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**tastingpanel**  
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*A Rising Star in*  
**TEXAS**

SOUTHWEST SPIRITS THRIVES AS THE LONE STAR  
STATE'S THIRD-LARGEST SPIRITS PRODUCER

PHOTO: JASON KINDIG



Southwest Spirits'  
Dallas-based  
team promotes  
NUE Vodka at a  
company picnic.





# Impossibly good Pinot Noir.

**“For there is no folly of the beast of the earth that is  
not infinitely outdone by the madness of men.”**

— Herman Melville’s Moby Dick

It’s our mission — our madness, if you will — to consistently deliver impossibly good 100% Pinot Noir at an unrivaled price. When you take a sip of Folly of the Beast, you’ll be immersed in the journey of its epic winemaking challenge, proving that a little madness pays off.

[trade.winc.com](https://trade.winc.com)

**Winc**



# CONQUERING THE **WHITE** **WHALE**

**WINEMAKER RYAN  
ZOTOVICH OF WINC  
USES HIS EXPERIENCE  
WITH SMALL-BATCH  
PINOT NOIR TO  
OVERDELIVER ON  
QUALITY FOR PRICE**

Winc Director of Winemaking  
Ryan Zotovich oversees the  
production of over 100 exclusive  
wines, including the highly  
sought-after Folly of the Beast.





STORY BY MICHELLE BALL  
PHOTOS BY JEREMY BALL

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Necessity has long been considered the mother of invention. Yet in a global economy, where there's a product to fulfill nearly every want and need, curiosity might be "necessity 2.0"—prompting novel ideas that challenge the status quo. California-based company Winc is testing that theory by dramatically changing how we shop for wine via a tech-enabled platform that showcases a diverse portfolio of brands made for the next generation of consumers (visit [trade.winc.com](http://trade.winc.com) for details).

Winc's team leverages a two-way conversation with consumers to launch, validate, and optimize products; with proof of concept, select brands are then scaled more broadly in premium retailers and restaurants nationwide. Winc wines are now available at more than 3,100 on- and off-premise accounts in 48 states—including Whole Foods, The Hoxton, and The Bungalow—and the company's unique ability to build and scale brands through a data-driven, omni-channel approach has decidedly set it apart.

But what started as a curated online wine-subscription service in 2011 has since evolved into a full-scale modern winery with a direct connection to the consumer. Marking its transition to proprietary products, Winc hired Ryan Zotovich as Director of Winemaking in 2015. Zotovich embodies the modern jack-of-all-trades persona, complete with a stylish Ron Swanson mustache (which he says his wife adores). His creative spirit and scientific mind are crucial to the job of managing more



**Growing up, Ryan Zotovich helped his family cultivate their own vegetables and orchids and raise chickens. Zotovich and his wife, Brittany, continue this tradition and have recently added beekeeping to their duties.**

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BEAST OF THE EARTH THAT IS  
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MADNESS OF MEN.”

~HERMAN MELVILLE, *MOBY DICK*

than 100 proprietary wines annually. Many of Winc's offerings are crafted from grapes sourced throughout the Central Coast, including the popular Folly of the Beast—a fresh, fruit-forward, sub-\$20 Pinot Noir that's actually true to the variety. Considering that Zotovich cut his teeth on Pinot Noir at Sea Smoke and Zotovich Cellars in Santa Barbara County's renowned Sta. Rita Hills AVA, which is nearly synonymous with the grape, it's not surprising that the wine has seen such success.

### Learning from the Best

Zotovich's path to the industry stemmed from a few chance encounters. His dad was a wine aficionado and always had a bottle at the table, but it didn't capture his son's interest growing up. That all changed when his uncle brought a bottle of 1983 Caymus Cabernet Sauvignon to dinner from a vintage that just so happened to be his nephew's birth year. "It opened up a world for me that I didn't really know about," recalls Zotovich, who spoke with his dad soon after that moment about being a winemaker.

His father then introduced him to Dr. Keith Patterson, the highly respected professor who ran the viticulture program at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, before his death in 2013. Zotovich remembers Patterson


saying, "Okay, meet me at Firestone. We'll have a cocktail and discuss your future." At the end of the meeting, Patterson explained that enrollment for the program was already at capacity, but he had taken a liking to Zotovich and told him, "I'm going to pull some strings and get you in."

Patterson was a passionate teacher who had a profound influence on his students. He stressed the importance of grape-growing knowledge to winemaking, prompting Zotovich to focus on viticulture as well as enology. "I knew that I wanted to be in the cellar more than the vineyards," says Zotovich, "but I knew I also needed a solid understanding of viticulture so I could go out and have a conversation with my farmers on a level where they would respect me."

For example, low yields are often assumed to be essential to high-quality wine grapes, yet Patterson reinforced the idea that every vineyard has an optimal load based on climate, variety, rootstock, desired ripeness, the soil's nutrient availability, and more. When looking for a source for Winc's Summer Water (a light, dry, and crisp rosé that has developed a cult following), Zotovich spoke with a grower in the Santa Ynez Valley who typically sells his Grenache at a premium but agreed to a lower price in exchange for higher-

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~WINC DIRECTOR OF  
WINEMAKING RYAN ZOTOVICH



Zotovich walks the hillside at one  
of his vineyard sources in the  
Santa Ynez Valley.



yielding fruit with a lower sugar level, around 21 Brix. If the grapes were to be used for red wine, the vines would struggle to achieve even ripeness at that Brix, but for a rosé, explains Zotovich, the result was perfect: “The grower made a little more money [and] I got a way better product . . . as the result of all of us having a conversation.” The ability to convince farmers to adjust to his needs is part of what makes him such a talented winemaker.

After graduation, Zotovich planned on moving to Napa Valley, where he already had a guaranteed position. Yet after meeting Steve Clifton, winemaker and owner of Palmina Wines, at a party, that plan changed. Clifton invited him to work a day of harvest, and after they finished, crews representing the whole industrial block of wineries in Lompoc met at Sea Smoke for a lunch that the producers typically take turns hosting. An all-star cast of personalities attended—among them Kris Curran, Bruno D’Alfonso, and Victor Gallegos—and Zotovich was so impressed by the camaraderie he witnessed that he asked to stay on as an unpaid intern at Palmina. He soon became Clifton’s assistant winemaker, working with nearly a dozen Italian varieties for more than 20 bottlings. This experience, and those that followed at Sea Smoke and Zotovich Cellars, gave him the confidence and flexibility required to manage a large portfolio of wines.

Though Zotovich crafts Winc’s domestic wines from grape to bottle, the company’s portfolio is global, with wines from Chile, New Zealand, France, South Africa, and beyond. As a result, Zotovich has cultivated relationships with specific partners who execute the international offerings to his specifications. After harvest, Zotovich meets with the producers to taste the wines, fine-tune the lots, and decide on the final blends. He bottles the results in California to reduce the company’s carbon footprint and ensure control over final sulfur adjustments.

Knowing that its customers are keen on minimal intervention, Winc has adopted the European organic wine standard for sulfur additions and treats each wine as thoughtfully as if it were a small lot. “If you’re picking the right thing from the right place at the right time, you don’t need all that other stuff,” asserts Zotovich, referring to the fillers and additives sometimes used in large-scale production.



**Folly of the Beast 2017 Pinot Noir, Central Coast (\$19)** Made from 100% Pinot Noir and aged in 30% new French oak, this is a well-balanced, feminine wine at an unbeatable price point. Showing pretty aromas of warm cherry pie with flecks of fresh-cut herbs, it’s soft, round, and light on the palate, with juicy red fruit and spice that lingers in hints of vanilla and clove. The label’s playful illustration and hand-lettering is a standout on the shelf, attracting younger demographics. The 2018 vintage of Folly of the Beast will be released this fall. —Meridith May

### Folly of the Beast

“It’s kind of a passion project bordering on insanity,” says Zotovich when introducing one of Winc’s most sought-after wines, Folly of the Beast. The name comes from a famous line in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* that captures Captain Ahab’s maniacal pursuit of the elusive white whale: “For there is no folly of the beast of the earth that is not infinitely outdone by the madness of men.” Pinot Noir is notorious for being difficult to grow; consistently producing a high-quality varietal wine at an affordable price is much like chasing Melville’s white whale (albeit with happier results). “We wanted a \$19 Pinot

Noir that drank like a \$25 Pinot Noir, and we knew we could make one better than what was out there in that same category,” explains Zotovich, alluding to comparably priced wines that rely on blending varieties and residual sugar.

By contrast, Zotovich treats each lot of Pinot separately before bringing them together for the final result. He says it’s all about rethinking the use of small-production techniques for larger-scale wines. “I’m basically taking the same approach I did at Zotovich [Cellars] and scaling it up. It turns out, yeah, it can be done,” he says, adding, “It’s Pinot Noir, and it should taste like Pinot Noir.” ■■