

ON WINE

The Best Winery T-Shirts Say More Than You Might Think

Sporting merch can be like a secret handshake among discerning wine drinkers. And you can learn a lot about a winery from the slogan and the thread count it selects.



LOGO LIFE Winery T-shirts, from left: Maison Noir Wines ‘Barolo King,’ \$25, maisonnoirwines.com; Guthrie Family Wines, \$25, guthriefamilywines.com; Bluet, \$20, bluet.me; Leo Steen Wines ‘Drink Chenin,’ \$30, leosteenwines.com; Teutonic Wine Company ‘Candied Mushroom Riesling,’ \$30, teutonicwines.com.

ILLUSTRATION: SERGE BLOCH; F. MARTIN RAMIN/ THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (SHIRTS)



By

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WINE DRINKERS, I’ve decided, are of two types: those who wear winery T-shirts and those who do not. Up to now, I have always belonged to the second group.

While I’ve visited plenty of wineries and purchased plenty of wine, I’ve never been tempted to buy winery-branded merchandise, aka “merch.” But after talking to winemakers, I’ve come to see the winery T-shirt in particular as a sort of barometer. A winemaker who is thoughtful about shirt quality and design is likely to approach winemaking just as thoughtfully.

One of the shirts I purchased for this column came from Matthiasson Wines in Napa, Calif., whose wines I've long admired and whose proprietor and winemaker, Steve Matthiasson, describes himself as "a T-shirt guy."

'If they know us, they enjoy seeing that one of our fans is as geeky about wine as they are.'

His winery's T-shirt (\$24) simply features a pair of pruning shears and the Matthiasson name—understated, much like the wines he makes. Also like Matthiasson's wines, the shirt is made in an environmentally friendly fashion—half organic cotton, half recycled polyester. Mr. Matthiasson had more to say in a follow-up email: "Most [people] have never heard of Matthiasson and don't recognize our logo...but if they know us, they enjoy seeing that one of our fans is as geeky about wine as they are."

Debbie Hansen and her winemaker husband, Leo Hansen, of Leo Steen Wines in Healdsburg, Calif., specialize in small-production Chenin Blanc (the grape known as Steen in South Africa). They also produce a shirt with a simple design (\$30), mostly for their wine club members and tasting room visitors. "We only make 50-75 shirts each year," said Ms. Hansen. But the shirt's slogan, "Drink Chenin," gets noticed; it caught my eye on Instagram.

Sonoma-based winemaker Blair Guthrie of Guthrie Family Wines was a graphic designer before he began making organic Syrah, Grenache and other wines. "A lot of companies make a T-shirt and slap an emblem on it," he said disapprovingly. He takes a more considered approach, he explained, printing on a shirt called Comfort Colors, made with sustainably grown cotton. "A big part of my brand is environmentalism," Mr. Guthrie emphasized.

The Guthrie Family shirt I bought in a soft sage green (\$25) features a design of Mr. Guthrie's he described as "winemakers being wizards pulling magic out of the ground." Like the Hansens, Mr. Guthrie makes a limited number. They quickly sell out.

Winemaker and serial entrepreneur André Hueston Mack is serious enough about producing his (often quite funny) T-shirts that he describes his brand Maison Noir Wines on its website as "a twofold lifestyle project producing both a T-Shirt line and Oregon wines." Formerly head sommelier at Manhattan's Per Se, Mr. Mack became a designer at

the same time he became a winemaker, he said. When he started he simply couldn't afford to hire someone to design his wine labels.

Early on, Mr. Mack began tweaking well-known corporate logos for decidedly droll takes on contemporary wine culture. For instance, his Maison Noir "Barolo King" shirt (\$25), created in 2008, replaces the word "Burger" in the Burger King logo with "Barolo," often called "the king of Italian wines." His "Lucky Charmes" shirt winks at the Charmes vineyard in Burgundy, while his "Cornas Extra" logo recalls both Corona Extra beer and Cornas, the great northern Rhône red. "The shirts are a nod to fellow wine lovers who understand the references," said Mr. Mack. "It's a way to be able to recognize your tribe."

Olga Tuttle of Teutonic Wine Company in Portland, Ore., counts herself among the many admirers of Mr. Mack's T-shirts as well as his wines. Ms. Tuttle has released a few shirts. The latest, advertising her 2020 Candied Mushroom Riesling with a groovy illustration of a mushroom (\$30), comes in three colors. "We made this psychedelic '60s-like T-shirt," Ms. Tuttle wrote in an email. On the back it reads "The Umami Tsunami!" Ms. Tuttle came up with the concept; the work is by Portland-based Noisy Cats Design.

The T-shirt I purchased from Bluet (\$20), a producer of wild-blueberry sparkling wine in Maine, has a very different sort of design, rendered on a shirt in a subdued shade of blue with a charming illustration that is as much an earnest ode to Maine as it is to the winery. It depicts a lobster, a lobster boat, an evergreen tree, wild blueberries and a bear. When I reached out to Bluet's co-owner Michael Terrien, he replied via email from the governor's house in Augusta, Maine. "We're all wearing the tees today!" he said. They were celebrating the start of Maine Wild Blueberry Weekend.



LET IT BREATHE Fans of Matthiasson Wines in Napa, Calif., appreciate this understated T-shirt made from half organic cotton, half recycled polyester.

ILLUSTRATION: SERGE BLOCH

Of course, a shirt is designed to be worn, not merely admired, so I enlisted a couple of friends knowledgeable about fabric and design to do a test drive. Juliann and Ruthie, an interior designer and a former fashion designer for Ralph Lauren, respectively, were both keen on the Bluet shirt's logo but not on its weight. The cotton was too thick, Ruthie said. She also objected to the Leo Steen shirt's thick "man collar"—not comfortable, she said—and she felt similarly about the Guthrie Family shirt. Both Juliann and Ruthie liked the Matthiasson shirt's weight and design, though they had no idea it depicted a pair of pruning shears.

My stepdaughter Molly, a graphic designer, happened to be visiting from California the week all the shirts arrived. She loved the Guthrie Family T-shirt most of all—so much so, she took it back to California with her. "It's clever, it's personal and I love the sage-green color," she said. Not a wine nerd, Molly didn't get the Chenin Blanc reference on the Leo Steen shirt, but she liked the stenciled lettering. The Bluet shirt was "a beautiful way to create a scene," said Molly, while the Teutonic design looked "very hippie, very Oregon."

Like Juliann and Ruthie, Molly was confused by the Matthiasson design; she thought it depicted a lobster claw. When I explained that it's a pruning tool, she declared it a shirt "for people in the wine business." And she loved the Barolo King shirt's play on the famous logo. "It's really smart, and it opens up a conversation," she said.

A conversation was exactly what I hoped would happen when I wore the winery shirts out in the world. I sported a different one each day, while mowing my lawn, shopping for groceries, riding my bike, walking my dogs and eating at restaurants. And not a single person said a word.

I felt somewhat resentful. Didn't anyone want to know what "Drink Chenin" meant? Weren't they curious about the psychedelic mushroom? I added wine shopping to my itinerary and finally scored a hit. In Gary's Wine & Marketplace in Wayne, N.J., a salesman named Tom declared, "Barolo King—I love it!"

Perhaps certain wine T-shirts, like certain wines, are an acquired taste. And perhaps that's the point. Drink what you like and wear what you like, and maybe—just maybe—you'll find someone of a like mind.

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