



CULTURE // FOOD & DRINK

Slo Down Wines | This Winemaker Wants You to Drink His Wine and Then Call Him

If you don't like it, you can call the founder.



by Christopher Osburn

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To tell the story of **SLO Down Wines**, you have to start at the beginning. "I began making wine in my buddy's backyard in college," says **SLO Down** Winemaker Brandon Allen who has no problem explaining that he's a high school drop out who managed to find work doing something he loves. He really wasn't trying to become a winemaker. "I was just trying to impress girls and get some free booze and I fell, head over heels, in love with it."

He continued making wine all through college, with no real aspirations of becoming a "professional" winemaker. "Then, around our fourth year of making wine, my buddies and I started getting phone calls from our friends parents (because our cell phone number was on the bottle) asking where they could find Sexual Chocolate (one of their wines)." This was in the wake of the financial crisis so they didn't have anyone banging down their doors with job offers. "At the time, I had around \$8,000 saved up from bartending and unspent student loan money and I saw a real opportunity to be an outsider wine brand." He and a friend decided that the time was right to drop everything and start a winery. SLO Down Wines was born shortly after in 2009.

When they first began making wine, they didn't have a name for their wine. It was simply a red blend with the story on the front. "When we made our third vintage, we made three barrels of wine and they were all distinctly different." So, in order to differentiate the wines, they decided to drink out of the barrels while naming them and writing the new names on the cask with a sharpie. "I named one of the barrels Sexual Chocolate." The name Sexual Chocolate comes from the classic comedy, "Coming to America" starring Eddie Murphy. "He had a Christian rock band in the movie called 'Sexual Chocolate' and that's the name that ended up sticking."

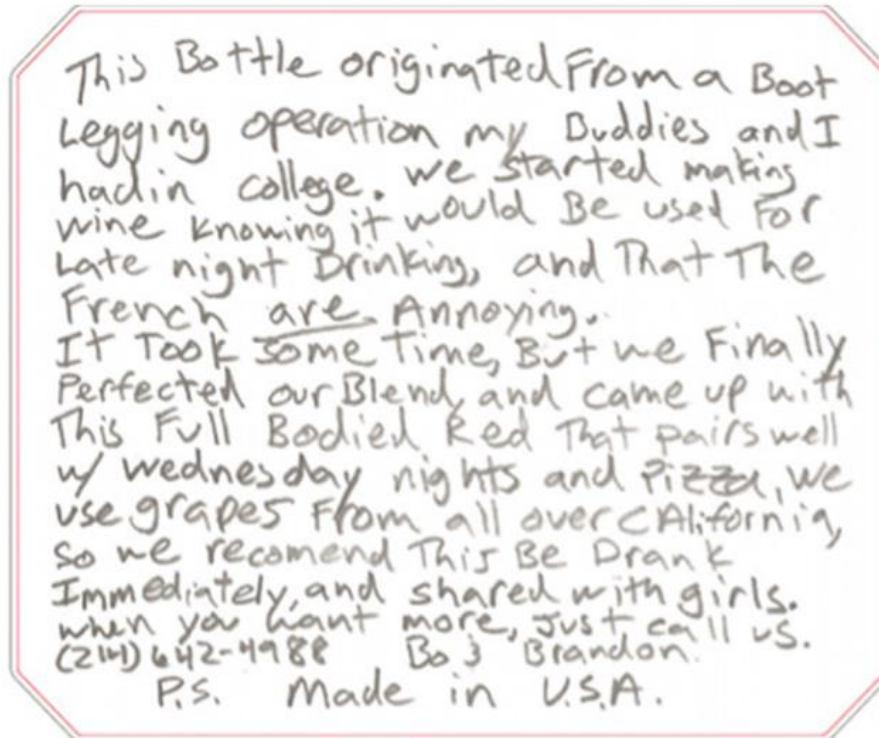
The story on the label is just the honest tale of when they started making wine. "That was the original label and I always loved it so I always kept it." He adds, "To me, it's a reflection of where we were at that time in our lives, just friends making wine for nothing more than the love of making wine. . . And tricking girls into thinking we were much cooler than we were."

Allen had absolutely zero history in the wine business before he began. "My parents couldn't stand wine when I was a kid, so I definitely didn't come from a winemaking family." He says that it isn't a jab at people who have a dynastic exposure, it's just his reality. "When I began making wine, I had this preconceived notion that wine was elitist and winemakers were pretentious."

He surmises those thoughts stemmed from his lack of exposure and the way that wine is sometimes portrayed. "However, as I really dug into winemaking I found that couldn't be further from the truth." He met some friendly, enthusiastic winemakers who were eager to share their knowledge and give him their time. "Honestly, I fell in love with those guys before I really fell in love with wine. Don't get me wrong, there is pretentiousness in the industry. That just wasn't my experience starting out." He feels fortunate to have grown up in a place where great wines were made by people who were laid back and willing to help him learn. "To this day, the idea of wine industry professionals who are open with their time, ideas and hearts embodies every mentor I have had and every person I surround myself and my company with. I hope to be like them some day. I feel it shows in your final product."

SLO Down Wines

SLO Down makes three different wines. "The first wine is Sexual Chocolate, which is the wine I've been making the longest." Sexual Chocolate is a blend of zinfandel, syrah, petite sirah and petit verdot. "Most of the fruit is from Napa, Sonoma and Santa Barbara. Sexual Chocolate is best described as sexy! It has a soft tannic structure with chocolate undertones and a balanced yet lush finish."



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The second wine is Broken Dreams, a Chardonnay. "Personally, I'm not into the traditional styles of California Chardonnay so I wanted to create something that was more focused on fruit and less focused on oak and converted acid." Broken Dreams is bright and balanced. "We get most of the fruit from Napa, Sonoma and Lodi. The Lodi fruit adds a nice tropical aspect to the lightly oaked fruit. By not letting the wine go through a secondary fermentation, it retains freshness and doesn't take on the more buttery or creamy characteristics that are associated with a lot of California Chardonnays."

The third wine that they make is called Stand Out, a Bordeaux style blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. "We get the fruit for Stand Out from Sonoma and Dry Creek. Stand Out is a bit lighter than a lot of California style cab blends. Stand Out is focused on acid and light tannins, think tart cherry and getting lucky."

Allen believes that young drinkers don't have the same relationship with wine as they do with beer for several reasons. "The main thing is that there is a stigma with the millennial generation that wine is stuffy and pretentious. Really it's the same thing I dealt with as a young wine maker." The reality is, the wine industry, similar to most industries, is controlled by a few large companies whose bread and butter was made by creating an idea of exclusivity for decades. "This by nature, creates a barrier in the casual consumers' mind that prevents them from exploring wine."

There's an idea that if a wine is \$15 it can't be good, and Allen says that just isn't true. "I think as more companies like SLO pop up and show consumers that wine can be bad-ass, consumer sentiment will change." He's thankful for what the craft beer industry is doing because it's opening the door for winemakers. "Micro breweries have popped up all over the country like wild fire showing people the value of a craft product and training pallets to be more complex. It's only a matter of time before the wine industry hooks into this idea of craft wine and starts showing people that wine can be even more complex."

Allen says to buy a bottle of Sexual Chocolate and call the number on the phone number listed on the bottle. "Seriously, I'll answer, unless I'm in the shower ... actually, I still might answer."