

The Little Urban Winery That Rocked the Big Wine World

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The founders of Division Winemaking Company have upended marketing and PR models to boost the competition—and themselves



Division Winemaking Company and Southeast Wine Collective exterior. Photo by Joshua Chang.

The annual international #DrinkChenin day was held on June 15 in locations from the Loire Valley to South Africa—it was the sixth iteration of an initiative that has been celebrated by millions of wine enthusiasts. The South African #DrinkChenin marketing campaign alone reached more than 1.2 million people and generated 4.9 million impressions last year.

This worldwide event was born not from a marketing team in a popular Chenin Blanc region, but improbably, in a small, urban winery in Portland, Oregon: Division Winemaking Company, founded by Kate Norris and Tom Monroe. And it isn't the only international grape variety initiative kick-started by the winemaker team. In 2017, the two also cofounded—with Michelle Battista, a co-owner of Portland's The Nightwood Society—I Love Gamay, a now-annual festival that draws winemakers from Canada, the United States, and France to Portland every May.

Today's standard winery marketing model calls for an emphasis on direct-to-consumer (DTC) sales, built on the foundation of a strong wine club membership drawn in by exclusive, members-only events. Norris and Monroe have turned this model inside out, preferring to launch worldwide campaigns for underdog grape varieties and to promote the competition, whether that's local or international winemakers. They host only two events a year for their own wine club members—the bare minimum.

A “rising tide lifts all boats” philosophy has driven Division Winemaking Company since the beginning, explains Norris, who adds, “It’s about celebrating the group rather than the self.” Monroe agrees. “People’s ability to achieve is based upon how healthy we are as a society,” he says. “A society is not just individuals. We can’t succeed just on our own.”

Building Community

The two got their start studying enology and viticulture in Beaujolais in 2009. Working in wineries in Burgundy, Auvergne, and the Loire Valley, they noticed that most French cellars are located in towns. When they moved back to the U.S. in 2010 and found work at Penner-Ash Wine Cellars and Methven Family Vineyards in Oregon’s Willamette Valley, they were struck by the remote locations of most American wineries. “How,” asks Norris, “can you build a business expecting your customers to drive 1.5 hours each way to reach you?”

When Monroe was getting his MBA at Washington University’s Olin School of Business between 2007 and 2009, he and Norris developed a plan for an urban wine hub that would attract foot traffic into its bar and foster a sense of community. The two launched their Division label in 2010 after finding the ideal building in the Division Street restaurant district of southeast Portland. At the time, they were concerned that the building was too big. “So we said, ‘We should see if our friends would like to band together on this,’” recalls Monroe. “We never wanted it to be just about us.”

In 2012, Norris and Monroe opened the Southeast Wine Collective, a shared winemaking facility in the alternating-proprietorship model. With 8 to 10 winemaking tenants at any given time, working in cramped urban quarters to vinify as many as 22 grape varieties, with production spilling out into the parking lot, it’s an admittedly complicated setup that creates an extra-long crush. Now producing 7,000 cases annually, Division could easily use the entire space on its own. “At the end of harvest, I am so jealous of all the other wineries,” says Monroe. “We go for a month longer than anyone else. We’re working 80 hours a week for two and a half to three months.”

“And by the end of harvest,” adds Norris, “we’re gearing up to host the 15 holiday parties that I’ve booked. We’ll sleep when we’re dead.”

The relentless pace hasn't been easy on Monroe and Norris, who started the business as a married couple and are now divorced. Yet the two still finish each other's sentences and continue to make each other laugh. "A plus B equals C, and C is way better than A and B. This winery is the one thing we did well together," Norris says of her and Monroe's yin-and-yang coexistence.

Promoting the Competition

Norris and Monroe are outgoing people, and they both admit that they embrace the chaos of the collective, preferring the camaraderie that comes with their nonstop pace to the solitary atmosphere of a rural cellar. They also enjoy mentoring up-and-coming winemakers, sharing advice as well as equipment. They designed the collective, they say, as an incubator and launchpad for promising young vintners—"The place to take your shot," as Monroe puts it.

Anne Hubatch, the proprietor and winemaker of the Portland-based Helioterra Wines, was an inaugural Southeast Wine Collective tenant, along with Vincent Fritzsche of Vincent Wine Company and Scott Frank of Bow & Arrow Wines. The 2012 vintage was "one of the most perfect years," Hubatch recalls now. "There was a lot of camaraderie, riffing, and throwing ideas around."

Back then, Hubatch adds, it was unheard of for a small winery to hire a publicist. Norris and Monroe realized that by pooling funds, the tiny labels at the collective could afford professional media representation. "How they positioned, branded, and marketed themselves and the collective was really smart," Hubatch says. "No one of our size was doing that at that time."

Most custom-crush facilities don't celebrate their tenants. In contrast, Norris says, the collective tells renters, "Here's the deal: It's going to be a little more expensive, but you don't have to drive down to the [Willamette] Valley, and we will promote the shit out of your brand."

Every Southeast Wine Collective tasting, special wine bar dinner, or class is announced to local media with a press release, making the collective a constant presence in Portland-area publications. These events may not overtly promote Division Winemaking Company or the other tenants, but they constantly keep the location on the radar of local food and wine lovers. And every customer who walks into Oui!—the collective's on-premise wine bar and restaurant—is exposed to the wines produced on-site.

Unlike the practice at a traditional winery tasting room, where the host's wines are center stage, Oui! is a low-pressure environment where dabbling is encouraged. Customers may not even realize that Division Winemaking Company is the anchor tenant. In addition to the offerings from the Southeast Wine Collective's labels, the bar serves the wines of Featured Friends throughout the U.S., as well as an extensive array of European offerings from Overseas Colleagues. Other Oregon winemakers frequently visit Oui! to pour their wines, as do local importers and wholesalers.

By promoting the competition, Norris and Monroe keep customers coming back. They've built brand loyalty by introducing the element of surprise. Even the cuisine is deliberately eclectic: Riesling-braised goat with fennel pollen and agretti is not your standard wine bar fare. "I have been told in this industry, 'Never cook this,'" says executive chef Althea Grey Potter. "Kate and Tom say, 'Make awesome food and we will find wines to match it.'"

Unpretentious by Design

When Norris was growing up, her family lived all over the world. "My mom hated London," she says. "The British were really mean to her. The cops would pull her over and ask where she stole the car and the children from, because she [a Madagascar native] is dark-skinned." The experience of living in so many places, Norris says, instilled in her a sense that "there's room for everyone on earth," a philosophy that has driven her business decisions.

The Southeast Wine Collective's event calendar is jam-packed with inexpensive—or more often, free—tastings and classes that are open to the public. At Oui!, there's always a \$6 glass pour: a nonvintage house blend of wine from the collective's tenants. Division's wide variety of wines, too, are styled to have broad appeal; at press time, Division's website listed 15 different bottlings retailing at \$30 or less. "We follow a rough 80-20 rule," says Monroe. "Eighty percent of Division's wines are made to be opened any day, and the [other] 20 percent are for special occasions."

Kirk Sutherland, the wine director at Roberta's, which has locations in New York City and Los Angeles, and Blanca, a 14-seat, reservation-only tasting-menu restaurant in Brooklyn, pours Division's Lutte Gamay Noir and L'Isle Verte Chenin Blanc at the New York Roberta's and its Inondé Chenin Blanc and Méthode Carbonique Pinot Noir at Blanca. "Their wines are unpretentious, affordable, and most importantly, delicious," says Sutherland. "Tom and Kate strive to make wines that are joyful and approachable."

The celebrations of international grape varieties that Norris and Monroe have masterminded, too, are street smart and accessible. While most prominent enophile-oriented gatherings tend to be expensive, exclusive, and serious, requiring reservations and travel, a person can literally stroll in off a Portland sidewalk on a whim and join the festivities at #DrinkChenin or I Love Gamay. Norris and Monroe add that their appreciation for value—along with a love for the Loire—played into their decision to champion Gamay and Chenin Blanc, two grapes that offer terrific bang for the buck by the bottle.

The annual #DrinkChenin event at the collective is free to all—including any wineries that wish to participate—and groups around the world can plan their own mid-June celebrations, as this is an open-source event. Tickets to the three-hour tasting salon at I Love Gamay are just \$35 for consumers, and any winemaker wishing to pour its Gamay is welcome, with a participation fee for the four-day event of a relatively low \$100 to \$250 per label.

“[Norris and Monroe] try to make wine accessible to everybody, from many different angles,” says Michael Wheeler, a partner in the boutique importing and distribution companies MFW Wine Co., based in New York City, and PDX Wine, in Portland. “They are anti-snob.”

Over the past eight years, Norris and Monroe have provided a launch site for 19 other wine labels. The Southeast Wine Collective has husbanded 26 grape varieties hailing from 12 AVAs spread out over two states. Including the production of their tenants, Monroe and Norris have crushed more than 1,000 tons of grapes and produced some 65,000 cases of wine, all in a 4,000-square-foot workspace.

They have introduced two worldwide grape variety celebrations, which benefit any winery producing Gamay or Chenin. And they have promoted and sold wines from throughout Oregon, California, Washington, and Europe. All this time, Division Winemaking Company has grown, but so has its competition, thanks to the industry-over-self philosophy of two urban winemaking mavericks.

“Historically, our industry here in Oregon is collaborative,” observes Adam Campbell, the owner and winemaker at Elk Cove Vineyards in the Yamhill-Carlton appellation. “Some people get it; some people don’t. Tom and Kate get it.”

Katherine Cole is the author of four books on wine, including Rosé All Day. She is also the executive producer and host of “The Four Top,” a James Beard Award–winning food-and-beverage podcast on NPR One.