



A party with winemakers means a lot of great wine. Dame's Dana Frank (standing) pours from a few favorite bottles.

Things can get geeky when you hang out with natural-wine makers.

Conversation flits from how much VA, or volatile acidity, a wine should have, to why Pinot Gris ought to be turned into a red rather than a white. Opinions fly. Cursing is compulsory. And, if you've opened half a dozen of their bottles, you're in for a rollicking good time.

On a recent night at Dame, sommelier Dana Frank's new natural-wine-focused restaurant in Portland's Concordia neighborhood, she'd gathered her winemaker friends for a spring feast paired with their best vintages. "Yes, these are really unique, interesting wines," said Frank as she popped open a bottle of Bow & Arrow's Melon, a supercrisp, golden Loire Valley varietal made by her husband, Scott Frank, who was at the other end of the table talking shop. "But they're also really delicious."

When Frank, the nationally lauded former wine director of Portland hot spot Ava Gene's, opened Dame last fall with business partner Jane Smith, her goal was to bring the wines she and friends most liked to drink to the forefront, and to demystify what's long been considered niche. The general idea behind natural wine is that it's made with as little human intervention as possible, and until recently, in-the-know wine-business insiders have been the main fans. (In fact, it was the Franks' mutual obsession with the Loire Valley, a hotbed of natural winemaking, that brought the couple together.) But a wave of natural-wine bars and restaurants—Wildair in Manhattan, The Four Horsemen in Brooklyn, Terroir in San Francisco, The Punchdown in Oakland—suggests that its breakthrough moment is now.

Frank modeled Dame on some of her favorite natural *bistrot*s à vin in Paris: Clamato, Septime and Vivant. A candlelit space with pendant lamps, a curving marble bar and Impressionist

paintings, Dame does seem like the kind of boite you'd stumble upon in the raffish 11th. But the reclaimed wood shelves house one of the country's best selections of natural wines from around the world: 140-plus bottles featuring gems the Franks discovered on their travels alongside those her friends make locally.

"It feels like we're at this turning point," she said as guests snacked on smoked-trout canapés between sips of orange-hued rosé from Analemma Winery in Columbia Gorge. "It's exciting to have people come in and say, 'I don't know anything about these wines, but this is great.'" There is no universal certification for natural wine, but Frank has her own prerequisites: The grapes must be either biodynamically or organically grown; the wines must be made with native yeasts (not commercial strains) and have low to no sulfur and no chemicals. It's a risky way to make wine, Frank admits, because the more hands-off the winemaker is, the greater chance there is that a wine might go sideways and end up *too* funky and strange. But as more vintners hop on the bandwagon, she says, they're learning from one another, and vintages are getting better and better each year.

Dame's chef, Eli Dahlin, an alum of two of Seattle's buzziest restaurants (Damn the Weather and The Walrus and the Carpenter), designed the restaurant's menu to complement natural wines, which tend to be lighter-bodied and higher in acid. Guests passed platters of roast halibut with oranges and braised radishes while sipping that bright Melon, and a gorgeously rare roast rack of veal was paired with winemaker Kelley Fox's earthy Pinot Noir.

At the end of the meal, Frank stood up on the banquette to deliver a rallying toast to her friends. "It makes me so happy that more people are grasping on to this idea," she said, raising her glass. "Thank you for all that you do."

Hannah Wallace, a Portland, Oregon-based journalist, writes about food and wine.