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Matthiasson wines – on a mission: The unorthodox approach of 'extreme environmentalists' yields exceptional wines from Napa

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Steve and Jill Klein Matthiasson at their home farm in the Napa Valley.

Steve Matthiasson, his wife Jill Klein Matthiasson and their two sons — Kai and Harry — have turned the common perception of the typical Napa Valley winemaking family on its head.

Like many other local vintners, the Matthiassons' wines are exceptional. However, their wines are often dramatically lower in alcohol than typical wines from the area, and their entire ethos is antithetical to the sometimes chichi exclusivity exuded by many local vintners. Both are also unapologetic environmentalists who seem on a mission to prove that growing grapes and making fine wine can be a positive force in the battle against climate change.

Since launching their brand in 2003, the result of their unorthodox approach has been widely viewed as successful: Their wines are highly regarded by both customers and critics. Matthiasson has been named Winemaker of the Year by both the San Francisco Chronicle and Food and Wine Magazine, and the winery is a six-time nominee for the prestigious James Beard Award.

The couple share in running the business. Jill, an orchardist, runs the business and Steve focuses on winemaking and vineyard operations. Beyond Matthiasson wines, Steve also provides vineyard consulting services to some of the region's top wineries, including such icons as Spottswoode, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Araujo Estates and Dalla Valle Vineyards.

We met twice, once in late winter and then again in June. The first time Steve and I sat in his winery overlooking their vineyard on a chilly, foggy March morning. At that time he'd just returned from a trip to Europe, making it back just before the shelter-in-place orders went into effect. He was mostly concerned about how they

might continue to pay their employees because nearly 50% of their wine sales historically went to restaurants, all of which had been abruptly closed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

“If this shutdown is for a few weeks then we’ll be OK,” he said at that time. “But if it’s a month or two I just don’t know how we’re going to survive.”

A Canadian who grew up in the desert

Steve was born in Canada, where his father and mother were both anthropology professors, but he dreamed of another profession: farming. When he was 7, his parents divorced, and eventually his mother moved him and his sister to Tucson, Arizona. But before she did, Steve had an experience that would direct the future course of his life.

“When my parents were splitting up, I got sent to my cousin’s wheat farm in Manitoba for the summer,” he said. “It was there that I first fell in love with farming — the peaceful pace, the cycles, the smells, the connection with the earth, the tractors.”

In Arizona, Steve nurtured his desire to become a farmer and became interested in environmental causes.

“I had a bad case of ADD and got sent to this hippie school that had goats, chickens and horses,” he said. “Every kid could have a row in the garden — I loved it.”

When Greenpeace came to the school in 1980 to give a presentation, he also knew that he was “destined to become an environmentalist.”

“I was born in Canada, but it’s the desert frontier that’s ingrained in me,” Steve said. “It was a self-sufficient, DIY ethos set in an artists’ town full of Arizona liberals who had a strong emphasis on personal freedom. It was like, ‘leave me alone,’ but be kind to people and don’t [mess] up the environment — an Edward Abbey philosophy all the way.”

Abbey was an American environmentalist and self-titled anarchist who lived most of his life in Arizona. His best-known works are “The Monkey Wrench Gang” and “Desert Solitude.” In another of his popular books, “A Voice Crying in the Wilderness,” he wrote “How to Overthrow the System: brew your own beer; kick in your Tee Vee; kill your own beef; build your own cabin...” a sentiment that captured much of what would become Steve’s future.

Driven by his desire to farm and inspired by his upbringing and a growing taste for punk rock, at 18 years old Steve headed west to California. There he intended to study philosophy (he had an interest in existentialists such as Camus and Kierkegaard) at Whittier College in Southern California and to eventually open his own organic farm.

“I didn’t really know how to just start a farm, so for a few years after college I became a bike messenger in San Francisco — which, by the way, is more dangerous than people imagine,” he said.

He also began to brew homemade beer and tended a plot of land at a small urban farm. But after three years of dodging speeding cars and avoiding angry pedestrians — one of whom hit him in the head with a metal pipe, another who chased him with a hammer and another who threatened him with a gun — Steve left the city and headed to UC Davis to study international agricultural development.

“When I got to Davis it was like ‘Bingo!’” he said, “because if you didn’t inherit a farm how do you become a farmer? But with this degree I thought I could learn how to farm, travel around and help people, advance organic agriculture and save money to buy some land someday.”

Planting the seeds of change

Jill Matthiasson had grown up in Pittsburgh and dreamed of someday having her own orchards. After attending the University of Pennsylvania, she spent two years working in Israel on a variety of environmental projects, including helping to renovate ancient water canals.

Afterward, she moved to Arizona to work with Gary Paul Nabhan, an agricultural ecologist, ethnobotanist, Ecumenical Franciscan Brother and author whose work has focused primarily on the plants and cultures of the desert Southwest. He is

considered a pioneer in local food and the heirloom seed-saving movement.

Eventually, Jill moved to California to study sustainable farming at UC Davis, and in 1994 she was on a team that had received an EPA grant to work on reducing pesticide use on crops. The intern for the project was a first-year UC Davis graduate student named Steve Matthiasson.

By 1996, the couple had married and Steve had joined the Lodi Wine Commission in 1999 to co-author the precursor to “Lodi Rules,” one of the industry’s first serious sustainability farming guidelines.

In 2002, the couple moved to the Napa Valley to help launch Premiere Viticultural Services in collaboration with vineyardists Jim Verhey and Al Buckland, and in 2003 the couple launched Matthiasson Wines.

A philosophical sea change

Since their arrival, the Matthiassons have been at the forefront of a wave of like-minded enthusiasts who are no longer willing to toe the line of making high-alcohol wines with sweet, over-ripe flavor profiles. They also insisted on using organically sourced grapes and working with operations that put the health of the land and the well-being of their employees as prime considerations.

“Jill and I are extreme environmentalists,” Steve said. “We’re always thinking about how we can improve the environment, reduce our impact on the land but also create an equitable place to work. It’s a constant effort.”

Many wineries will talk primarily about the prestige of their wines and the fame of their winemaker, but those are not the first topics the Matthiassons want to talk about.

“The health of the land is critical, but our team is just as important,” Steve said. “We believe in fair wages, flexibility with schedules, help with professional development and tuition assistance with nearly every employee engaged in expanding their education through classes at local colleges.”

Reducing the carbon footprint of the wine industry

“It might be a cliché, but it’s true: Think globally, act locally,” Steve said. “The question we ask ourselves is how can we reduce our carbon footprint? The answers are many, but some include using less energy, packaging with lighter glass, using recyclable shipping containers, using more solar power and conserving all resources. If we all forgo a little off our bottom lines it will go a long way to improving overall outcomes.”

All the vineyards farmed for the Matthiassons’ wines are either certified organic or currently going through the years-long certification process.

“For all our vineyards we are constantly expanding our planting of beneficial insect, pollinator and wildlife habitats, pushing more vineyards to no-till protocols to help sequester carbon and working to create healthy, living soils.”

Whereas most vineyard owners who replant their vines do so by ripping out the old grapevines and pushing them into a large pile where they are burned — a practice that sends smoke and carbon into the atmosphere — the Matthiassons keep their piles of twisted wood along the edge of the vineyards to provide shelter for the birds that help keep “pest” insect populations naturally in check.

“I get tired of people asking if we will be able to make the same great wine when the temperatures get hotter,” he said. “It’s not about that; it’s about standing your ground and working to reduce the causes of it getting hotter.”

Regenerative farming

Steve sees regenerative vineyard farming techniques as a potential model to share with other agricultural industries. He says soil is a mixture of sand, silt, clay and organic matter, and a healthy soil might be 4% or 5% organic matter, by weight, whereas an unhealthy, depleted soil might have only 1% to 2% organic matter.

“If we can improve soils by drawing in more living matter (sequestering carbon) by even a couple percent, this can have an enormous positive impact on the global climate when spread across the world’s vast agricultural lands.”

Steve explains that because plants convert carbon from the air into woody material (stems, branches and roots), such things as cover crops (grasses between the vines), the grapevines and trees are efficient natural mechanisms to remove carbon from the atmosphere. However, he warns, “If you end up just burning the plant material when you are through with it then the carbon just goes right back into the atmosphere. Or if you till ground that’s full of roots the introduced oxygen triggers the microbes to go crazy eating and they just respire that carbon back into the air.”

The benefits of healthy soil go beyond sequestration of carbon.

“You want soil to be more like a chocolate cake than chocolate pudding. All of those holes and structures are held together by organic matter in the soil and provide a pathway for healthy microbes and roots and allow water to percolate down and be stored,” he said. “Without such structure, the soils become nutrient-depleted and compacted so that the water just runs off the surface, taking with it valuable nutrients that are washed into the streams and rivers where they can cause harm. So we’re not just looking at organic farming but regenerative farming as our goal.”

The wine

The New York Times wine reviewer, Eric Asimov, wrote that, “...their [Matthiasson] wines bear an agricultural stamp, as fresh, lively and alive as the best produce from a farmers market...”

Part of the freshness of the Matthiassons’ wines is due to their low alcohol. Many of the Napa Valley’s most famous wines prior to the 1990s — such as those that won in the Judgment of Paris tasting in 1976 — were all around 12% alcohol. Through critics such as Robert Parker Jr.’s influence and broad consumer trends, super-ripe wines with alcohols as high as 16% became commonplace, with lower-alcohol wines becoming rare in the Napa Valley over the last few decades.

“My Cabernet is very different to your average Napa Cab. It’s more like the Cabs that were made before the Parker era as the alcohol is never more than about 13%,” he said.

Each of the wide diversity of wines Matthiasson makes come from grapes grown in Napa and Sonoma, including chardonnay, red blends, a mind-bending white wine blend of Ribolla Gialla, and even a delicate sweet Vermouth that is made from 80% Flora, a cross between Semillon and Gewurztraminer.

I tasted three wines: the 2018 Ribolla Gialla (\$49; 293 cases), the 2018 Linda Vista Chardonnay (\$32; 3,000 cases) and the 2017 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$65; 1,700 cases made).

The Ribolla Gialla is one of the hallmark wines of Matthiasson. Only seven rows of these vines were planted in their home vineyard in the Western Oak Knoll area of Napa Valley. Steve and Jill fell in love with the variety while working with it for clients and immediately grafted the variety into their own vineyard when they purchased it in 2006. This wine is vibrant and exudes aromas of roasted hazelnuts, ripe pear and ocean breeze. On the palate this is a tantalizing wine, with complex, twisting flavors of nuts, fruit and earth. Part of the liveliness of this 12% alcohol wine was that it was fermented whole cluster in an open-top tank with the must pressed after two weeks and then aged for 18 months in neutral oak barrels. The wine was aged sur lees and never raked, with no sulfur dioxide used until bottling — making this a good example of a “natural wine” style.

The Linda Vista Chardonnay comes from a small vineyard in West Oak Knoll that the couple leases and farms themselves. Daily winds that originate from the nearby San Pablo Bay, deep-clay soils and an early harvest contribute to a zesty wine that is a straw-gold color in the glass and has aromas of tangerine, lemon, yellow apple and acacia flower. With an alcohol content of 12.2% this is a perfect summer wine that screams to accompany grilled halibut with a sauce of caper, butter and mint.

The Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon is a blend of three different grapes — Cabernet, Merlot and Petite Verdot — from six different Napa Valley vineyards that cover three distinct AVAs — Coombsville, Rutherford and Oak Knoll. This 13.0% alcohol wine is wonderful with vivid red-fruit flavors and aromas of ripe cherries, hot stones, sandalwood and a hint of herb-roasted lamb. Unlike some Cabs from 2017, the grapes for this wine were harvested prior to the devastating fires. This is another benefit of making low-alcohol wines — picking earlier in the season lessens the risk of being affected by the debilitating impact of smoke, power outages and labor disruptions.

Visionaries — Steve and Jill Klein Matthiasson

When I met with the Matthiassons again in June, they had survived the three months' shutdown — retaining all of their employees by shifting their sales from restaurants to a direct-to-customer focus.

“We’re seeing light at the end of a very dark tunnel,” Steve said. “Our ‘Tasting Packs’ and Zoom tastings have been a hit. We are doing them seven days a week. Also Napa folks have been taking advantage of our free local delivery, and we just reopened our tasting room.”

Beyond trying to save their business during the pandemic, the Matthiassons donated to various efforts to help those in need, including \$53,000 to the Independent Restaurant Coalition that seeks to help save restaurants from economic collapse.

As we spoke a quote from Anne Frank came to mind: “How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

We all stood and gazed eastward toward the town of Napa as evening descended. The sound of crickets and an occasional crow were distinct over the din of the nearby subdivision and farther on from traffic on Highway 29. In the vineyards the

untilled earth was covered with a yellowing net of drying summer grasses with a swath of chicory flowers that remained soft sky blue against the frame of verdant green-leaved vines with their beebee-sized clusters of tiny grapes just taking shape.

“I am not an ethical relativist — I believe that there is better and worse in this world,” Steve said. “That’s why it’s important for us to create an ethically based business. It’s a way to find meaning through doing good work, lifting people up and repairing the environment by making honest wine.”

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