

The New York Times

THE MUSIC BEHIND THE WINE

By *MATT KETTMANN* / April 25, 2012

It turns out that it's not only chefs who are using music for inspiration: Whether it's the polka beat of Mexican folk or the indie rock of Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, tunes are also employed by winemakers in creating their latest vintages. A few of them wrote about the connection in response to my e-mailed questions.

One such musician-winemaker is Jeff Smith, who built Hourglass Vineyard into one of the most renowned Bordeaux varietal vineyards in the Napa Valley. Mr. Smith achieved relative indie rock fame as a founding member of San Francisco's Noonday Underground from 1982 to 1990; when his dad died, he turned his focus to saving the family property. "That's where I learned how to organize and channel the creative muse, create from nothing, generate and refine a sound, capture an emotion and craft an image," said Mr. Smith, who now plays mostly cover songs in the band Wrist Rocket. "With wine, the medium and disciplines are different, but the creative process is the same. Steve Jobs had LSD to change his professional outlook, I had a band."

Mr. Smith, whose team listens to everything from Radiohead (a popular winemaker band, it turns out) to Dave Brubeck to the aforementioned Mexican folk, believes that music has a role in how wine tastes and has tested the theory at a few tastings.

In Oregon at Bergström Wines, the winemaker Josh Bergström became an avowed Deadhead after his brother turned him onto old Grateful Dead concert cassette tapes at age 12. Since then, his tastes have broadened (everything from Howlin' Wolf and Bob Dylan to Grandmaster Flash and My Morning Jacket) but music still plays a daily role in his life. "I feel that a dark mood or a cloudy sky or a serious bass line can really affect how you taste a wine and how that wine will show in any given day," he said. "Our goal with music in the winery is to keep a happy environment and thus focus positive energy into our work." Another rocker-vintner is Karl Wenté of Wenté Family Estates, founded in California's Livermore Valley more than 125 years ago. About to put out his first album with his Front Porch band, Wenté said that making music makes him a better winemaker and vice versa. "The Zen state that needs to be achieved during blending sessions is similar to the mindset needed with writing, recording and mixing songs," said Mr. Wenté, who has paired six

vintages with six indie artists and hosts a summer music series called HomeGrown as well as a mini-fest called BottleRockit.

Andrew Murray, a Santa Barbara County winemaker, is a self-professed “music geek” who hung out in record stores as a kid. Last year, he released two new wines: the E11even red blend, a reference to Spinal Tap’s “turn it up to 11” line, and Purple Haze, a Côte-Rôtie-style syrah that’s co-fermented with a touch of viognier, because, as Jimi Hendrix would have agreed, the “viognier puts a spell on the syrah.” The first thing he did when moving to a new location in 2005 was to set up a multiroom stereo system, and today his musical taste is powered by Pandora and ranges from The Doors to Swedish House Mafia; Adele to Kimbra; Muse to Deadmau5.

Mr. Murray opts for high energy techno-pop during early morning bottlings because they go with his coffee buzz and “provide me a Zen-like experience for the repetitive (yet extremely important) early a.m. bottling line steam-sanitation.” But he primarily uses music to match with the task at hand. “I need it to balance out the echoes of the winery or the pulse of our air-pump, the cacophony of conversations,” he said. “Music is a bit like acid in wine. In the right amount, yes, more please, it is great. Get it wrong and it will stick out and possibly even take the enamel off of your teeth.”