



“Wine’s Most Inspiring People 2023: Steve Myers — Working Toward Gender Equity in the Wine Industry”

“Steve Myers radiates creative energy in a way any artist would recognize. It’s an energy that connects disparate ideas and turns them into tangible solutions; that sees paths to future outcomes where others see only barriers; that recognizes potential talent in open-minded curiosity; and that understands passion is essential to success.

Myers started as a strategic management consultant, moved to Allied Domecq, Beam Wine Estates and Duckhorn Wine Company before becoming president of Distinguished Vineyards, where the portfolio he’s building now includes MacRostie, Argyle, Markham and Textbook.

‘It’s been a journey,’ Myers says. ‘What brought me into the industry is wine’s intersection between people passionate about their craft and the business of building a brand and connecting with consumers. It still excites me 20 years later.’

Under Myers’ leadership, Distinguished Vineyards has invested in new channels, enhanced customer experiences and acquired wineries — all while achieving consistent double-digit growth. But what truly sets Myers apart is his focus on positively impacting the people around him.

Kimberlee Nicholls was well-established as the winemaker at Markham Vineyards when Myers arrived. ‘His coming in and seeing where we needed to go as a brand was very positive, for me personally and for the brand,’ she says. ‘His laser-intense



focus on improving the winemaking process is every winemaker's dream. My leadership team also changed; we are now five women.' As for the future, Nicholls simply wants 'to be a winemaker and go to a wine tasting with my husband without people assuming he made the wine.'

With this succinct statement, she puts her finger on an exasperating career experience for virtually every woman in winemaking (and beyond). After the Me Too movement's spotlight on the wine industry, Myers realized that diversity, equity and inclusivity had a long way to go. He asked his senior women what changes were needed and attended the Women of the Vine & Spirits Global Symposium. While there, he experienced another common occurrence for career women — but in reverse — being one of only 20 men among 800 women at a conference.



'That had such a profound impact on me,' he says. 'I left understanding that a balanced team of men and women is good, but if all your leaders are men, it's superficial. What matters is that when you look up and see who's speaking or who the leaders are, you see yourself. So today, we have a 50/50 gender balance across the business and at the management level, with 46% of our managers, including three of five head winemakers, being women. The quality of discussions, decisions and outcomes are so much better when you have populations diverse in age, gender and experience.'

Heidi Bridenhagen had been an enologist at MacRostie Winery for two years when she assumed the former head winemaker's day-to-day responsibilities while Myers searched for a replacement.

'He saw my passion when he met with me and asked me how I saw myself

in the next five years,' she says. 'I was young, so I saw assistant winemaker as my next step. Then he offered me the job of head winemaker! I didn't even know I was in a job interview.' That was in 2013, and in 2022, Myers promoted Bridenhagen to director of winemaking for all Distinguished Vineyards wineries.

'It's a huge growth opportunity,' she notes. '[Steve] supports females and does not think these higher-level roles need to be men. That's important in a good leader. But even more important is that he's not promoting us because we're women, but because he sees our talent and wants us in leadership positions.'

Reaching beyond wine

Myers extends his positive impact beyond the Distinguished Vineyards family by integrating nonprofits that support causes relevant to its wines, teams and consumers.

James Beard Foundation President & COO Kris Moon relates how Distinguished Vineyards' support of the Impact and Smart Catch programs, which promote a sustainable ecosystem for food and beverage, snowballed after Myers told him, 'I think we have an opportunity to build a new wine brand that would generate funding for the foundation.' Myers' vision became Dough Wines, a sustainable wine designed by Bridenhagen and to be sold at restaurants that support the sustainable seafood ecosystem. The 25,000-case brand now contributes more than \$100,000 to-date to support restaurant recovery, kitchen equality, sustainability and culinary scholarships.

Another partnership began when Myers saw Joanna James speak at a Harvest Summit on her documentary about the underrepresentation of women in the culinary industry. James asked him to support the national distribution of her film, *A Fine Line*. For Myers, it was an easy yes.

Distinguished Vineyards also sponsors James' 501(c)(3), MAPP, which advocates for women in hospitality, and its annual conference. She says of

Myers, 'He's a visionary, always thinking about the bigger picture and how he and the company can make a difference. I attribute everything we've done over five years to him. I call everyone on his team a friend; they care about how to make [things] better.' She believes Myers instills those values by creating an environment where sharing ideas is comfortable.

'When I started at Distinguished Vineyards in 2010, I didn't want to talk about case production,' Myers says. 'Instead, I wanted to discuss creating social value for the brands and using growth to invest in the people, wine quality and our communities.'

He's accomplished his goal of building a financially successful wine company that's a positive agent of change and will undoubtedly continue to do so into the future."

-Laurie Wachter
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