

Canadians in Napa! Steve Matthiasson: Farmer, Viticulturist, Winemaker & Guardian of the Galaxy...aka Grape

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The 2017 Matthiasson Rosé. Photo credit: Matthiasson Wines

Did I happen to mention Steve Matthiasson, venerated winemaker, chief viticultural steward and all round humanitarian at [Matthiasson Wines](#), grew up on my street in Winnipeg, Manitoba, CANADA? It's true. Napa's guardian of the grape is indeed Canadian, spending his early years on Queenston Street, just around the corner from Snell's Drug Store & ice cream parlour and about as far away from California's wine epicenter as one can imagine. And why is this important, you ask? Well, aside from validating my own humble roots (yay Winterpeg!), it does, in fact, explain a lot.

Like his agrarian soul and the fact that he refers to himself as a farmer. Not a grape-grower or a winemaker, I ask? I mean – shallow me – but the guy *was* the 2018 Food & Wine Magazine and San Francisco Chronicle winemaker of the year, and has been a James Beard finalist several times over. And OMG, have you seen the fabulous range of wines and deliciously esoteric and creative Italian blends he produces?



Photo credit: Matthiasson Wines Instagram

According to Steve, spending the first 18 years of his life on his aunt's farm north of Winnipeg ignited a passion for agriculture and reinforced the importance of farming. A Greenpeace video seen later in his young life sealed his fate as a Jeffersonian, planet-first, environmental steward. It's about using the earth's gifts responsibly, he says. Sigh. I don't know about you, but at a time when climate change, income inequality and rotten politics dog the headlines, Steve Matthiasson is like a shining beacon of hope!!



Steve Matthiasson & Jill Klein Matthiasson. Photo credit: Matthiasson Wines Facebook

Talk to Steve (done! – see below) and the first thing you learn is his values, beliefs and moral compass, inform everything he does from family farming, sustainable living, viticulture management, to the way he makes wine. Together Steve and his wife slash business partner, Jill Klein Matthiasson, are farmers first. They grow their own fruit and vegetables, raise livestock, preserve their own food and teach and consult with others in the Napa community on how to do the same. *Naturally*, their wines are certified organic. Impressively, in 1999 Steve co-authored *the* California manual on sustainable vineyard practices.

Matthiasson Wines reflect Steve's very specific attitude towards what wine should and shouldn't be. His deeply-held belief that wine is best enjoyed as an accompaniment to food completely informs his winemaking style. His wines are complex, energetic, beautifully fresh and have none of the high-alcohol, fruit-bomb hallmarks that he thinks are a betrayal to the potential of Napa. That single-minded determination to produce elegant, low alcohol, high acid wines certainly made him the odd-winemaker-out in Napa in 2003, when his label was launched. Steve didn't get the love....or the listings. And he wasn't about to compromise his values, so they scraped by, with Steve consulting on sustainable viticulture across the valley.

It was another nine years before the Matthiasson's saw an appreciable industry shift towards a food and wine sensibility. The next generation of food and wine critics, the rise of less classic/more experimental sommeliers and the birth of food and wine blogging, helped propel the Matthiasson brand forward.



Photo credit: Matthiasson Wines Instagram



Hang out around the water cooler – aka their Instagram feed – and you feel the love, appreciation and respect for all Team Matthiasson does. Did I mention he's Canadian?

Enough from me! Here's our conversation which has been lightly edited for clarity (i.e. ums ;).

Q&A

Almost no one in the wine world comes from Manitoba. And, we both grew up in Manitoba's Red River Valley! Can you tell me a little bit about your roots?

Yea, so the name Matthiasson is Icelandic and my dad's relatives grew up north of Winnipeg in an Icelandic community called Gimli. And then there's the other branch of the family that settled just south of Winnipeg and the Manitoba border. They were in North Dakota in a town called Cavalier, which is also in the Red River Valley. On my mom's side it's very old school, traditional American dating right back to the Mayflower. So they were Quakers on that side.

I think I identify most with my dad's Canadian side. They had a cottage in Gimli and my amma – grandma in Icelandic – lived in the north end of Winnipeg, in an Icelandic neighborhood, and she had a cottage up in Matlock. So that was my youth and I lived in Winnipeg until I was eight. I grew up on the Queenston just around the corner from Snells.

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What? Really?? I grew up on Queenston Street in Winnipeg!

No way!! OMG!! Yea, my dad was an anthropology professor at the University of Manitoba and my mom was an anthropology professor at the University of Winnipeg. (Much laughter and comparing notes.)

And then my parents split up and my mom, sister and I went down to Tucson and my dad stayed in Winnipeg. But I returned to the Winnipeg area every summer until I was 18, so lots of time was spent up there.

And my aunt lived on a farm north of Winnipeg and I would spend a lot of my summers there as well. That's really where I got my love of farming. Being out on the prairies with the wheat fields going on forever, riding the tractors, and the incredible smell of the dirt. Those are such good memories.

So yeah, all those years later, growing the grapes is the part I love the most and I look at winemaking as the finishing of the growing-the-grapes process. But that love of farming definitely comes from my summers on the farm.

I noticed in all of your branding, on your website and in articles written about you, that you talk about yourself as a "farmer" as opposed to a "grower". Can you elaborate on that?

Yeah that's really interesting. I guess everybody does say I'm a grape *grower*. I think the word grower is a little too commodity-oriented like I'm growing this thing.... whereas farming is more of a mentality, and it means something culturally. And when we say farmer, there's a value there.

So can you elaborate on that value because it seems to frame everything you do?

Hmmm. I never really thought about the distinction between grower and farmer until you brought it up but I guess it's the idea of *using* the land. It's part of the whole Jeffersonian idea. It's the idea of independence and our relationship with the land. When I think grower I'm thinking, ok, I'm using this land to grow this crop. But that's not at all how we think of it. We think of it as having a relationship with the land and having an opportunity to work with the land to achieve the best possible outcome.

And you are clearly a true caretaker of the land. As I look at your site and wine descriptions, it all seems rooted in your relationship with the environment. It's so distinct from other brands in that way. Was it always a conscious choice to be an organic and sustainable farmer?

In the beginning, I had no inkling if I could even make a living as a farmer and winemaker. I was definitely trying to find some role within the world of organic farming. It wasn't initially apparent how one gets into *being* a farmer so step one was researching and exploring the world of organic farming. I started as a consultant, I went to Davis and I studied horticulture with a specialty in pest management with trees and vines. And so I said, right, I'll get into consulting with farmers who want to move towards organics. That's a career I can do, and it'll get me out into the farming environment that I crave. All I knew was the goal was to get my own place – but it was one step at a time. Eventually we did get there.

But my interest in organics? ... so I had ADD as a kid. I did not do well in school and I went to this experimental school that was run by these nuns in Tucson and it was called Kino Learning Center. There was a garden and as you can imagine, with nuns there was a heavy focus on growing your own food and getting down to basics. And we had a garden and I really loved my little row in the garden.

But I also distinctly remember – and this is probably 1979 or 1980 – Greenpeace coming to our school and showing us a film about the oceans. That really turned me into an environmentalist. And so when we started looking at our garden and the goats and chickens and stuff, we had to think about our own use of the land. This is a finite resource and we need to take care of it. It's not just about using it for our benefit.



Photo credit: Matthiasson Wines Instagram

Do you think enough people care at this point about drinking organic or sustainable wine? Where are we on that curve?

Well I think that curve is actually pretty steep right now. There's a lot of talk about organic and sustainability in the wine world. Natural wine is really big and there's a lot of focus with natural wine on the wine-making process. Personally, I'd like to see the grape-growing focus more prominent in that discussion. But I think it's a really healthy direction we're taking as an industry. And hopefully the conversation will get a little more nuanced because right now it's not nuanced at all.

Actually, the history of organic farming is interesting. It really took on a lot of momentum when Rachel Carson wrote her book *Silent Spring* which was about the impact of the pesticide DDT on birds. So people said, ok – we need to start farming organically so we don't kill the birds. And then the next surge in organic was the Alar scare in the 80s. Apples were coated with these poisonous pesticide chemicals and the conversation shifted organic farming from protecting the planet to eating healthy.

And so today, a lot of consumers in the wine world are focused on both these things – they don't want chemicals and shit in their wine and they want to eat healthy. But I'm hoping the conversation moves over to doing the right thing with our vineyards. I think it's moving that way but it's a little more about the health aspect and less about the environmental perspective, which is where I think it needs to go. They're one and the same but it doesn't make sense to *me* to be lumping using commercial yeast in the same bucket as using chemical fertilizers. They're not equivalent.



Matthiasson home vineyard. Photo credit: Woodlandwinemerchant.com

And today you're working with so many vineyards and a lot of different farmers.... if I can call them farmers (lol). I counted fourteen or fifteen different partners. How do you manage those relationships with your own Matthiasson Wines?

I consult on wine-making for six clients who have hired me to make their wine. Then I have the viticulture consulting business. There's probably ten clients there where we work on the vineyards as opposed to the wine. Then we lease seven vineyards in addition to the two that we own and farm. And then we have other partnerships where we source grapes. It's crazy.

Whoa – that definitely requires a spreadsheet or two. How do you and Jill manage this? Do you have business associates?

Nope, no business associates, no partners, no investors. We have a really great, small team. When Jill and I started it, we completely bootstrapped the business. And over the years we've just had this organic growth (pun intended). We meet someone that has a little vineyard who says 'would you like to plant a vineyard here and make the wine... you keep

half and give us back half the wine'. And then you have an arrangement with someone else and then some other little thing comes along. The property next door changes hands and they say 'hey would you like to lease this vineyard?' And of course I say 'sure' and then they subdivide it three ways and then they subdivide it three people and on and on it goes.

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We started Matthiasson in 2003 and there's no way you can take on that kind of organizational complexity all at once. But we've grown with it. At this point it's sort of like, ok, how awesome would it be to unload the consulting and – even though I really do enjoy the people – I could just focus on our own projects. But it's not realistic because we boot-strapped our way into this and it's still a work in progress. Matthiasson is now in 43 states and 12 countries and we still have not taken a salary from the business – and that's since 2003. We still live on the consulting. That's how we've grown it.



"Thinning the lagging clusters in the cabernet." Photo credit: Matthiasson Wines Instagram

That's an eye opener slash wakeup call, especially when you look at the scale of your brand, and your influence....

Yea a lot of wine makers who are starting out, ask me for advice and I say don't quit your day job. There is cash flow required with everything you do and at every stage of the wine business. And if you don't have the cash you need an investor. But now you don't own the decision making anymore. You're passionate about Shiraz but they force you to make Pinot.

Got it. So do you have your own wine-making facility? You're bottling a lot of wine.

Yes, we do now. We bought it last year.

Is it on your property?

No. With Matthiasson we couldn't do it on our property. We got really lucky and we bought one a mile away. Really lucky! We were able to buy it because the owner was in a land-rich/cash-poor retirement situation. We met him because we were leasing the property next door. So we worked out terms where they can stay in the house for as long as they live, for a dollar a year, and I was able to negotiate a deal that we could afford.

You're clearly skilled at deal-making. I do love the range of grapes you grow and wine you make, in particular the northern Italian and Slovenian grapes. It's a really eclectic mix. Is there a back-story there?

Well I guess the story goes back to the idea of loving farming and horticulture ... anyone who is into roses has a bunch of varieties – you got your Floribundas, Polyantas, and you're fascinated with the beautiful variations and types of flowers. That's essentially how we look at wine. The Schioppettino or Ribolla Gialla – these are ancient varieties from Friuli that were passed on over hundreds of years. The Ribolla is probably at least a thousand years old. Why? Because it's amazing and unique and there's a tradition associated with food. But how does that plant grow? If you're into roses you see them bloom. If you grow them, you know this one gets a powdery mildew and this one doesn't. But the culmination is the bloom. With grapes it's exactly the same thing except the culmination is the wine. The wine is the bloom that you get to see. So that's how we look at it.



Wine: "It's part of setting the table." Photo credit: modernluxury.com

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2018 was such an amazing year for you with so many industry acknowledgements... 2018 winemaker of the year – San Francisco Chronicle, Food & Wine, a James Beard finalist. What is it about your wine that has earned you those food and wine honours?

We really think about food when we're making our wine. The balance of the wine is completely informed by its role at the table. And it's all we really care about. We don't taste our wine blind. It's food wine. In our household, we drink wine with food. In the afternoon I drink beer or have a cocktail, but I don't sit around and drink wine. But seven nights a week we have wine with dinner.

It's part of setting the table. The whole wine world, ok...not the whole wine world but the loudest conversation in the wine world really moved away from food and became more about drinking. Through the late 90's, 2000's and into the 2010's wine became this sort of luxury item that was more about show and impact and being ...loud.

At first we were really naïve because we were coming out of the farming side. My wife Jill was working for a family farming non-profit and I was working for a consulting company. We weren't aware of the wine conversation. We were out of date. We thought wine was still about food. We didn't key into the whole thing until the late 90's, early 2000's. We actually had a kid in 97 and 2000, so of course had no money. And we didn't drink that big wine and we didn't read Wine Spectator. So when we started Matthiasson in 2003 it was wine that would go with food. So we really struggled to sell our wine that whole decade, really struggled.

Some of the wine writers who were more interested in wine with food and were trying to make a conscious effort to change the conversation. They started writing about our wine. Matthiasson was one of the few examples of a new, small winery, making 12.5% alcohol white wine. At that time, most people thought a 12% alcohol wine would be anemic, and remember 'food wine' was a disparaging comment. You'd say this is a food wine – it has acid and red fruit and see-through colour. Nothing....

And then all of a sudden, the pendulum swung in the other direction. After eight or ten years of not being able to sell our wine to *save our lives*, all of a sudden, we went from obscurity to the right place at the right time. And now we have a new generation of sommeliers that are really passionate about food and wine and they're really interested in learning and in educating their guests. It's not just about the beverage manager looking at the economics of their beverage program or about the "score" of the wine. And a lot of bloggers are writing about wine and food and so that, in line with what's going on with some of the more food-oriented wine writers – like Eric Asimov, Jon Béné, Wall Street Journal – that helped us big time.

When was that? When did the tide turn?

I'd really say it started for us in 2012. But our first year was 03. But then our wine becomes a lot more than just the wine. It represents something. Our wine represents an idea, a movement and I think that's really important.



Photo credit: healdsburgshed.com

You really were at the front end of that curve for lean, high acid wines that make food sing.... and you ran headlong into the Parker trend. Certainly in Napa.

The thing that drives me crazy is Napa doesn't get the recognition for the amazing climate and these soils that have the potential to make food sing. The acidity is natural here. But the wine style has shifted so much to the blind tasting "Parker" style, that a lot of the wine world has sort of pigeonholed us as making these big, overblown wines. Our wines are really a throwback to Napa wines from the 60s, 70s, 80s with their gorgeous singing voices.... fresh, lean food wines that have a ton of flavour. You can still make those here.

I worked the harvest last year in Paso Robles, California and we spent a lot of time visiting wineries. Everyone is talking about moving away from that concentrated style but with heat and climate, there wasn't...isn't much wine under 15%.

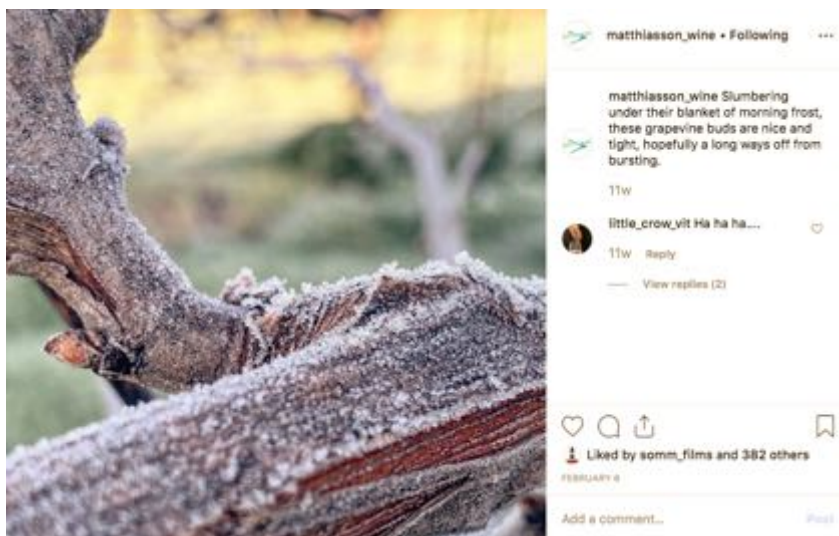
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That's what everybody says. That's what everybody believes, they're not just saying it. But the whole industry has consolidated into these sort of 'fact camps' and that's one of them....particularly the comment that you can't make big "Parker" wine in California under 15%. But if you change your definition, basically everything has to change. You can't make "Parker" wine under 15% without dealing it.

The problem is, if you want that concentration and that density of dark fruit, you're talking over 15% and if you want concentration, density and dark fruit, that sure doesn't speak food to me.

But if you're looking at classically balanced wines from anywhere in the world – Burgundy, Bordeaux, the great regions in Italy – they have red fruit at the core of the wine. Having black fruit for the core of the wine is not something you see very often in any of the great wines in the world. It's a moderation thing.

You're not going to get a big score as a new world producer with a red fruity wine. It's not going to happen. So our attitude is we don't care and we don't try. Thank God we managed to find our niche. But if you're trying for that black-fruited, if it's important to you, and you depend on tasting traffic, that's a different wine. You're not eating with the wine. A lot of people who aren't that experienced with wine come in and they love a rich, dark-fruited oaky wine. But you're not going to get any love in the restaurants. So you have to decide what business you're in. I have nothing against big rich wines if that's what the winemaker loves... they're still very honest. It's when they're made for a target market, there's no soul there. So if you're in the tasting room business and welcoming everyone with a nice big fruity wine, then that's great. We know we're never going to sell our wine in a retail environment with a random sales person on the floor. We need to be in retail environment where the owner knows their customers because the wines need to be translated.



Matthiasson progeny (lol). Photo credit: Matthiasson Wines Instagram

I enjoy a well-written wine description and you've done that. It feels like you're treating each bottle as a personality.

I'm really glad to know someone reads those things. But yeah, totally. My wife runs the business but I'm the one tapped to write the blurbs. I really enjoy it.

I like to think of the wine as a kid. Basically, with your kids, you try to impose manners, values, a sense of morality and help them distinguish right from wrong. But you try **not** to impose personality because it doesn't work and you mess them up. Part of the fun of having kids is seeing them develop their own unique selves and that's how I think of the wine, as... I don't know... like a unique Schioppettino.

A what?

Schioppettino, it's a rare grape from Italy. The other name for it is Ribollo Nero. But the reason we plant it is, we already have Ribolla Gialla, so we figured we needed to plant Refosco and Schioppettino. So there's a kind of parentage with the wine where you really get to know it because in this case, it's been in our life since 2009. So for nine years this grape has been with our family and we've been getting to know it better and better. So for us, these vines are definitely living beings. So the wine... it's this amazing blossoming from what the vine gave us. And that's what I try to put into the wine descriptions.

Last question..... Is Canada much of a market for you? We live and breathe lean, high acid wines. I know you're with Group Soleil in Toronto.

Ha ha. It's still a little market for us. We're a little bit in Quebec, a little bit in Toronto, a little bit in Alberta, a little bit in BC and a little bit in Manitoba, but they're all tiny for us.

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I love that you're still an honorary Canadian.

Feature Photo: Canadian and Napa farmer, viticulturist & winemaker – Steve Matthiasson. Feature Photo credit: Matthiasson Wines