



An inside look at the Marilyn wines reveals all

Thursday, August 18, 2005

By Alan Goldfarb
WINE EDITOR

Bob and Donna Holder seem to laugh a lot, especially Donna, and that is a good thing. Because the many people who see the couple's notorious label with the images of Marilyn Monroe on the bottles probably laugh a lot, too.

After all, what's not to laugh at while ogling an image of the late movie star, who at first blush is seen wearing a sparkly candy apple red sequined bikini, and with the next glance is a sex kitten sans accouterments?

Laughing at something in the wine business, however, isn't necessarily a good thing. It has something to do with one's wine not being taken seriously. But after tasting the wines at a St. Helena restaurant last week with the Holders, it's evident that what's in the bottle transcends what's on the outside, which in some cases amounts to nothing.

Formula's worked

The Holders will tell you that they're not very serious people when it comes to producing and marketing wine. But whatever formula they've concocted apparently has worked. And it's worked for the last 20 years.

This, in spite of the fact that the Marilyn wines -- whose owners reside in Rutherford and have the wines made (by John McKay) at the Napa Wine Co. -- have not reaped the benefit of playing in one of the most visible arenas that can be bestowed upon a Napa Valley wine, Auction Napa Valley. Heretofore, a Marilyn wine is yet to be auctioned at this august affair.



Toward that end, the Holders found it necessary to soon release a "legitimate" Merlot under the Uvada brand, which they'll sell for \$30, or 25 percent more than the Marilyn wines.

No Marilyn at the auction

"We kind of like the idea of taking a more legitimate (approach)," said Bob Holder,

referring to the new wine. "We never thought Marilyn Monroe and the Napa Valley auction would be a good fit."

Why not?

"Because we don't take ourselves seriously," says a laughing Donna Holder, who used to hold down a sober job as the librarian at St. Helena High School.

But don't be fooled. The Holders made their bones with the Marilyn line of wines; and the veneer of fun, which is genuine, doesn't speak to their shrewd business sense. After all, Bob Holder is a partner and CPA with G&J Seiberlich accounting firm in St. Helena, and knows a thing or two about numbers.

Especially when it comes to holding them close to the vest. The Holders don't make it a practice of revealing how much in royalties they pay for the privilege of using Ms. Monroe's likeness on their labels.

Don't reveal production

Nor are they very forthcoming about the number of cases they produce, which includes the Norma Jeane brand ("a young Merlot"), and their latest, a high-end Merlot called the Velvet Collection, which comes with a velvet-lined box through which the consumer can spy the aforementioned "peel and peek" label of Marilyn going from here to there. That wine, in a 1.5L format, will sell for \$225, and will be released next month.

With some keen business acumen -- and with the benefit of time that involved past attempts of others to get such "risqué" labels (see Jan Shrem's beleaguered nude for his Clos Pegase), past the TTB, nee BATF -- the Holders were successful in getting the peek-a-boo label through the system.

Amazingly, the process seems to be a breeze as compared to the machinations the Holders went through to get Monroe's estate to agree to have Marilyn's visage, as well as the rest of her, festooned all over a wine bottle.

Initially denied use

Bob Holder encountered Anna Strasberg, the daughter of famed acting coach Lee Strasberg, who trained Marilyn Monroe and to whom Monroe bequeathed 75 percent of her estate. At first Strasberg refused to allow Monroe's photos to be used on a wine bottle.

She told Holder, "I'm not a prude, but those photos represent a difficult time in Marilyn's life," and she did not like to look at them.

But Holder says that when he told Strasberg that there would be "lots of royalties generated," and that the photos were iconic, "she thought about it and then said OK three

days later, reluctantly."

Holder wouldn't reveal the amount of the royalties he pays to the Monroe estate, the Lee Strasberg Theater Institute and the Anna Freud Foundation. But upon further cajoling, he acknowledges that the royalties are "a couple of hundred thousand" from the Marilyn wines and hopefully, an equal amount from the Velvet Collection.

Approved in eight weeks

To get the label approved, the Holders enlisted the services of consultant Ann Morse, who for decades had guided clients through the labyrinthine federal regulations. With "the appropriate degree of modesty" of the overlay, within six to eight weeks, the Holders had their peel-away label of a nude and only slightly chaste Marilyn.

Bob Holder, who admits to not knowing much about Marilyn Monroe before the project started from an idea formed in his living room in 1983, said almost impishly, "I always liked 'Some Like It Hot.'"

But now, the Holders display Marilyn memorabilia wherever they can. They are on constant lookout for original photos of her to use on their labels, for which they pay from \$3,000 to \$6,000 each.

Have they thus far received any adverse responses to the revealing label that appears on the Velvet wines?

"We were somewhat ready for a negative response, but there was none to us," said Donna Holder. "Somebody in Washington state was upset by it. But when we sent him a bottle," she said, he was OK with it.

"But Bob didn't want to do it (send the bottle). He wanted someone to sue us."

With that, the Holders have another good laugh.

Alan Goldfarb can be reached at wines@sthelenastar.com.