



Drink Wine + Pet Dogs

Meet this couple living the dream and raise a glass for rescue: Mutt Lynch Winery's Californian wines taste delicious and do good

By J. Leslie Johnson

One might expect Chris and Brenda Lynch, owners of Sonoma County, California's Mutt Lynch Winery, to be a bit pretentious. They are artisans, after all, operating in the rarified sphere of wine making, and regularly receive accolades. Among many other awards, their 2014 Hellhound Red, which they describe as "dark and violent," won Double Gold at the 2017 Sonoma County Harvest Fair. You could be forgiven for thinking that a stereotypical attitude comes with the terroir.

But Chris and Brenda are anything but. "The wine business can be too stuffy," Chris states baldly, "and so we wanted to inject a sense of playfulness into it." They decided to merge their love of wine and their love of animals—specifically their pack of mutts—and start their own winery, which they called,

appropriately, "Mutt Lynch." (Their menagerie has now expanded to include two kids, twins Katie and Porter.) Brenda soon found she had a flair for making wine so she took over production while Chris headed up the marketing and business arm. "I make it and he sells it," she laughs. The love of dogs continues straight through: Never a couple to take themselves or their wine too seriously, they named one of their first wines, a Zinfandel, "Domaine du Bone." The French language gives it an air of refinement, but the phrase actually means something humorously mundane: House of the Bone. Chris and Brenda fashioned the labels by hand and attached a small dog bone to each bottle, a labour of love. Although they no longer hand-label their wine—"It's too much work," admits Chris—they continue to name each



with a mutt-inspired moniker. Their 2013 Zinfandel, for example, is named “Portrait of a Mutt;” they characterize the delicious blend of various grapes as “always a mutt.” In 2014, Forbes magazine took note of their ingenuity and declared their Unleashed Chardonnay and Rusty Muttitage as some of the “coolest wine labels.” The playful names are complemented by equally cheeky artwork featuring designs like a dog dancing across a rolling vineyard.

Chris and Brenda also offer a full range of what they call their “MBF” wines, such as their 2014 MBF Charbono, created from grapes from the celebrated Frediani Vineyards in Calistoga, California. Those new to imbibing wine might conclude that “MBF” is an acronym for a wine term they’re not familiar with, but it is actually a canine descriptor: “MBF” is short for “man’s best friend,” and an apt term for the very drinkable offerings.

Brenda crafts her wines—ranging in style from Chardonnay to Rosé—from grapes grown along the California coast, vineyards buffeted by agreeably cool winds blowing in from the Pacific Ocean. The Perotti Vineyard, for instance, located in Dry Creek Valley near Chris and Brenda’s winery, is the source of their Zinfandel grapes, including those used in their delectable dessert wine, the 2015 Nectar of the Dogs Late Harvest Zinfandel. But outstanding vineyards are not the only reason for Brenda’s winemaking success. “I think I’m very much attuned to what my customers want,” she says, “And I work very hard to deliver that to them.”

Named as one of the most pet-friendly wineries by Wine Buzz Magazine, as well as by Bay Woof, a monthly Oakland-area magazine, Mutt Lynch regularly opens its tasting room to both two-legged and four-legged visitors. Chris says people travelling with their dogs, who want to bring them along on a wine tasting, often visit them. “They Google ‘dog-friendly winery’ and we come up,” he explains. ►

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Brenda (second from left) and the Mutt Lynch “family”—the winery staff and their dogs.

Brenda enjoys talking to visitors, whether at the tasting room or at charity events. She says they often ask her why her winery is centered on dogs, which she simply explains to them thus: “Dogs are great: they are always there for you, wagging a tail, giving you a hug when you need it.” As people taste the Syrah, they start to also imbibe the more serious aspects of Mutt Lynch—beneath the light-hearted, dog-inspired labels, lies a mission: Chris and Brenda are devoted to improving the lives of needy animals, and they support a multitude of rescue groups in California and elsewhere by donating their wine and their time. “We get calls every week from shelters that are looking for donations,” explains Chris, adding, “We really try to help out.” A glance at their website shows a long and diverse list of animal rescue groups they support, from national organizations to smaller operations in California and other states. While

regular wineries host Happy Hours, Mutt Lynch puts on charitable “Yappy Hours” for people and pets that raise funds for animal rescue groups, such as Hounds for Haiti. Their most recent initiative, started in 2017, features a custom label created for a delectable Mutt Lynch 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon; the colourful artwork showcases the winery’s partnership with the Sonoma Humane Society, in an effort that not only highlights the commendable work done by the organization, but that generates funds for the animal welfare group: Mutt Lynch donates 25% of the purchase price directly to the charity. “It is our newest program and the one we have the highest hopes for,” Chris says proudly. In 2018, Chris and Brenda hope to expand the program not only in California but nationally. “In every bottle,” Chris continues, “there is a portion that we are giving back.” ■

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