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AUG. 31, 2021

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WINE DIRECTOR
ALDO SOHM AND
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OF LE BERNARDIN,
NEW YORK CITY

“Better for You” Wines

BY MARYANN WOROBIEC

Heidi Scheid enjoys a glass of wine every night. “Wine is the perfect way to segue from a busy schedule to a relaxed evening,” says Scheid, executive vice president of Scheid Family Wines in Monterey, Calif. “But I also like to get up early, exercise, and get a lot accomplished.”

Scheid created the brand Sunny With a Chance of Flowers, which joins the growing ranks of wines marketing themselves as “Better for You” (BFY). There’s no legal definition of wines in this category, but they’re generally lower in alcohol, sugar and calories and stress sustainability in production and/or transparency in ingredient labeling. In the case of Sunny With a Chance of Flowers, the wine is touted as sustainably grown, with no added sugar, 85 calories per 5-ounce glass and 9% alcohol.

What defines these wines as BFY is the marketing approach; they’re not dramatically different from many other wines on the shelves. Most table wines run between 11% and 14% alcohol and have 120 to 130 calories per glass. And, while many BFY brands highlight that they have no added sugar, it’s actually illegal to add sugar into table wines in some winegrowing regions, including California.

Low-calorie wines have historically been marketed toward women and focused on body image, but the current BFY wines have a different vibe: They’re about a healthier alternative. Scheid and other BFY vintners take inspiration from an unlikely source: White Claw. They suspect part of the hard seltzer’s appeal is that the cans clearly state 5% alcohol by volume and 100 calories, and that some consumers like that sense of transparency—most wines’ alcohol percentages are practically hidden in small fonts on labels, and calories are typically not listed.

New Zealand winemakers began exploring the opportunity for low-alcohol wine more than a decade ago. In 2009, Marlborough vintner John Forrest noticed that some wine lovers preferred the taste—not just the idea—of a lower-alcohol quaff. That sparked the New Zealand Winegrowers Lighter Wines Initiative, launched in 2014, which so far



Decisions on how to make “BFY” wines can start with picking at lower potential alcohols. There are also technology options in the cellar.

has invested \$12.2 million in research and development to make New Zealand a leader in low-alcohol wines.

So how are BFY wines made? Decisions can start in the vineyard with an eye on when the grapes are picked (the riper the fruit, the more sugar, meaning more potential alcohol). But there are also technologies to help get the wines to lower alcohol and calories.

Randy Ullom, head winemaker at Kendall-Jackson, makes a Chardonnay called Avant Lower Calorie. He selects from estate vineyards in Mendocino, Sonoma, Monterey and Santa Barbara. “We picked one portion early, so we had higher acid levels, lower sugar and some fruit tones,” explains Ullom. “The early pick gives us that sort of leanness and lower alcohol, and then we have the later pick that’s full-on mature flavors.” The wines are barrel-fermented and then blended. Ullom’s team also uses spinning cone technology—a type of distillation process—to

remove alcohol from the wine.

Sunny with a Chance of Flowers is made from estate vineyards in Monterey. Grapes are picked at full ripeness. They ferment the wines to dry, leaving no residual sugar. They also use a two-step reverse osmosis process—a type of filtration—to remove alcohol.

With no official rules, the BFY category can be confusing. Labels on Mind and Body Wines state the wines contain 0 grams fat, but all wine is fat-free. Lifevine labels sport grapevines in yoga poses and claim to be Keto-friendly, but the 2019 Cabernet is listed at 14.8% alcohol.

But as more major wine companies invest in BFY, the trend could lead to more wines with calorie and/or ingredient listing on the labels, and potentially draw in a new group of consumers. Time will tell.



One appeal to some consumers is transparent labeling information.

TASTING “BFY” WINES

Selected wines were blind-tasted by *Wine Spectator* senior editor MaryAnn Worobiec; below are the top scorers. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews using the online Wine Ratings search.

- 88 | \$15 | KIM CRAWFORD Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough Illuminate 2020** | Lemongrass and verbena notes accent. Key lime, lemon curd and ruby grapefruit flavors on a fresh frame.
- 87 | \$15 | KIM CRAWFORD Rosé New Zealand Illuminate 2020** | Strawberry-rhubarb flavors are juicy and intense on a crisp, refreshing frame, with hints of herb and orange zest.
- 87 | \$13 | GIESEN Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough Pure Light 2019** | Bursting with grapefruit and pomelo notes on a light, crisp frame, showing a touch of lemon zest.
- 87 | \$13 | MIND & BODY Pinot Grigio California 2019** | Fresh and juicy, with tangy lemon curd and peach flavors on a supple frame, showing a touch of pineapple.
- 86 | \$17 | KENDALL-JACKSON Chardonnay California Avant Lower Calorie 2020** | Soft and creamy, with an appealing touch of butterscotch pudding to the peach and citrus flavors.
- 86 | \$13 | MIND & BODY California Rosé 2019** | Blood orange, strawberry and melon flavors are both candied and tangy on a smooth and appealing frame, with hints of spice.

- 86 | \$17 | SUNNY WITH A CHANCE OF FLOWERS Pinot Noir Monterey 2019** | Strawberry and cranberry flavors are light and fresh on a delicate frame, with green tea, spice and forest floor notes.
- 86 | \$17 | SUNNY WITH A CHANCE OF FLOWERS Sauvignon Blanc Monterey 2019** | Ripe melon, nectarine and crunchy yellow apple flavors appeal on a soft and supple frame.
- 85 | \$15 | BEV Pinot Noir California NV** | Compact, with strawberry-rhubarb and cranberry flavors that are light and fresh, showing herb, green tea and earth notes.
- 85 | \$15 | BEV Sauvignon Blanc California NV** | Lime and grapefruit flavors show an appealing fresh note on a slightly fizzy, refreshing frame, with plenty of focus. (M.W.)
- 85 | \$15 | FITVINE Cabernet Sauvignon California 2018** | Plum, cassis and blackberry flavors are ripe and plump, with dense tannins and notes of tobacco, spice and black tea.
- 85 | \$15 | FITVINE Sauvignon Blanc California 2019** | Light and soft, with yellow apple, peach and lemon curd flavors that are supple and appealing.