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A Little Bit Funky

Eric Wareheim is known for his envelope-pushing comedy, but his natural wine label, Las Jaras, is proving equally influential.



Eric Wareheim has his death row meal all planned out. Although—as far as I can tell—he hasn’t committed any felonies serious enough to warrant capital punishment, he enjoys imagining the vicissitudes of his final culinary experience. In fact, imagining a death row meal is a game Wareheim, 42, likes to play with his friends, a cadre of artists who live mostly in Los Angeles and New York City—between which Wareheim splits his time. Fatty tuna belly, or chūtoro, would comprise Wareheim’s first course—but it’s a very specific preparation he would demand: it’s from the restaurant Sawada in Tokyo, he explains. “They give you this piece of chūtoro, and in the background, these embers are burning the whole time you’re there. It’s like a four-hour meal. And then the chef’s wife takes those embers and puts it over the piece of chūtoro and sears it. It’s crazy. It makes me wanna tear-up.” Wareheim’s second course? “A piece of Willy Mae’s Scotch House fried chicken from New Orleans. That’s how I’d wanna go out.” Besides attesting to his deep knowledge of and passion for food and travel, this mix of high and low—of bourgeois and street, artistic reverence and idiosyncratic playfulness—encapsulates his life and work.

You may recognise Wareheim from the award-winning Netflix series *Master of None*, several episodes of which he has directed and also co-starred in with Aziz Ansari, playing Ansari’s sidekick. You may also know him as co-creator, writer, director and co-star of the ten-year-old sketch comedy series *Tim & Eric*, with Tim Heidecker (on Adult Swim, and in live shows). In these and in dozens of other shows he’s either appeared in or written (e.g. on *Funny or Die* and *The*

Office), Wareheim’s surreal and discomfiting physical humour—like spoof television advertisements for child clowns or frilly music videos about kissing his sister on the lips—have earned him a huge following. But in the past couple of years, in addition to his increasingly successful Hollywood career (with many television projects, actual commercials for brands such as Old Spice, and a feature film in the works), Wareheim, who grew up in Audubon, Pennsylvania, has been accruing a new legion of unlikely fans among those in the natural wine community. This is because Wareheim is partner with vintner Joel Burt in Las Jaras Wines (the ‘Ja’ is pronounced ‘Ha’), a Northern California-based winery producing wine with minimal intervention.

“Natural wine encompasses many things,” Wareheim tells me, a few days before he was heading out on a month-long European sojourn to natural wine hot spots in Germany, France and Spain. “I’m interested in wines without chemicals—without any additives or colourings. A lot of wine is made that way. You don’t have to list your ingredients on the back of wine, which is crazy, because people are drinking toxic chemicals every day.” Natural wine lovers like Wareheim also make the argument that when the process is organic or biodynamic and additive-free, hangovers become a thing of the past. “All of our wines are very light and slammable” (a word Wareheim uses to mean it’s drinkable in large quantities without a painful morning after—‘chuggable’ being another of his favoured terms for this quality). He’s even named a bottle in homage to this welcome phenomenon, the popular Glou Glou Charbono (made with grapes from Mendocino County), coming from the onomatopoeic French wine term for ‘gluggable’.

If Wareheim is serious about what goes into the wine (and especially what does not), his brand of whimsy nevertheless makes its way to the wines’ labels. “The labels are all made by my artist friends, who are doing a kind of counter-culture art making.” Chloe Wise, the New York-based multimedia artist (Wareheim publicly refers to her as his “ex-wife” or “goddess wife” in a kind of ongoing performance piece in itself—the two were never actually married), designed the label for the Old Vines Carignan, which features an illustration of a woman’s buttocks—“she plays with a lot of ideas in consumerism and feminism,” says Wareheim of his friend. Others who have created labels for Las Jaras include Duke Aber, who also designed many of the Daliesque *Tim & Eric* show’s billboards, and the artist Jen Stark, whose three-dimensional, rainbow-hued works are world famous. One of Stark’s characteristic, ultra-modern designs seems to spin around and through the Las Jaras 2016 Petillant Wine bottle. In other words, the Las Jaras labels all scream the Wareheim you know and love.





Unlike most celebrities who dabble in wine production, or are tangentially associated with a brand (ever try Madonna's 2005 Chardonnay?), Wareheim is fairly hands-on. Although you probably won't see him crushing grapes or driving a tractor in vineyards in Napa, he is directly involved in marketing and selling the wine, while Burt handles the production. After the two met (in true Hollywood style, at a beach party), Wareheim had to convince Burt to take him on, telling him: "I'm not just a comedian, I'm a cultured individual!" Wareheim's Instagram feed is flooded with photos and posts about Las Jaras. Besides letting his fans know where to find the wine, he's something of a digital sommelier, with recommendations about what to pair with each bottle—he suggests Charbono with pizza, for example, and which bottle is best for orgies (Sweet Berry Wine).

Wareheim has hosted Las Jaras tastings at wine shops in New York, where the natural wine community is seemingly much larger than that in Los Angeles. He also recently collaborated with three well-respected, super-trendy restaurants in LA—Animal, Elf and Orsa & Winston, the last of which is part of a small group of restaurants run by the celebrated chef Josef Centeno—for a series of wine dinners featuring Las Jaras (the brand also appears on each of the restaurants' regular wine lists). Genevieve Hardison, director of operations for all of Centeno's restaurants, and who also oversees several of their wine programmes told me, "We are dedicated to serving the best things. We didn't put the Las Jaras wines on our list because they're Eric Wareheim's wines. We put the wines on because we like them."

And certainly, it's no coincidence that some of Los Angeles' top sommeliers and chefs offer Las Jaras wines. Wareheim is part of a growing, loosely connected group of natural wine enthusiasts that originated mainly in France but which has spread around the world, everywhere from Georgia (the country) to Australia (often known for its mainstream, commercial wines). Natural wines have a reputation for being a bit funky, owing to their lack of additives and chemical manipulation, but, according to Wareheim, "It's really about being super food-friendly." Some of the hottest restaurants in the world—like the newly opened Frenchette in New York City—are moving the needle away from the establishment and presenting lists entirely devoted to natural wines. Effortlessly cool spots like Septime in Paris, The Four Horsemen in Brooklyn (owned by LCD Soundsystem's James Murphy and featured on *Master of None*), or the Thai restaurant Night + Market Song ("the wine is unbelievable," says Wareheim), on a hipster-friendly stretch of Sunset Boulevard in Silver Lake, are also enamoured of natural wine, and favourites among devotees of the stuff. Still, the natural wine movement is relatively small—there's only one natural wine bar in LA: Bar Bandini. It's no surprise that Wareheim calls it "the coolest bar in LA".

Although the parallel between the unconventional, anti-establishment appeal of natural wine and Wareheim's own brand of absurdist, Dada-inspired comedy seems, well, natural, Wareheim is adamant that the two are not mutually influential. "It's two different things," he told me. I asked Helen Johannesen, who, as director of operations and beverage director for a small group of hip LA restaurants run by young chefs Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo, including Animal, has known Wareheim for years, her opinion on Las Jaras. "It's rad," says Johannesen who owns a carefully curated wine shop located in the back of LA hotspot Jon & Vinny's, where Las Jaras wines are sold. I also asked her whether she sees Wareheim's deliberate approach to art and comedy infused in his passion for wine and his budding business. In response she recalled the recent dinner she and Wareheim collaborated on: "He's an artist, clearly, but it wasn't like he was laying on tables in an inflatable pool toy, drinking wine from the bottle." It's an image that wouldn't be out of place in Wareheim's Instagram feed or in one of his television shows. At one point Wareheim told me: "I try to focus on more artistic visions." He was describing his forthcoming film and television projects, but it seems with anything in which he is involved, that much is crystal clear.