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These entrepreneurs want to diversify the wine world one can at a time

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San Francisco-based canned wine company Maker, which announced yesterday that it raised \$2.3 million from prominent investors, plans to triple production and expand the venture nationwide.

The round included funding from Pear VC, The Chainsmokers, [Mariam Naficy](#) and former C-suite executives of Glossier, Henry Davis and Bryan Mahoney, among others.

Canned spirits saw a rise in popularity during the pandemic as restaurants shuttered their doors and to-go meals — including adult beverages — become more commonplace. For those who didn't wish to open up an entire bottle of wine, cans provided an option.

Founded in the middle of the pandemic, co-founders Sarah Hoffman, Kendra Kawala and Zoe Victor began their venture by hosting virtual wine tastings and shipping their canned wine



COURTESY OF MAKER

Maker co-founders Sarah Hoffman, Kendra Kawala and Zoe Victor

directly to consumers. They implemented a subscription-based model, called the "Can Club" and quickly sold out of their initial production.

But this isn't a typical canned wine company, if such a concept exists. The founders of Maker were struck by the political events of 2020 and the racial reckoning that has ensued. They wanted to create a company that would shine a brighter light on women- and BIPOC-led wineries, and followed through on that vision. "We are grateful to have brought together a coalition of over 30 best-in-class investors and operators as diverse as the wines and makers we support, to shake up the wine world for the better. We're proud that female and minority investors account for over 50% of our cap table," said Kendra Kawala in a press release. "We started Maker because we are passionate about supporting the independent creators and makers of wine."

I spoke to Sarah Hoffman, one of Maker's co-founders, to learn more about their operation, commitment to diversity and the growing popularity of canned wine.

"From the very beginning, we wanted to highlight women- and minority-led wineries, and part of what we want to do is tell the untold stories — and highlight people that haven't always gotten the spotlight in wine. We found that winemakers were really excited to partner with us and try something different, shake things up, and people that were excited put their incredible award-winning wines in a different type of format," Hoffman told me.

The process of getting a wine into a Maker can is quite rigorous. It begins with two panels of blind tastings (one from within the industry and one from non-expert consumers). Once a wine passes both tests, Maker brings in the producers for an extensive interview to learn their story and talk about can designs. In terms of the actual canning process, they work directly with the partner wineries.

These canned wines are not "dumbed down" for a specific market. "[The canned wines we offer] are the same wine that's in the bottles of some of the best small producers in California," Hoffman said.

Their investors are also excited by their mission and what sets them apart from producers in the same space. “I invest when talent and ambition in exceptional founders meets a brand that solves a problem in the market. With the three Maker co-founders that was a no-brainer,” said Bryan Mahoney, CEO of Chord Commerce and former Glossier CTO via press release. “I see a lot of similarities for Maker in Glossier’s earliest days — while we pioneered the democratization of beauty, Maker’s mission is to do the same for wine. They’re creating an amazing brand, they care deeply about the product and customer experience and are using technology to build community and democratize an industry. This is Maker’s moment.”

Self-taught vintner Chris Christensen — who came from a non-wine-drinking household in rural Iowa — is owner and winemaker of [Bodkin Wines](#) and a close collaborator with Maker as a “Can Coach.” He came to California to attend Stanford where he fell into the local wine world. He’s also credited as being the first American winemaker to make a sparkling sauvignon blanc. “After decades in the industry it’s rare to see something truly new and exciting. It’s refreshing. Premium wine, with a direct-to-consumer model, celebrating diverse producers — who wouldn’t want to be part of that? I knew if they could sell me, they could sell wine. It was too exciting of an opportunity to pass up,” he said in an email in response to what initially drew him to working with Maker.

“It’s fantastic to see these young women approach the industry with fresh eyes and a fresh perspective — they think outside the can. Inside the can is the new outside the box,” said Christensen.

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