

Celebrities Take Hands-On Approach to Making Fine Wines

By **KATHY A. McDONALD**



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Care to sip champagne backed by Jay Z or 50 Cent? Or mellow out with a fine Chianti from Sting and Trudie Styler? Behind every wine label is an incredibly expensive team effort of surprising proportions. Wine lovers may consider making their own as the ultimate dream; however, few can afford the buy-in. Vineyards are wonderfully picturesque and they are pricey. (Prime planted Napa Valley vineyards can cost upward of \$400,000 per acre).

Those in showbiz who are serious oenophiles have taken different paths to wine renown. These projects are distinct from licensing deals: remember Celebrity Cellars' Madonna wines, which were more collectible than drinkable? These marquee names have real input into the winemaking process from vineyard cultivation to harvest, blending and vitally, marketing.



GREAT GRAPES

John Legend (clockwise from left) has released his third vintage of LVE wine; Trudie Styler and Sting in their Tuscan vineyards; For actor Jeff Fischer, winemaking is a creative outlet.

"Whatever people's preconceptions about our wine, the scores given by some of the most demanding wine critics in the business speak for themselves," says multihyphenate Styler, who along with husband Sting, owns Il Palagio, a historic estate in rural Tuscany, which produces well-reviewed Chiantis, and Sangiovese-forward blends. "We take this part of our lives very seriously, we love making wine and we're very proud of the results."

Some are aptly named after tunesmith Sting's hits "Message in a Bottle" and "When We Dance." Since purchasing the estate vineyard in 1997, the couple has invested significantly, replanting vineyards and updating the winery's practices.

Others who've turned their passion into an avocation: singer-songwriter Pink (aka Alecia Moore), who produces Two Wolves Wine at her Santa Barbara County winery. She is actively involved in all aspects of vineyard cultivation and winemaking, as is retired racecar driver Danica Patrick, who cultivates cabernet sauvignon for her label, Somnium, on Napa Valley's Howell Mountain. Former Houston Rockets star Yao Ming works with seasoned vintner Tom Hinde to craft Napa Valley's Yao Family Wines; and John Legend is now in his third vintage of LVE (Legend Vineyard Experience), a joint venture with Raymond Vineyards' Jean-Charles Boisset.

The vintner, who heads the Boisset Collection of 28 wineries in California, France and Canada, explains the workflow goes both ways.

"We see each other to make blends, he's very engaged and it's fun. We want them to be very consistent and his style of wine has been very well received," Boisset says of LVE's releases, including two Provence rosés and a prestige Napa cabernet.

Actor and voice talent Jeff Fischer ("American Dad") just finished harvesting the 12th vintage of his Santa Barbara County-made Habit Wine. He shares a facility at Presqu'île Winery, south of Santa Maria, bottling eight to nine wines annually (Chenin Blanc, Grenache Noir and Sauvignon Blanc among them) with a 3,000-case output. "As an actor, I was always doing more than one thing. As much as I want to work everyday, it's impossible," he says.

Winemaking became a creative outlet: he went into the business professionally after studying alongside Santa Barbara's Doug Margerum of Margerum Wines. "Wine keeps me focused: I look at it as a form of expression or craft," he says.

Although he's admittedly passionate about his Habit Wine Co. he laughs, "I wished it paid like an acting gig."

Almost all of Fischer's wine production goes to restaurants (find Habit Wine at A.O.C. in Los Angeles or Danny Meyer's restaurants in New York). "I make wines for people to enjoy: they are serious, but not meant to be elitist," he adds.

With so many boutique wines available from around the globe, the competition for consumers is intense. A celebrity attachment, "can help in some ways and hurt in others," says Ian Blackburn, Wine LA's founder.

David Osenbach, wine director of Los Angeles' Providence, contends it's more about the wine than any celebrity connection. "I will taste anything," he says, in reference to a spot on the restaurant's in-depth wine list. "If a celebrity had something to do with a wine, it might make it more intriguing for me to try and if it's good, I'll put it on the list."

As with the lengthy development process from idea to screen, the journey from vine to bottle is equally long. Styler says. Distribution is always the challenge. "A film and a wine are both products to sell and there are many links in the chain from conception to finding its place in the world."

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