"We produce under this sky": making organic wine in a material world

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of living and non-living materials as active agents in the processes of making and marketising organic wines in Northern Italy. It is concerned with the ways in which the tension between human intentionality and material agency is managed and worked with in this high-risk and ethically charged context. By applying theoretical insights of actor-network and post-humanist theories to the field of agri-food production, this thesis proposes novel ways of understanding markets, ethics, and skill in the context of organic wine, and of agri-food more generally.

The thesis traces and analyses the effects of materials key to the production and marketisation of organic wines: vines, yeast, and sulphur dioxide. A multi-sited, participant observation ethnography approach is used to follow these materials, and the practices in which they are implicated, at a number of wineries in Northern Italy. Two dominant modes of ordering (Law 1994) of organic winemaking practices and discourses are identified: pacification, and making spaces for nature. It is shown that the constant tension between these two modes of ordering expresses the ongoing negotiation of acceptable levels of indeterminacy (and so the acceptable limits of ‘naturalness’) in organic wine production and sales.

This thesis makes a significant contribution to current debates in post-humanist and agri-food literature. It extends the existing empirical focus of post-humanist research to spaces of high-risk human-nonhuman interactions. It proposes a move beyond conceptualising agri-food ‘natures’ as economically or ethically passive, and towards relational understandings of both markets and ethics of agri-foods. It demonstrates that the times and spaces of agri-food production, and those of agri-food markets and ethics, are linked through the materialities of practice and product. This thesis thus calls for a materialist politics approach to agri-food production.
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