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A look inside Tank Garage Winery, the winery hidden inside a California gas station



By Melissa Kravitz
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You're not stopping at this gas station to grab a a cheap six-pack — or gas, for that matter. Tank Garage Winery, in Calistoga, California, is redefining the gas station beverage — and in the best way possible. Open since spring 2014, this innovative winery converted a 1930s-era gas station and mechanic's garage to a winery and tasting room completely unprecedented in Napa Valley.



"I always wanted to put a winery in an old art deco service station," James Harder, Tank Garage's founder said in an email. "My whole life, I loved vintage Americana design — cars, motorcycles, pinball machines, neon signs, surf culture, you name it. There was a time not too long ago that America built things that had a timeless quality to them. That is what inspires us and the vintage garage is the perfect venue to showcase our wines."

"Napa definitely does not need another sprawling Chateau complete with all the traditional ways you're supposed to make and showcase your wines. That has been done so many times, they all become interchangeable." – James Harder, founder of Tank Garage



With a tasting room created in a mechanic's garage, old gas cans styled to look like guitars lining the exposed brick walls and an antique motorcycle presented like a grand statue to decorate the winery, the venue is indeed a unique spot to make and sell wine.

"We speak to a lot of our customers and the response has been overwhelming that they love that we are so unique and different from the norm," Harder said. "Napa definitely does not need another sprawling Chateau complete with all the traditional ways you're supposed to make and showcase your wines. That has been done so many times, they all become interchangeable."

Harder said Tank Garage Winery is "authentic, relevant and engaging" to all generations of wine drinkers, the newest generation of wine-enthusiasts included.

And with that comes very old fashioned values. "We feel our goals are pretty focused and yet simple: to create an environment that is pleasing, provide a very high level of hospitality, continue to make high quality and unique products, attract like-minded customers, remain authentic and true to ourselves and our values and be here for a really long time," Harder said. "I think now they call it 'sustainability,' but my grandparents simply called it 'good business.'"



The "one-off" wines are one of a kind

Beyond the ambiance, it really is all about the wine at Tank Garage. The so-called "one-off" reds, whites and rosés are all bottled with artistic labels (see the wolf with a graphic lightening bolt across its face below) and sold at the winery, online and as part of Tank Garage's wine club.



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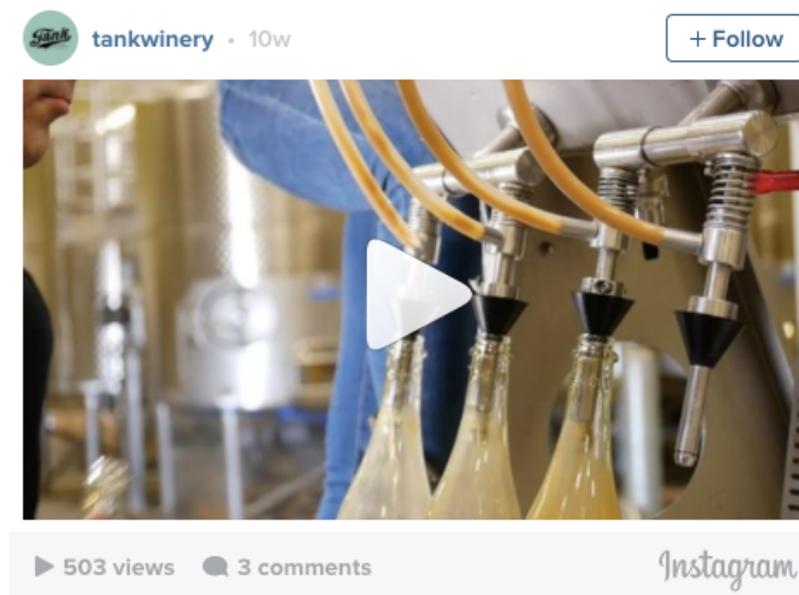
So what's a "one-off" wine exactly? Think of a chef whose menu changes with seasonal market availability, or your favorite recipe made with whatever your local grocer has available.

"When we say 'one-off,' what we really mean is we try never to adhere to some recipe where we are making the same wine year after year, vintage after vintage," Bertus van Zyl, Tank Garage's winemaker, said in an email. "For example, a winery might make a pinot noir every year from the same vineyard, with the same label and you may see subtle variations in the wine due to differences in growing conditions from one vintage to the next, but overall there is normally a style consistency." Van Zyl estimated that 99.5% of wineries operate this way, but Tank Garage is claiming its stake in the .5% of wineries that opt for distinct wines year after year.



"With Tank it is more like creating a unique, custom wine every time we sit down at the blending table," van Zyl explained. "We have the freedom to explore a lot of different styles and winemaking techniques like foot-stomped, whole-cluster red fermentation and making skin-fermented white wines and this artistic freedom is something that I love about Tank."

So how do Tank's fans know that they'll like each new wine pumped out of the garage? "We do have a style in so much that we want to ensure that each wine is delicious in its own right, regardless of the style that it was produced in," van Zyl said.



Grapes for the wines are sourced from vineyards throughout California. Van Zyl says he has "a very big appreciation for all of the diversity that California offers in terms of varieties and all of the amazing different terroirs that are spread across its beautiful landscape." And those drinking the wines will gain an appreciation for California's diversity as well.

With plenty of freedom from Harder, van Zyl travels throughout California to find and buy cabernet sauvignon grapes from "killer hillsides in Napa to make a big red blend" or vermentino grapes that are grown in decomposed granite soils in the Sierra Foothills to make "intensely focused and crisp white blends." Each site van Zyl sources from differs in its soils, elevation, sunlight, exposure and more, ultimately making each finished wine totally unique in its composition.

"I liken it to an artist who can extend their color palette as far as their vision will take them," van Zyl said. "So I definitely love that we have zero constraints to explore and create and not be bound by tradition, but rather inspired by it."

This isn't your parent's boring Chardonnay — this is tattoo artist-decorated wine!



Speaking of artists, Tank Garage's bottles are works of art in themselves.

Harder said there's not really a set process to create the eye-catching bottles (we all know how important this is when you're in a rush at the liquor store and don't know what wine to impress your new friends with),

"It really comes down to how we are feeling at the time and what inspires us," Harder said. "Sometimes we come across an artist we like, like L.A. tattoo designer and painter Shawn Barber, and ring him up and give him our best pitch on why he might want to do something cool with us."

Other wineries, like [Saved](#), in Oakville, California, have also used tattoo artists — in Saved's case, Scott Campbell — to adorn their wine bottles, turning them not merely into glass booze containers but gifts, centerpieces and vases to potentially be re-purposed once all the wine is consumed.

To up its artistry, Tank also employs an in-house designer, Lindsay Biggar, to further improve the winery's imagery. "[I'll] say, 'Hey we should go down to Joshua Tree, rent a vintage convertible and go get inspired to create a cool label,'" Harder said of the winery's ongoing creative process. "So we do. It really is nothing more than that."



Currently, only a small amount of Tank's wines are made in the winery's garage, due to space, though Tank Garage plans to try to expand and renovate in the future.

For now, the majority of Tank wines are made in a "larger, more modern garage type facility" that the owners purchased specifically for the project," van Zyl explained. "It is a very creative space that allows my team to create all of the Tank wines with more room to maneuver and have fun with it. We have all the bells and whistles of a state-of-the-art winemaking facility and instead of one roll-up garage door, I have four."

The production facility doesn't host customers (that's what the antique garage tasting room is for) but the winemakers do have a special guest in there: the King. "We still installed a 40-foot mural of Elvis Presley overlooking the cellar and I often ask myself while putting together the blends, 'What would Elvis do?'" van Zyl said.

Elvis would party

For Napa Valley locals (and tourists), Tank Garage's parties make the winery stand out even further from its more traditional counterparts. Over the summer, Tank would block off their parking lot and host Sunday parties complete with vintage pinball machines, gourmet hot dogs from a local purveyor, dance music and, of course, great wine to drink while customers tried to rack up a high score in pinball. "This is an environment we find pleasing, you can just hang and get to know your customers and they can get to know us," Harder said.



Tank has also recently started a Friday evenings series, for visitors with a secret password to visit between 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. to listen to music, sip wine and hang out in the winery's speakeasy.

Suddenly a visit to wine country seems a lot less intimidating.

Visitors can schedule a \$25 tasting (deductible when you purchase three bottles of wine) at Tank Garage Winery via VinoVisit.com. Wines, which range from \$25 to 65, are available on TankGarageWinery.com.