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NY CULTURE

## A Wine Man in a Hurry

By LETTIE TEAGUE



Bryan Thomas for The Wall Street Journal

Andre Mack at Terry's Wine Shop

"I wanted to make my first million before I turned 40," Andre Mack told me over lunch at Morrell Wine Bar last week. His confession seemed almost quaint in this age of overnight tech billionaires. The Brooklyn-based Mr. Mack, who turns 40 later this month, just reached that goal, when his wine company, Mouton Noir, reached \$1 million in sales. But when I offered my congratulations, Mr. Mack shook his head: It wasn't enough.

"Not enough" pretty well captures Mr. Mack's feelings about most of the things he does—though he seems to do a lot more than most. One reason may be that he doesn't sleep very much: about

four hours a night. "I go to sleep around four in the morning and get up around 8 a.m.," he said. And if he's in town, he will make breakfast for his two children. But he's not home very often; Mr. Mack said he spends about 200 days a year on the road, selling his wines.

Mr. Mack said he came to the wine business "late in life": He was 30 years old when he became a sommelier. That's hardly late in life, I observed. Again, Mr. Mack shook his head. "I felt like I was always trying to catch up," he said. "So many people—like Laura Maniec—got into the wine business when they're really young." (Ms. Maniec, who owns Corkbuzz Wine Studio in New York, was in her early 20s when she was named a master sommelier, the youngest ever at the time.)



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His Knock on Wood label

Mr. Mack was named best young sommelier by the *Chaine des Rotisseurs* in 2003, and he was the first African-American ever to win the title—but that wasn't enough. Nor was the fact that he did so while living in Houston. He wanted more. And that, of course, meant working in New York. In 2004, he became the head sommelier of *Per Se*—a much-coveted position, or as Mr. Mack said, "It was a job that some sommeliers would grab and never let go." But he did, at the end of 2006. "There was the feeling that I'd hit a glass ceiling," he said. "And if I wanted to walk on water I'd better get off the boat." Was that a reference to Christ? I asked.

"Well, I was born on Christmas," said Mr. Mack, who may be as confident as he is ambitious.

Mr. Mack wanted to show other sommeliers that there was "life after the floor," but in the beginning that life didn't seem especially inviting. He was couch-surfing at the apartments of friends and trying to figure out how to start a wine company without any money. He ran a wine company, Nobel Wines, with two partners but cashed out after a year or so and followed it up with some restaurant consulting. He founded his wine company, Mouton Noir, in 2007.

"We made 378 cases that first year," he said. "Now we're just shy of 20,000 cases and we're in 17 markets." A lot of that success was owed to winemaking friends who helped him along the way when it came to sourcing fruit, noted Mr. Mack, who doesn't own a winery or vineyards. Instead, he acts as a negociant who purchases grapes and works with a custom winemaking facility in Oregon.

I asked whether it was difficult to sell wine to wine directors and sommeliers who were his colleagues and friends. "Well, I can at least get an appointment," Mr. Mack said with a laugh, adding that they too have also been quite supportive. (Indeed, the list of New York restaurants where Mouton Noir wines can be found is fairly extensive and includes such well-known names as Marea, Aureole and Lure Fish Bar.)

Although he has produced wines from California and Washington State, all Mouton Noir wines are currently made in Oregon. They include reasonably priced wines (around \$20 a bottle) like the 2011 Knock on Wood Chardonnay, a straightforward, citrusy white, and the 2010 Other People's Pinot Noir, a light-bodied, attractive red with the abbreviation OPP in big, bold, black

letters on the label. (Mr. Mack admitted that some people are offended by the use of OPP, which references a certain popular rap song that references certain sexual practices, but he said he was just having fun with a play on words.)

Graphic art is another component of Mr. Mack's business. He's a self-taught graphic artist who learned to make his own labels when he couldn't afford to hire a label designer. Today, he creates T-shirts and slogans and labels for other winemakers and wineries, too. One such T-shirt got him into trouble with a certain famous winemaker in Burgundy: Aubert de Villane of Domaine de la Romanee Conti, aka DRC.

The T-shirt was emblazoned with the words: Run DRC. "I got a cease-and-desist letter from Aubert de Villane," said Mr. Mack, who seemed more surprised than troubled by the correspondence. It certainly didn't stop him from producing similar work. For example, there's a Barolo King shirt whose design looks exactly like the [Burger King](#) logo. That company hasn't sent him a letter, and the T-shirt is still in production. "I figure it's easier to do the work and ask for forgiveness afterwards," Mr. Mack said.

Now that his million-dollar year is almost at an end, what did Mr. Mack have planned for the year ahead? More wine, more design and maybe another art gallery exhibit (he's already had one). He's also planning to hire his first employee, and further down the line he's thinking of renting a tour bus and driving it cross-country to sell his wine. "My driving force is that I feel like whatever I've done, I should have done it already," said Mr. Mack, who thinks that he's perpetually behind but may have actually just arrived.

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