sulfites. Only wines without added sulfites can be certified organic wine. Wineries that use organic grapes, but add sulfites or other additives can only be labeled "Made with organically grown grapes".

Are Coturri wines "Organic"? Coturri wines could be labeled an "Organic Wine" because we use certified organic grapes and our wines contain no additives, such as sulfites or tartaric acid. We are currently considering this certification for use in some of our labels.

How do pesticides affect wine and people? Conventionally grown grapes are sprayed with a variety of pesticides, insecticides, fumigants, and herbicides. When the grapes are picked and crushed the residue is washed from the skins right into the juice, and therefore into the wine - weed killers that are sprayed on the ground are also absorbed by the roots and end up in the pulp of the grape and thus into the wine. In addition, organic farming provides a safer environment for farm workers and reduces their exposure to chemicals.

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