

HIGHER ED

Carbo Takes A Dip

by Aaron Ayscough



Illustration by Nishant Choksi from Alice's forthcoming book *Natural Wine For the People*.

*Small-scale natural winemakers are employing a novel twist on carbonic maceration, and while it has no name, they're loving the results. **Aaron Ayscough** reports from France.*

ince establishing his winemaking operation in 2011, the reclusive vigneron-négociant Daniel Sage has pioneered a curious and novel winemaking method: a twist on carbonic maceration that is gaining fans among like-minded natural winemakers with each passing vintage.

In his isolated winery in a 1000m-altitude hamlet in the Haut-Loire, Sage gently vats whole-cluster grapes before filling the remaining space in his vats with unfermented direct-press juice. The direct-press juice seals the whole-cluster grapes from air contact, effectively substituting for the role of CO₂ in a standard carbonic maceration. He thereby achieves much of the fruitiness and minimal extraction of a carbonic maceration, with, arguably, less intervention.

Sage calls the method *flottaison*, or ‘flotation.’ But there is as yet no definitive term for the practice. That hasn’t stopped it from spreading, meme-like, throughout winemaking France in recent vintages. Before visiting Sage in January I learned of the method from winemakers in Burgundy, the Gard, the Beaujolais, and Auvergne—almost all of whom took Sage’s technique as inspiration.



From the brain of Daniel Sage to your glass. Photo credit: [Frédéric Truchon](#).

To understand the appeal of Sage's technique, it helps to have a fairly tactile knowledge of carbonic maceration, the intracellular fermentation method behind most silky, fruity, *glou-glou* styles of natural red wine on the market.

A winemaker conducting a carbonic maceration will ensure that his or her vat of whole-cluster grapes is sealed with CO₂. There are several ways to achieve this: a winemaker may pipe in CO₂ from adjacent fermentation vats, or he or she may wait until juice at the bottom of the tank ferments and creates its own CO₂. (This juice may be created from settling of the whole-cluster grape mass, or it may be added as an already-fermenting starter must.)

The fastest and surest way to seal a tank against oxygen is to simply add CO₂ to a tank with a canister. Yet whether it is truly *natural* to add outside CO₂ to a fermentation tank is a recurring point of talmudic disagreement among natural winemakers.

What is certain is this: intracellular fermentations, the *raison d'être* of carbonic maceration, require sealed, anaerobic environments. Otherwise the cap of grapes can quickly dry out, inviting acetates and bacterial spoilage.

In Sage's 'flotation' method, direct-press juice takes the role CO₂ plays in carbonic maceration, thus creating the conditions for a sort of immersive intracellular fermentation.

"I found the idea relatively clever and reassuring," says Gard winemaker Valentin Vallès, who first learned of the technique in conversation with Sage. Vallès and his friends have derived their own variation of the method, which they informally call *la trempouillette*. It's a diminutive noun version of the verb *trem-pouiller*, itself an affectionate form of *tremper*, to dip or soak. *Trempouillette*, a little dip. They use the term to refer to the addition of direct-press juice to whole-cluster fermentations, from smaller proportions, up to the full Sage-style 'float.'

"It's a sort of carbonic maceration," Vallès confirms. "The grapes go whole-cluster in the tank, and rather than sealing it with CO₂, we put in [direct-press] juice, which avoids problems with the microbial environment."

The first time Vallès employed *la trempouillette* was in 2015, on a skin-macerated sauvignon called "Queue de Paon," or "Peacock's Tail." Since then he's used the technique on several cuvées, notably "Rollier," a blend of syrah, grenache, cinsault, and roussanne.

“It offers security in relation to the cap, which can otherwise risk lactic spoilage,” Vallès confirms. “And on the aromas it does finer things [than standard carbonic]—less extraction, more aromas.”

Vallès showed the technique to his friend and neighbor, former Châteaubriand sommelier turned négociant winemaker Sébastien Chatillon, who first tried it on a 2017 pinot noir that had begun as a carbonic maceration.

“We had a lot of mildew and there were acetates [perceptible in the aroma of the fermenting grape mass. I was worried about having a spike in volatility, so I flipped out and added some direct-press juice,” Chatillon explains. The result is “Becasse,” a *vin de France* from 85% whole-cluster pinot and 15% direct-press cinsault and mourvèdre. “It worked well, so I kept the technique.”

Chatillon’s two 2018 *primeurs* are called “Goodbye” and “Welcome.” “Goodbye” is 70% whole-cluster cinsault, 30% direct-press grenache, while “Welcome” is 50% direct-press syrah and 50% whole-cluster grenache. Both wines possess a slender, rosé character reflective of their origins as short intracellular fermentations bathed in direct-press rosé. It’s not uncommon for winemakers in warm regions to lighten their red wines with the later addition of direct-press wine. But co-fermenting the two from the start is quite original.

In Burgundy, near Dijon, Domaine de la Cras’ Marc Soyard is among the latest to begin experimenting with immersive intracellular fermentation. Soyard met Daniel Sage at a tasting in 2017 and wasted no time putting the latter’s ideas into practice: he employed it on three separate cuvées in 2018. Most striking, tasted from tank in early January, is a seamless and persistent blend of gamay and pinot noir entitled, “Melting Potes.”

“For carbonic vinifications in small containers, there’s nothing better,” he says, clearly pleased with the results.

Natural Beaujolais winemaker Romain des Grottes concurs, having employed the technique for two collaborative micro-cuvées last year, and another of his own, “Good Handicraft,” in 2016. Alone among the winemakers I spoke to, he didn’t receive the idea directly or indirectly from Daniel Sage.

“I suppose for me it was an extension of my *pied de cuve*, where we use a lot of direct-press gamay,” he says, referring to a starter must that he harvests early and adds to help boost

fermentation in his red tanks. “I think many winemakers might be arriving at the idea, as we begin to think of ways to avoid using outside CO₂.”

Aurelien Lefort, a slim, thoughtful natural winemaker in the central France region of Auvergne, met Daniel Sage four years ago, introduced by the Paris wine agent Clovis Ochin. (Ochin distributes Lefort’s wines in Paris, and rather oddly claims to represent Sage also, though according to Sage he does not.) Nowadays Lefort employs immersive intracellular vinification on late-harvested fruit to conduct fermentations of astonishingly long lengths: what he vats in October, he often presses in March. The results are fascinating reds: crystalline in structure, sinuous, with long, piercing acid—retaining a certain white character, as when reds are produced using a portion of white grapes.

“It makes a type of tisane,” says Lefort, who avoids describing the technique as “carbonic maceration” on the grounds that CO₂ is not added to the tank. He prefers to call it “a meeting between liquid and solid phases.”

What Lefort means by this cryptic phrase becomes clearer when I visit Daniel Sage’s cellar in January, before wines are assembled.

Alone among the practitioners of his ‘flotation’ method, Sage later separates the direct-press juice in which his whole-cluster grapes macerate and bottles it as a separate cuvée with a different assemblage. He has his own idiosyncratic slang for these styles: if *flottaison* (flotation) refers to the process of immersing the whole-cluster grapes in direct-press juice, *la grouse*—a contraction of *jus de presse* (press juice) and *jus de goutte* (free-run juice) refers to the direct-press juice that has spent time soaking the whole-cluster grapes.

In January we tasted a barrel of press juice alongside a separate barrel of the *grouse* in which the fruit from the press juice barrel had floated for two weeks. (Got that?)



Photo credit: Aaron Ayscough

The *grousse*, a pinot noir from Ardèche, is pale, translucent, and rosé-colored at 11° alcohol. The press-juice, from the same parcel harvested at the same time, is a more recognizable bright ruby, at 15°. While it is normal for press juice to be somewhat richer in alcoholic potential than direct-press juice, the difference here is surprising. It seems to imply that, during this “meeting between the liquid and solid phases,” some alcohol or alcoholic potential is transferred from the direct-press juice to the floating grape bunches, rather in the way one might infuse pineapple slices with vodka.

Sage admits that *la flottaison* remains somewhat mysterious, even to him. He says he first came up with the idea in conversation at the Auberge de Chassignolles in 2011.

“I asked myself what type of ‘extraction’ there would be [in the wine],” he recalls, “if we did maceration in a juice without alcohol?”

It is a testament both to the power of his idea and the infrequency with which winemakers from disparate regions communicate with one another that Sage seems genuinely surprised when I enumerate all the other winemakers he has already influenced.

“These things,” he muses, shining a light on the chalk denoting the contents of another barrel. “Sometimes they’re just in the air.”

Immersive Intracellular Fermentation: A Glossary

La flottaison – literally ‘flotation’; slang employed by Ardèche winemaker Daniel Sage to refer to immersive intracellular fermentation.

La grousse – a contraction of jus de presse (press juice) and jus de goutte (free-run juice); slang employed by Ardèche winemaker Daniel Sage to refer to direct-press juice that has been used to immerse whole-cluster grapes for short-to-medium-term intracellular fermentations (5-15 days).

La trempouillette – literally ‘a little dip’; slang employed by Gard winemakers Sébastien Chatillon and Valentin Vallès to refer to short immersive intracellular fermentation.

Examples of Immersive Intracellular Fermentation

Romain des Grottes

Vin de France “Good Handicraft” 2016 (gamay)

Aurelien Lefort

Vin de France “Sérum” 2017 (gamay, chardonnay)

Valentin Vallès

Vin de France “Queue de Paon” 2015 (sauvignon)

Vin de France “Le Rollier” 2017 (syrah, grenache, cinsault, roussanne)

Ad Vinum

Vin de France “Becasse” 2017 (pinot noir, mourvèdre, cinsault)

Vin de France “Goodbye” 2018 (cinsault, grenache)

Vin de France “Welcome” 2018 (syrah, grenache)

Daniel Sage

Vin de France “Abreuver ses Sillons” 2016 (gamay, all press-juice)

Vin de France “Nyctalopie” 2016 (gamay, pinot noir, carignan – all grousse)

Marc Soyard

Vin de France “Melting Potes” 2018 (gamay, pinot noir)

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