

# The Fizz

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## **The Fizz #55: Jill and Steve Matthiasson are environmentalists working toward sustainable solutions for all viticulturists.**

In this issue, Jill and Steve talk about ways to connect your local farming community, experiments with spore trapping, and how they support their team of employees.



Margot Mazur

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I've been drinking **Matthiasson** wines for years, always pleasantly surprised at how the wines show life and bring joy to my palate. Jill and Steve, a husband and wife team, have been making wine commercially since 2003, coming up on 20 years. They are first and foremost environmentalists, with an eye toward sustainability in everything that they do.

In this issue, Jill and Steve explain how they got into the winemaking world, as well as what they're doing to bring others in after them by working with The Two Eighty Project. We talk about creating a farming community and sharing information, as well as the experimentation they run in the vineyards and how they approach organics. We also touch on their labor practices and how they structure their team, as well as the benefits they offer. This important conversation is not one the Matthiasson team shies away from, but rather, one they amplify.



**Margot:** Can you give me a sense of how you got started in winemaking?

**Steve:** We got started in making our first wine in 1995—that was the year we made our own wine as home winemakers. We were really into gardening and preserving all of the stuff that we grew in the garden. Before Jill and I started dating, I was a home beer brewer. For the first time ever, we had access to grapes, we were living in Davis and I was taking viticulture classes.

I was in grad school to study organic farming and Jill had already gotten out studying farming in the same program called international agricultural development. She was working in the nonprofit world trying to help with sustainable agriculture here in California. I was still in grad school and got an internship working for a consulting company to help people reduce their pesticide use—one of the crops they worked with was grapes.

I was a kid in a candy store because everything came together with the ferment stuff and the growing stuff—all in one. We were home winemakers starting in 1995 all the way through 2002, and then in 2003, we were living in Napa and I was consulting here. I had my own business by that point and fell in love with the quality of the grapes and some of the vineyards that I was managing.

We were like, hey, let's make some extra wine and see if we can start a little wine business and sell it. That was kind of how we got started after whatever seven or eight years of being a home winemakers.

**Margot:** You've been in Napa now for 20 years. Can you give a sense of how that area has changed over that time?

**Steve:** I know 20 years seems like a long time, but that question has me scratching my head a little because I don't feel like it's changed a whole lot here in Napa. The California wine industry, the wine world has changed quite a bit in that there's a bunch of young, newer folks in the business that are really bringing a lot of much needed diversity of thought. There's a lot of different people making different kinds of varieties and different styles of wine that 20 years ago, I'd never heard of in my life. In general, though, it's pretty similar.

Napa just kind of plugs along. The climate is different every year. It definitely seems to be getting warmer, not just by looking at the data, but in our personal experience, it seems to be warmer than it was when we moved here. There used to be a lot more fog in the morning. In Napa, though, there is a sleepiness to it that doesn't change a whole lot.



Cabernet Sauvignon at the Bengier Vineyard, photo from [Instagram](#)

**Margot:** Gotcha. It sounds like sustainable agriculture is really important to you both with your history. Can you expand on that and how you bring those values with you into the work that you do?

**Steve:** That was how we got started and we got started as idealistic people, trying to work within agriculture, to help move it towards sustainability. We had this dream of being farmers ourselves at some point, but we didn't know how realistic that was going to be because neither one of us came from farming families and we didn't know how to get in there. Jill worked for a nonprofit and I found that if you didn't have your own farm, you could work in agricultural consulting.

Most farmers need someone to come around and help them with their identify tests and do soil samples to figure out fertilizers. We were both committed environmentalists and wanted to work in sustainability. There were a lot of years there where we ended up being very focused on building our own little family. The last few years, we've really rekindled that original idealism. It's really an exciting time for us because as small business owners, we now have the ability to do some of this stuff that twenty-five years ago we were talking about and trying to get other farmers to do.

**Margot:** What kinds of things are you hoping to help other farmers with and hoping to do yourself from the sustainability aspect?

**Steve:** Back then, a lot of it was getting information to the farmers. Jill worked on facilitating information transfer between farmers, setting up all these breakfast meetings all over the state around different crops.

Earlier this morning, I did a little interview with the [Napa Register](#) talking about [spore trapping](#) for [powdery mildew](#), to try to get the word out that there are ways now coming down the pike to reduce our need to spray for powdery mildew as much, which is our main pest for grapes. We're trying to find a way to have a leadership role within our industry to move things along. Getting the word out and trying to lead by example as best we can, trying new things and sharing what works and doesn't work, demystifying some of this stuff and trying our best to inspire people.

**Margot:** Jill, I'm curious to hear about what has worked for you when trying to get information out to different farmers. I've talked to a lot of farmers and winemakers around the country with smaller wine communities, let's say in Michigan or here in Maine. Folks often say "I wish that we had a stronger community where we could share information". What has really worked for you?

**Jill:** I don't think there's really any tricks. For example, on the winemaking side we grow grapes and make wine out of [Ribola Gialla](#), which is an unusual variety and there's a group of a handful of us—five or six wineries that make wine from Ribola Gialla. When we first started making it, there was really no one that was familiar out in the world about this variety.



There was the idea that there might be a story there if we all banded together and could get some outlet of people in the world talking about Ribola Gialla from a marketing point of view. Then we started hosting an annual, we call it Ribola Fest and we invite all of the winemakers who are making wine from Ribola Gialla to bring their wines and pass them around and everybody tastes them. Everybody talks about what they did.

We had to take a pause during COVID, but it was almost 10 years of people having experience, and I really saw people's evolution on their confidence with the variety, having tried different things, what the results have been. There's been more of an awareness out in the market because of all these people talking about it. Everybody wants to come together. Winemakers are geeks and really want to geek out on all the different things that they're doing. From a farming perspective, there are some farmers that are kind of quiet about it and don't want to share.

I think generally farming is very lonely. You're out there by yourself. There's the classic coffee shop talk where there's some coffee shops that the farmers all get together in the morning and talk about what they're going through, really hearing what other farmers are doing. If you can talk to anybody else who has experience in the field, that can be really helpful. We're having an explosion of voles right now on both of our ranches—is that a thing everybody is seeing, is there a population explosion right now?

It's really helpful to hear things like has bud break started or has bloom started? It's just really comforting to know that you're not out there on your own, figuring this stuff out. There's one thing that I found helpful too, an email list called Women in Viticulture in Napa Valley. Some Sonoma people are on there too. Sometimes I'll have a question and I'll just ask—we're seeing this or what are you doing about frost abatement or what are you doing about HR? How much are you paying your pickers to pick grapes? There's all kinds of examples of how valuable it is to share that information. I think people really see that.

Share The Fizz

**Margot:** That's awesome, and so important to have that community. On your website, I'm seeing a bunch of different vineyards and it looks like a couple of them are transitioning to organic. What is the process of that look like? Are you purchasing these vineyards and then putting in all your efforts to transition or are you working with those growers to transition?

**Steve:** There's a combo of all of that. Most of our vineyards are certified organic. We own three—one we just got this last year, so that's transitioning. The other two we've had for a little while, so they're certified. It's three years to transition. We rent about 11 other vineyards that we farm ourselves. I think all of the ones we're renting right now are all certified now.

We buy some fruit from a couple of places in the Central Valley. We pay them more so that they'll farm our portions organically. Those aren't certified, but that's fine with us. We don't need them to be certified because we don't make organic claims on our labels. We can't ask them, if they're just farming our portion organically, to get certified. We just need them to be farming organically for us.

So one hundred percent of the fruit we use is farmed organically. It's important to us because we want to participate in the organic movement.

**Margot:** That makes sense. Have you explored biodynamic options? I was at a conference in the Finger Lakes recently where the winemaker at [Hermann J. Wiemer](#) was talking about how organics had this limitation because you were only allowed to use certified organic products, whereas biodynamics allows you to have a little bit more freedom in the vineyard to treat your vines naturally. How do you feel about that?

**Steve:** Well, not if you're certified. We don't farm biodynamically just because it's a very different mindset. I have some clients that are certified biodynamic and they're part of the organic movement because you have to be organic to be biodynamic. I don't think that if you're certified biodynamic, that you can use non-organic products. Not with the Demeter certification. Here in California, if you're biodynamic, you're also organic.



Picking in the vineyard. Photo from Instagram.

**Margot:** That's curious. Considering you have all these different vineyards that probably need different care, is there experimentation you do in the vineyard? And if so, what does that look like?

**Steve:** Oh yeah, tons. The thing we're experimenting right now is with our spore trapping for powdery mildew. Powdery mildew is our number one pest in the vineyard. They have to spray fungicides for it. It could be spraying organic—sulfur, oil, biological, there's lots of organic stuff. We don't want to spray that much, but it's really difficult because the problem with powdery mildew is that it's really hard to find it. By the time you see it out there, it's kind of too late. So you're spraying preventatively and you don't know if you really need to be or not.

This spore trapping traps the spores—it's like a weather station, it sits in your vineyard and traps the spores. You get a number every week and you find out if there's any spores there and this is totally experimental. We don't really know if it is going to actually work as an early detection, what the numbers mean, but we are trying it in a few different locations. We're going for it.

We're getting zeroes back and we're not spraying, so it's a little scary, cause we're like, oh, I sure hope the powdery mildew doesn't blow up on us, but it's an opportunity to just totally change how much you have to spray. We're really excited about the promise of it.

**Margot:** Yeah, that is really exciting. And how do you do that? Are you experimenting on one side of a vineyard? Do you have a control/experiment situation going?

**Steve:** No, I don't know how we do a control on that. We have a lot of experience in powdery mildew, and normally you would start spraying earlier in the season and we're just looking at these four numbers and we're going to find out if they keep saying zero and we keep not spraying. That's really our only way of doing it because the spores are flying around in the air. If someone had much larger acreage, they would be able to do a true experiment with replicates.

**Margot:** That makes sense, that's super interesting. There has been more light shed recently on vineyard labor practices, and you have been one of the voices that has been speaking to that. What is your workforce structure look like?

**Jill:** We have a small team of very experienced vineyard workers who are employed year round. During the slow season, they'll help us in the winery with things like bottling. We provide health insurance for them at the full amount, and then 50% for their dependents. We have educational opportunities for them. There's a 401k program set up for them. We see them as an important part of our family and an important part of our team.



Vineyard portrait. Photo from [Instagram](#).

**Steve:** Year round employment is really big and important. We restructured how we do things—this week they're working on bottling, and so people move in and out of the winery. Finding ways to extend our work so that we can employ everybody year round has been a big part of this. Then it's like a normal 12 month job, like any other job. There's vacation and nine paid holidays and you know, a normal job that they can count on and not have this feast or famine.

As we plant new vineyards, we plant the vines higher so they're easier to work when you're a little older and your back isn't as durable as it was when you were young. The education—everyone has their own agenda in terms of how much they're even interested, but we offer that people take time away from work and we pay for them to learn English, for example. We'll pay for classes if they choose to take them. We've had some people take us up on that, some don't. We try to move people along within our business, it's a small business, but there's a little bit of opportunity for moving up.

Maria, for example, she started with us five years ago. She'd never been in a vineyard before. Last year we made her our crew leader, for example. That's more pay and more responsibility. One of the things in our industry is you don't often see women as crew leaders. We were really happy to be able to offer that and break that paradigm a little bit.

**Jill:** I also think that being certified organic, where the workers just aren't exposed to the agricultural chemicals that a lot of farm workers are often exposed to, that's an important piece of it.

**Margot:** Gotcha, that's really great to hear. I spoke to Christopher at [The Two Eighty Project](#) for an interview a little while ago. He spoke about the internship and how you're working with these interns. Can you give me a sense of how you work with these folks and why it's important for you to create alignment with an organization like that?

**Steve:** Sure! First off, the idea is to open our industry up to everybody, right? That's the overall goal. Chris loves just working with the plants, and gets a lot of joy out of being with and attending to the vines. Originally we were talking about providing that opportunity and experience to people. My job was to try to find educational opportunities for everyone to have that in their lives to start to work with the plants.

Then I realized pretty quickly that it's a lot more than just working with the plants. It's understanding how this industry works and what makes this industry tick so that people can also see themselves in it, and get a leg up in it and navigate it. It's important that they can find opportunities where they're working with the plants or making wine, or starting a small business, or getting a job in the industry.



Christopher Renfro, founder of [The Two Eighty Project](#), in the vineyard at Alemany Farm. Photo from [Instagram](#).

Jill and I had no idea how the industry worked, and it was really hard for us. It took us a long time to break into the industry and figure it out for us, and we have the advantage of being white, you know? It was still hard for us. Well, how does someone who has even more obstacles supposed to figure this weird complex world out?

With The Two Eighty Project, it's a combo of trying to get people out in the vineyard with their hands on the vines and also hopefully they're learning how the business works on a more general level. There's a lot of specifics on how grapes are bought and sold. Vineyard budgeting, how do winemakers and viticulturists and vineyard managers work together and what are their roles, what are the plans involved in planting new vineyards? Who are the people you have to buy stuff from, and how do you buy it? All that stuff. We go to some big wineries and talk to folks about how did you get this job? How do you keep your boss happy?

Hopefully at the end of the apprenticeship, people have a sense of this world and can make a plan for themselves around how they're going to engage with it. By that time, they've hopefully met some people along the way that they can lean on for help.

**Margot:** That's amazing, and such a needed and beneficial program. Thanks so much to you both for speaking with me today. I can't wait to come visit you in person someday.