

THE DAILY BEAST



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PINKWASHING

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How These Booze Makers Co-Opted the Pink Ribbon

The link between alcohol and breast cancer is well established, but that won't stop the booze industry from slapping a coat of pink on its product and profiting from breast cancer awareness.

Leaves turning orange and products turning pink are the two surest signs that October is here.

Every [National Breast Cancer Awareness Month](#), countless companies put [a coat of pink](#) on their products and donate a portion of their proceeds to breast cancer charities. But when companies fund-raise with goods that are potentially linked to cancer itself, organizations like [Breast Cancer Action](#) take notice and dub the practice “pinkwashing”—a term that has been used for everything from [pink buckets of Kentucky Fried Chicken](#) to [pink Baker Hughes fracking drill bits](#).

Now, add alcohol to that list.

[Pinkwashing critics](#) have called on alcohol companies to reconsider their breast cancer campaigns since at least 2010 but [a new report](#) from the watchdog group Alcohol Justice—tied to [an October article](#) in the journal *Addiction*—points out that several companies are still raising money for breast cancer organizations using alcohol, despite longstanding criticisms.

The largest among them, Mike's Hard Lemonade, has sold a limited pink edition and donated \$1 million to the Breast Cancer Research Foundation ([BCRF](#)) since 2009, according to the *Addiction* report.

A range of smaller breweries and wineries are also running breast cancer campaigns. [Sutter Home](#), for example, has announced that it will donate \$1 to the National Breast Cancer Foundation for every “wine selfie” posted on a Twitter hashtag.

We're donating \$1 to [@NBCF](#) for each Sutter Home wine selfie received using [#sutterhomeforhope](#) <http://t.co/j7y0eYitfN> pic.twitter.com/d7KdIJokg7

— Sutter Home Wines (@SutterHome) [October 1, 2015](#)

The [Free Will Brewing Company](#) in Pennsylvania has sold a special pink saison (pale ale) since October 2013 and claims to have raised [over \\$20,000](#) for breast cancer research. This month, according to the brewery's [Facebook page](#), they are pouring their Saison de Rose at several events in the Philadelphia area, including one called “Boozin’ for Boobies.”

But boozin’ is not all that great for boobies.

The positive correlation between alcohol consumption and breast cancer risk is well-established.

According to the American Cancer Society ([ACS](#)), women who consume two to five drinks per day have “about 1½ times risk” as women who abstain from alcohol altogether. And although the ACS website notes that “women who consume one alcoholic drink a day have a very small increase in risk,” a [new study](#) in the *British Medical Journal* analyzed health data from nearly 90,000 women that had been collected over 30 years and found that even a single glass of wine per day significantly increased breast cancer risk.

The National Cancer Institute ([NCI](#)) estimates that 3.5 percent of all cancer deaths were alcohol-related in 2009 and recent research suggests this figure is much higher for breast cancer deaths. A [2013 study](#) in the *American Journal of Public Health* found that 15 percent of all breast cancer deaths in the U.S.—or 6,000 annually—were attributable to alcohol.

Sarah Mart, the director of research for Alcohol Justice and co-author of the *Addiction* article, believes that selling alcohol in the name of curing breast cancer is almost a mockery of those who suffer from it.

She told *The Daily Beast*, “The idea of buying alcohol to ‘fight’ breast cancer exploits the courage, the strength, and the experiences of those who fight this disease—they deserve better than to be used as marketing materials for pink drinks.”

The *Daily Beast* reached out to the alcohol companies, charities, and health-care providers named in the *Addiction* report to ask how they would respond to accusations of pinkwashing. The alcohol companies who replied cited moderation, consumer choice, and their donations themselves as proof that pink drinks were an appropriate choice for October.

Trinchero Family Estates, which owns Sutter Home, told *The Daily Beast* that their campaign began when their late founder received a breast cancer diagnosis in 2001 and that the [Sutter Home for Hope](#) program has since raised nearly \$1 million.

“Everyone is affected by breast cancer and we believe there is hope that a cure can be found with the collective help of corporations and consumers across all industries,” a spokesperson told The Daily Beast.

Tom Kehoe, president of the [Yards Brewing Company](#) (YBC), which makes the [seasonal berry ale PYNK](#), told The Daily Beast, “As with all our products, we believe they are best enjoyed in moderation. It is up to the consumer to make decisions about the health benefits of consuming our products. What we can keep doing is making great beer and giving back to the communities that sustain us.”

Kehoe cited the company’s other charitable initiatives and the money that YBC has raised for the [Tyanna Foundation](#)—over \$18,000—as proof that it is genuine in its efforts. The [PYNK webpage](#) promises that “when you drink PYNK, you are helping us do more good.”

Among its many cause-related products, winemaker ONEHOPE sells [a bottle](#) of California chardonnay to “Fight Against Breast Cancer.” The online order page for the wine notes that “one in eight women in the U.S. will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime”—a statistic that is fueled, in part, by alcohol.

A spokesperson for ONEHOPE told The Daily Beast that its California chardonnay “isn’t a trend or [a] marketing gimmick” but rather “part of our company’s mission as a cause-centric business to make a positive impact with every bottle, every day of the year.” The company says they have donated nearly 1,000 clinical trials to women with breast cancer.

Keryl Pesce, founder of [Happy Bitch Wines](#), provided The Daily Beast with a lengthy response to Alcohol Justice’s report, which criticized her company for tying sales of its pink chardonnay to breast cancer research. Alcohol Justice’s position, Pesce said, “makes several assumptions and doesn’t take into account the complete picture of the effect of alcohol consumption on overall health.”

Alcohol consumption is down since the 1970s while breast cancer rates are up, Pesce noted. But this juxtaposition says little. The first claim about declining alcohol use is true but the second statistic is misleading: Breast cancer incidence rates increased in the 20th century but they have [remained level](#) among women from 2002 to 2011 and breast cancer deaths have been [on the decline](#) for decades.

Pesce went on to acknowledge the link between alcohol and breast cancer but cited a [1996 paper](#) from a doctor affiliated with the American Heart Association (AHA) as evidence that moderate alcohol use can reduce the risk of coronary heart disease by 30 to 50 percent.

“Heart disease is by far a bigger killer of women than breast cancer and is, in fact, the number one killer of women,” she said. “So like everything else in life, it’s a question of balancing risks.”

The [AHA website](#), however, reviews the current research on alcohol’s supposed cardiovascular benefits and concludes: “How alcohol or wine affects cardiovascular risk merits further research, but right now the American Heart Association does not recommend drinking wine or any other form of alcohol to gain these potential benefits.”

Many of the claimed positive cardiovascular effects of alcohol consumption, the AHA notes, can be derived from consuming fruits and vegetables—“including red grape juice”—or by participating in “regular physical activity.”

“There is no scientific proof that drinking wine or any other alcoholic beverage can replace these conventional measures,” the AHA states.

Lastly, Pesce took issue with Alcohol Justice’s recommendation that pink alcohol campaigns should be [regulated and restricted](#), saying that this “would limit the amount of money donated to valuable research and patient support services.”

And therein seems to lie the heart of the pinkwashing debate: Alcohol companies see the dollar amounts donated as a bottom-line good whereas Alcohol Justice and other critics see pink alcohol campaigns as a matter of public health.

“Promoting drinking contributes to breast cancer risk and negative outcomes for women undergoing treatment for breast cancer, even if the drinks are colored pink and wrapped in a big pink ribbon,” Mart told The Daily Beast.

In a phone interview, Karuna Jaggar, executive director of Breast Cancer Action (BCA), added, “If [companies] really care about breast cancer, if they really want to make a difference for women living with that risk of breast cancer, they shouldn’t just be putting a pink ribbon on their products and saying to the public, ‘We care.’ They should be looking at their business model and asking what they can do to reduce the risk of breast cancer and breast cancer deaths.”

This October, BCA is campaigning against the [Look Good Feel Better](#) initiative, which gives cosmetics with controversial ingredients to breast cancer patients, but Jaggar says she is concerned about “pinkwashing” across all industries, alcohol included.

But if alcohol companies are seen as hypocritical for fundraising with alcohol, what should charities and health-care providers do when presented with their donations or their requests for partnership?

According to Mart, “We’d also like to see breast cancer charities refuse marketing and sponsorship agreements that promote alcohol brands and/or consumption,” she said.

The *Addiction* article argues that U.S. charities should follow the example of the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation (CBCF) and refuse partnerships with alcohol companies as a matter of official policy.

The CBCF’s [statement on alcohol](#) also presents a stark contrast to, say, [Susan G. Komen’s resource](#) on the subject. The former notes that the “health risks [of alcohol] outweigh minor benefits for heart health”—a stance similar in tone to the American Heart Association’s resource—whereas the U.S.-based Komen maintains that “drinking low to moderate amounts of alcohol ... may lower the risks of heart disease, high blood pressure, and death.”

The charities and health-care providers named in the *Addiction* report vary in their approach to the question of pink alcohol. Several told The Daily Beast they were grateful for donations from brewers and winemakers while acknowledging no formal partnership with them.

A spokesperson for the Breast Cancer Research Foundation ([BCRF](#)), which receives donations from Mike's Hard Lemonade, told The Daily Beast that they honor the company's reasons for giving—an employee died from the disease—and added that they “do not have an agreement connected to the sales of product.”

The Lehigh Valley Health Network (LVHN) in Pennsylvania benefits from Weyerbacher Brewing Company's sale of the Belgian-style ale Althea, which the brewery [calls](#) “a unique and delicious way for beer lovers to support women in their fight against breast cancer.”

A spokesperson for LVHN acknowledged the brewery's donations and cited positive examples of how they have been put to use. The two have no formal partnership, however. When asked about the Alcohol Justice report, the spokesperson stressed moderation.

A spokesperson for [Penn Medicine](#), which accepts money from Free Will Brewing Company's sales of Saison de Rose, told The Daily Beast, “These welcome funds are used to raise awareness about breast cancer and improve access to prevention, detection, and treatments for the disease.”

But some charitable organizations appear to be more brazen about their associations with booze.

The Tyanna Foundation, which did not respond to The Daily Beast's request for comment, has no less than [five events](#) involving PYNK on their calendar for National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. On Facebook, the foundation announced [partnerships](#) with restaurants serving PYNK specials and even a burger with onions that have been marinated in the ale.

And the [Save the Ta-tas Foundation](#), which has attracted [controversy](#) in the past for its use of sexualized messaging, provided a statement to The Daily Beast that explicitly calls out other charities for not accepting donations from alcohol companies.

Save the Ta-tas accepts donations from [RELAX Wines](#), which is running a Twitter campaign centered on their brand to raise donations.

Show your support for [@savethetatas](#) & use [#RELAX4TaTas](#). We'll donate \$1 for each tweet using the hashtag.

— RELAX Wines (@relaxwines) [October 5, 2015](#)

Save the Ta-tas president Julia Fiske said: “Save the Ta-tas Foundation will gladly accept donations from a person or company willing to donate monies to fund research to stop cancer. We use donations to fund independent, groundbreaking cancer research. Other breast cancer organizations will not accept these funds for fear of bad press, however Save the Ta-tas Foundation does not want these precious dollars to go unused in the fight against cancer.”

But to pinkwashing critics, avoiding alcohol promotion in the fight against breast cancer doesn't seem to be a case of dodging bad press—it's a matter of not pouring, well, alcohol on a fire with the hope of extinguishing it.