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WITCHES' BREW

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How the Grape Witches put a spell on Toronto's wine scene

"WE'RE NOT SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE, but let's say we're having a rave and maybe someone spiked your wine with some kind of drugs and you're really thirsty," Nicole Campbell suggests from the stage to a chorus of laughter. The crowd has assembled partly to raise funds for FoodShare, a non-profit organization that works with communities and schools to provide healthy food and food education—but they are also here to learn about wine.

"It's like seven in the morning and you watch the sun rise, people are in suits around you, and you're like what is life?" Nicole continues. "The only thing around is this disgusting pond water in front of you, but you're just so thirsty. And then you drink it, and it's the best thing that you've ever consumed."

Welcome to wine education courtesy of Toronto's Grape Witches, a duo consisting of Nicole, a wine importer, and her best friend Krysta Oben, a sommelier. Nicole speaks quickly and excitedly, drawing you in to her dirty-pond daydream, then Krysta follows up more softly, delivering details on the producer, the winemaking, and potential pairings. It just works—everyone present that night undoubtedly left at least a little more intrigued by, and knowledgeable about natural wine.

I first encountered Nicole and Krysta in the spring of 2017 in the open "garage" space at the back of a popular local pizza and natural wine hotspot that they had filled with cauldrons of dry ice, and homemade art advertising the wines on offer for the night. This was one of their early parties, just months after they began making a mark on our home city's wine scene, and it was exhilarating.

Natural wine in Toronto has lagged behind other cities like New York or even Montréal in part due to restrictive control of liquor sales by a government monopoly. But on January 1st, 2017, these "Grape Witches" suddenly started throwing parties featuring natural wines in a (seemingly oxymoronic) relaxed and ravey setting. They initially called their parties wine raves and, of course, they occasionally summon rave imagery to describe the thirst-quenching properties of a wine, but typical raves these are not.

Their parties feature great DJs—including Brendan Canning of Broken Social Scene fame—as witchy decor—dry ice, velvet, and countless candelabras—takes the place of glow sticks and bare walls, while natural wine subs for pills or powder. Not exactly after-hours warehouse parties, but definitely different from a typical wine tasting in a sanitized corporate event space. Here, you can drink the best natural wines Toronto has to offer, while also getting a tarot card reading. People in Toronto who care about wine found all of this refreshing and exciting, to say the least.

Over the past year, the Grape Witches have taken their parties to other Canadian cities like Vancouver, Halifax, and Montréal, while the local Toronto events have grown more ambitious. There was a Nineties-themed music video dance party that friends with only a passing interest in wine still talk about; a faux bat-mitzvah that left Nicole spending hours studying the Old Testament in order to pair wines with the "right" biblical characters; and a natural wine booze cruise on Lake Ontario is in the works for August. They've also supplemented their parties with extremely popular "education hours" where they taste through some of the night's wines, giving insight into their production, along with important info like which wine reminds them of that dirty pond water (De Martino "Viejas Tinajas" Muscat), and which of Rihanna's armpit (Envínate "Lousas" Mencía).

On the day we met for this interview, Nicole was referred to as a "star of the Canadian wine scene" in a review of Paris Paris, the Toronto wine bar where she works the odd shift on the floor, and which Krysta manages. While lounging in the summer sun, Krysta and I enjoyed poking fun at our new "celebrity" friend, but it's true—the Grape Witches are stars here, and they've changed Toronto's wine scene for the better. Sure, the slackliners, frisbee tossers, and croquet players set up around us in Trinity Bellwoods Park were mostly still brown-bagging beers and sneaking mass-production rosé in red Solo cups, but every day there are more and more young Torontonians seeking out wild and "witchy" wines as well.

So grab a glass (or several bottles if you want to be totally accurate—try for Didier Grappe's Côtes du Jura Savagnin Ouillé, and Les Pervenches's "Bubulles" if you want to drink along with us), lay down a blanket outside, and join us in the Grape Witches coven.

PIPETTE: WHY DO YOU CALL YOURSELVES GRAPE WITCHES?

KRYSTA OBEN: We admire and respect real witches and their connection to nature and rebellion against the world that they live in.

NICOLE CAMPBELL: Being a witch is a real powerful thing, and we deeply respect that. But we actually have a real answer.

KO: I was working at Cava [a Spanish restaurant and wine bar in Toronto] with a bunch of lovely dudes and they had a cruel but loving nickname for me, which was "grape witch." They liked to make fun of but also enjoyed my taste in biodynamic, natural, and witchcraft wine, so when they were trying to lure me out after work they were like, "grape witch, let's go drink some witchcraft wine." So the name was a little bit cruel, but also sweet and tender.

And when Nicole and I were drunk in New York at 4am trying to figure out what we wanted to do to bring more fun and engagement to the Toronto wine scene, that seemed like the right name.

NC: I was obsessed with the name.

KO: So we took it back. Reclaimed it.

YOU CONSIDER EACH OTHER BEST FRIENDS NOW, BUT HOW DID YOU MEET INITIALLY?

KO: I was working as a wine buyer in a restaurant and Nicole was working as a wine seller for an agency, and then she moved away to Vancouver and I was a little bit sad. Then when she came back to Toronto we became friends.

NC: I wish it was like we wrote each other love poems about wine while I was gone.

KO: We were wine acquaintances, but I didn't realize how much I liked you because I just stopped buying from your company when you left. The other people just were not as funny.

NC: Really it was that New York trip when we kind of realized that we loved the same things and loved being silly and creative and being scrappy and making nice things happen.

WHAT WERE YOU DOING IN NEW YORK?

KO: We were there for RAW [Wine Fair] two Novembers ago.

NC: I was staying with my friend and I had gone for dinner and had already come home when Krysta texted me, "You up?"

And in fact I was, so I took a 20-minute cab ride to the Lower East Side and we drank everything. The initial idea was just us giggling and wasted.

KO: We both worked in wine for so long and were kind of frustrated seeing our friends who don't work in wine drink crappy wine all the time, but also we were a little tired of the bro culture that seemed to be in the wine world. Less and less every day, fortunately, but it's still definitely present. So we just wanted to do something more engaging and a little silly.

SO YOU STARTED BY THROWING PARTIES THEN GREW TO DOING MORE, LIKE EDUCATION HOURS WHERE YOU TASTE AND TALK ABOUT SOME OF THE WINES YOU'LL BE SERVING AT THE PARTY BEFORE THE MUSIC GETS GOING. HOW DID THAT COME ABOUT?

NC: The first party, we had no idea what we were doing. We were stapling velvet to the wall, we were experimenting with dry ice for the first time, we had a bunch of candles, we had a friend of a friend DJing. It was all really scrappy and lovingly put together, and it was just a really, really nice party that was 100% industry people.

KO: Then we started to see a bunch of non-industry people even at the second party, and they would ask us really nice questions like, "what's the difference between organic and biodynamic?" And we were screaming back over the music, "It's cow dung, don't worry!"

NC: We thought, maybe we should talk about this when there's not literal smoke between us and the guest, so we decided to have a little education hour. And they started to sell out really quickly.

AT THOSE EDUCATION HOURS, AND ON INSTAGRAM, YOU'LL OFTEN DESCRIBE WINES WITH FUN AND QUIRKY DESCRIPTIONS. HOW DO YOU COME UP WITH YOUR TASTING NOTES?

KO: We never want to say any words like "medium-plus acid" to people. Wine stuff for wine professionals is a shared language. We all know the right words to convey some facts about what a wine tastes like, but that's not very fun. And especially for people who aren't working in a restaurant or wine judging setting, it's super boring. So we try to be way more evocative, we try to get a little tipsy maybe, and talk more about how a wine makes us feel, what it reminds us of, and convey the essence of a wine in a way more funny, witchy way.

NC: We like to think about a wine, like if this wine was a person what would they look like? What would they be wearing? What would their hobbies be? If it was a love interest, what type of love interest would it be? What kind of relationship would it be? Like would they text you back? Would they be really needy? Would you dream of them forever? Or would they just be a little fuckboy?

KO: Nicole really wants the wine to text her back.

NC: Not too much. Just a little text though. And maybe something cute, not just "Hey." I want a little joke.

SO LET'S DO A LIVE TASTING NOTE NOW. YOU BROUGHT THIS BOTTLE OF DIDIER GRAPPE BACK FROM A TRIP YOU TOOK TOGETHER TO FRANCE, RIGHT?

NC: Yeah. We had a very dramatic visit with this man.

KO: I've loved this guy ever since I tried his wines. When we were going to France I wrote him an email saying we'd love to visit him. Most producers usually just say yes right away, but he said, "before I answer you yes or no, can you tell me the three best wines you've had in the past year?"

WHAT DID YOU ANSWER?

KO: The first one was his wine included in a dinner with many other good wines. Had to do it. The second was a wine from my home that I thought he might enjoy, Pearl Morissette. And then François Saint-Lô from the Loire. So, he finally agreed. And then we all had food poisoning while we were there. My boyfriend fainted and hit his head on the road just outside the cellar.

NC: Our trips are always very aggressive because we just want to see all our heroes, and so we end up seeing two or three producers a day, and we eat everything and drink everything and stay up all night in a motherfucking castle. We have a very bad habit of getting tattoos in a cave [literally, both have stick and poke tattoos of wine glasses they got in a cave in the Loire this February], or going to London for one night, and taking the train to Paris for one night and meeting with our crazy friend and getting fucked up, and then getting in a car the next day to drive to the Loire. But we would love to lead a trip to the Loire. That is a dream.

OK, SO THIS WINE. FOCUS!

NC: It's definitely like a salty sailing expedition. Like if you were a barnacle . . . what makes barnacles happy? Like a big hull? Maybe something to scratch and you're like, ooh scratch it.

KO: There's some wild apple juice.

NC: Yeah, some apple juice in Normandy on the side of a road that you think might make you more powerful, or at least immune to certain diseases. We love wines like this that are not powerfully oaked and that are about acidity and freshness.

KO: Trying to not be any other wine than themselves. They have a confidence and calm about them that makes them really delicious.

YOUR PARTIES AND EDUCATION HOURS ALSO OFTEN FEATURE OTHER FEMALE WINE PROFESSIONALS IN THE CITY. IS THAT A CONSCIOUS EFFORT TO COMBAT THE BRO CULTURE IN WINE THAT YOU MENTIONED?

KO: I think Toronto has an incredible amount of

female sommeliers—a lot of cities do now. Women are often the ones buying the wine in restaurants and doing a lot of the work selling the wine to restaurants, but there's still an image of a bunch of dudes in tastings wearing suits, wearing their pins, and being really stuffy and intimidating. And we know all these cool women in wine and just wanted to make their voices heard.

NC: Also, just the type of woman that was allowed to be in those spaces was typically like a woman in a suit or a really feminine woman. This isn't just an issue in wine, but it's about expanding who you can be in this space of wine and be considered a professional. It's a more interesting space when you have a diversity of opinion and that's something that all industries can get better at.

KO: I think in the wine world you're often told to be more serious and look more serious and wear more suits and be a particular way, and part of this is like, fuck that. We want to wear velvet dresses and be super-weird and cover a room in dry ice and still drink the best wine.

NC: Part of the reason we latched on to this idea of being Grape Witches is I grew up in this very traditional wine background. My dad had a wine agency and we traveled the world. I had a lot of education but still didn't kind of fit a norm of wanting to wear a suit or only talking about Burgundy and selling very expensive wine. That's very exciting sometimes, but I also just want to drink some dank juice in an alleyway.

OR IN A PARK? SHOULD WE TRY THIS SPARKLING FROM LES PERVENCHES TOO? WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON IS A PERFECT TIME FOR POPPING BOTTLES, RIGHT?

NC: I love these guys so much. We had their Chardonnay when we did a party in Montreal [Les Pervenches is based an hour outside Montreal and their wines are generally only available in Quebec]. This is like if you're a horse and there's unsoiled fresh hay and you're like, I'm gonna put my hooves on it, I'm gonna munch on it. And this hay is Friday hay. They spent extra time on it.

IF THIS WINE WERE ONE OF YOUR LOVE INTERESTS, WOULD IT TEXT?

NC: This wine would not text. This wine would lose itself, like, "sorry, I was harping on twigs and I missed your text."

KO: "My friends and I were micro-dosing on mushrooms and I lost track of time, but I really like you, what are you doing right now?"

DOES KRYSTA TEXT YOU BACK?

NC: She does text me back. I can text her like 20 times without response, but it's part of my personality. Sometimes I'll text long poems.

But back to this wine. I'd say it's garnished with lime. Like for someone who says, "I like gin and tonics," but they're in a wine bar. It's great.

THAT SEEMS LIKE A GOOD PLACE TO END SO WE CAN JUST HANG OUT AND DRINK. ANY DEEP CLOSING THOUGHTS? WITCHY SPELLS?

NC: We really just want to continue to share the most exciting wine and tell fun stories. The parties are super, super fun and we've been doing more ambitious events, but it's also about the community. We're working on a wine club. We want to do more artist collaborations.

It's about wine, but it's also about sharing art and music. We always want bring what we think the best part of the sommelier community is to people who give a shit and who are trying to live authentically.

KO: Yes, now let's drink!