

## MEANS AND MATTERS PODCAST

**EPISODE TITLE:** Earthy, with Notes of Sustainability: A Wine CEO's B Corp Story

**GUEST:** Amy Prosenjak, CEO of A To Z Wineworks

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**Amy Prosenjak:** *[00:00:02]* The main part of our supply chain of how you produce wine is your grapes. So when we are recognized for being the best in environment, that's really about how we treat the land, what we do. And one of our taglines that A to Z is always leave a place better than you found it. Kind of what your mom used to teach you. It's like clean up after yourself, you know, make the room tidier than it was when you first arrived. And we tried to do that in a holistic view of farming”

**Leah Thomas:** *[00:00:34]* Hi! And welcome to the Means and Matters podcast, presented by Bank of the West. I'm Leah Thomas, environmental advocate, creator of Intersectional Environmentalist, writer, Bank of the West ambassador and your host.

My guest today is Amy Prosenjak, CEO of A to Z Wineworks located in the Willamette Valley of Oregon. Working with more than 100 vineyards across the state, A to Z uses biodynamic or organic principles to farm all their owned or long-leased vineyards. They produce 375,000 cases of wine each year making them one of the largest wineries in Oregon. In 2014, A to Z became the first B Corp certified winery – in the world. 7 years later, they are still only 1 of about 30 wineries worldwide that have undergone the rigorous certification process.

As someone who lives in California, I get that wine is a big business. Here, there are over 630,000 acres devoted to growing grapes that generates 43 Billion-billion, yes billion with a b-dollars worth of retail value in the United States. So, I was really interested in a business that is holding themselves to a higher, certifiable standard. When A to Z makes a business choice, they don't just consider their “bottom line.” They have to consider the impact of their decisions on the environment, their workers and their community.

I enjoyed talking with Amy for her down to earth approach to managing a business that, at its root is farming, and has to deal with unpredictable things like weather, and how they are striving to find ways to do business that lessens the environmental impact.

**[Music]**

**Leah Thomas:** *[00:02:37]* Hi Amy! When I think of wine, I have this image in my head of a winery that's surrounded by all these lush vineyards. I'm curious about your time with A to Z Wineworks over the last 15 years. Can you tell me your story and how you went from studying

accounting at Ohio Wesleyan University to being CEO of the world's first certified b corporation winery?

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:03:02] The way I got here from my alma mater, Ohio Wesleyan, which I love in Delaware, Ohio is saying yes. Saying yes to taking some chances, to opportunities in my professional life that I maybe didn't have all the answers to when I said yes. I maybe didn't think through exactly everything that I should have when I said yes. My first job out of college was in accounts payable at the Limited Corporation there in Columbus, Ohio. And that opportunity really catapulted me within the Limited to learn and have lots of different positions over the seven years that I worked there.

I didn't want to live in Ohio my whole life. I was interested in taking some sort of adventure and I liked wine personally. My husband and I had traveled to Napa, we had gone to Italy. We had traded in our kegerator full of beer from college days to a wine fridge. We were much more sophisticated then, I'm sure.

And so my husband started looking for jobs in the wine business for himself. And finally he came back and he said, I found this website called WineJobs.com. And I think you should apply for a job in wine. I said, well, who's going to hire me? All I know about wine is that I really enjoy it.

I sent my resume on a whim to A to Z. And one of the owners, Bill Hatcher, called me the next day and he said, 'so you understand cost accounting?' I said, well, yeah, I'm the director of inventory control for a billion dollar furniture company. I kind of understand cost accounting. Yes. And he said, well, I can teach you wine. And I flew out to Oregon to interview and we just really just shook hands at the airport. We had a really interesting day talking. It's been a great opportunity. And I just love both of the families that own A to Z that I now run for them. I've been president for about eight years and then CEO for about two and a half years.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:04:49] I'm curious to know more about A to Z being a B corporation. While more companies are going through the certification process, it's certainly not easy to achieve. Can you walk me through some of the B Corp related milestones or requirements that the business has achieved or had to go through?

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:05:06] The B Corp certification is not easy, that is for sure. It takes a lot of effort. You have to practice what you're preaching for sure. You can't just say you have this great employee handbook that has all these documented benefits. You have to submit the handbook and then you have to fill out the roster by person and then you have to show what your percentage pay is for all the different levels. You have to talk about what kind of training you do for different departments. You have to prove your benefits package and submit all your documentation.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:05:33]. So, Thinking about other aspects of how your business operates – sustainability has always been a core tenant. It was part of the ethos that Deb and Bill Hatcher

brought when they founded A to Z in 2002. Do you think that's a necessary condition for a company to go down the B Corp. path?

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:05:50] I don't know if it's a necessary condition, but it sure made it a really easy decision. When we looked into it in 2014 and I started looking at the very rigorous kind of sixty five page questionnaire that you have to fill out, I thought, well, this will take some time to do, but we actually already have these kinds of benefits for our employees. We're actually already doing all this work in the community. We're doing all these great things in the environment based on how we treat our vineyards and our facility. So it just was a matter of work to get certified. And once we did, it was fun to kind of wave that flag to other wineries and say, come and join us.

It's a third party stamp of approval on your business practices and it's a nice way to be able to talk about it in a situation like this, rather than just bragging about ourselves like, oh, we have this great vacation or volunteer time off policy. You can talk about it in the framework of B corp. And it's a real thing because you have to change your legal language with all of your stakeholders and your stockholders through your company. You have to change your language of your operating agreement. So it has teeth, so it's for real. So that's why we liked it.

It's great that the founders all believe in that and we're practicing all of that already. And that's really just the culture and ethos of A to Z. And we now have a way to talk about it. So at every monthly staff meeting at A to Z, we have a B Corp moment, right? We talk about something that we're doing that falls within that B Corp tenant. We're really focused on reducing our water consumption this year in the winery. And so all different departments are measuring it, tracking it, talking about it. And hey, by the way, that will improve our B Corp score next time we certify.

**[Music]**

**Leah Thomas:** After a short break, we'll dive into what it means to be a B Corp, planning for climate change and the heat dome. Stay with us.

**[MIDROLL]**

**[Music interlude]**

**Leah Thomas:** [00:07:59] So can we talk about the weather, 115 degrees this summer in Oregon's Willamette Valley. As someone who cares for our planet and lives there, what do temperatures like this mean to you?

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:08:12] There's a lot of answers to that question. I mean, as far as the actual week where it was 115 degrees, it was an interesting time for that to happen for the grapes, because we still had a lot of leaf protection. And all of our sites seem to have fared pretty well during that time. You know, if that heat comes back at that rate, right at harvest time, we could have different sorts of problems that come up then, because at that point you've probably done a lot of leaf thinning and pulling. If that heat comes back at that time, we could have something else happen. If we have hail at that time, if we have rain, if we have, you know,

any sort of those weather events can affect the grapes in different ways. It's one of the reasons we have viticulturists on staff at A to Z, and their job is to constantly be traveling throughout the state, visiting all of our vineyard sites and working with our growers to protect the grapes so that we can make the best quality wine. I mean, our main concern is, of course, for the people that are affected by all of this, that are working in these or have to work in these conditions and then, of course, for the grapes. So there's a lot to think about with the weather for sure when you are a farmer. And that's what we are.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:09:25] Absolutely. And what are some of the steps that A to Z Wineworks is taking in the face of a changing climate, is there anything that you all are actively preparing for or developing some sort of strategy to be able to tackle?

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:09:38] We are. We're trying to think of things from all sorts of angles. We have a deposit down on an electric tractor that is supposed to come in next year. We are doing things like considering harvesting and we do this – we harvest at night time. So for the vineyards that we mechanically harvest fruit, we run those machines, you know, at 2:00 in the morning when it's the coolest, it's better for the grapes, it's better for the people. These big tractors have big headlights. We are trying to make sure that we have break rooms and improve all the conditions for those that do have to work outside.

And last year when we had fires in the whole state of Oregon, including the Willamette Valley, we stopped processing during harvest for a few days, which is almost unheard of. The air quality was too dangerous for our folks to be outside. So, yes, lots of things to consider and work on both in the right now and towards the future.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:10:44] So you talked about this a little bit earlier when you were talking about climate preparedness. Farm worker rights are a big topic in the wine industry. How does A to Z Wineworks support farm workers and other workers throughout its supply chain?

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:10:59] We do a couple of different things. Not only do we support our small team of a vineyard group that works directly for A to Z for some of the properties that we own and operate, we also support a couple of different organizations. There's one that's kind of near and dear to my heart, which is Virginia Garcia Memorial Foundation. And they operate health care centers that are providing culturally appropriate health care to agricultural and seasonal farm workers.

We support the Hispanic Chamber in Portland and they run a year long leadership program where they are supporting and encouraging LatinX population to get involved in their community, from a professional point of view.

We support Causa, which is the Know Your Rights campaign group here in Oregon. I mean, when a new employee joins A to Z, they get a little card that goes in your wallet that reminds them what your rights are in the state here in Oregon and what you have to say or what you don't have to say. It's pretty important to us to support all the different initiatives. It's where we put a lot of our time, money and effort towards supporting these causes

**Leah Thomas:** [00:12:04] I'm wondering if you think that being a B corp gives you an advantage for retaining employees or forging new relationships with other businesses?

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:12:13] I definitely think it's a way to attract talent and retain talent, which is a really important thing to do. I think it's a way to separate ourselves when you look at a wine shelf, and I think it's a way for consumers that care about such things to have a way to categorize things.

I mean, when we first became a B Corp, New Seasons here in Oregon is a local grocery or a regional grocery chain, that's also a Bcorp. And I walk into New Seasons one weekend to do some shopping. And here they have this whole end cap of B Corp products. Normally you're kind of negotiating and paying for an end cap in a grocery aisle. And here they put it together themselves because that company believes in B Corp companies.

We've done some like minded promos with another winery called Fetzer that's also a B corp. And that's OK. There's room for all of us from a competitive point of view. Let the consumer decide what wine they like better. So I think that collaboration with the B Corps and fellow B corps is a really cool collaborative group to be a part of.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:13:16] I've always believed in collaboration over competition, any day. So A to Z has been recognized for multiple years as being a Best for the World B Corp in environment. And you received that honor again in 2021. Congratulations.

**Amy Prosenjak:**[00:13:32] Thank you.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:13:33] I know you talked about this earlier, but if there's anything else, especially if there's, you know, a fun fact that the consumers might not know, feel free to share.

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:13:42] Thanks for that recognition. That really is about us working with our growers. So the main part of our supply chain of how you produce wine is your grapes. So when we are recognized for being the best in an environment, that's really about how we treat the land, what we do. And one of our taglines that A to Z is always leave a place better than you found it. Kind of what your mom used to teach you. It's like clean up after yourself, you know, make the room tidier than it was when you first arrived.

And we try to do that in a holistic view of farming. And so we try to operate by some sort of standard. Sometimes it's organic, sometimes it's biodynamic, or sometimes it's LIVE standards, which stands for Low Input Viticulture and Enology. And it's really about only giving the land what it needs so that you can get the highest quality fruit from those grape vines.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:14:37] So there's much more to the business of winemaking than growing grapes. By some estimates, most of the environmental harm a company does comes from its supply chain, which includes things like bottling, packaging and distribution. What are some of the vital components of A to Z's supply chain and how do you make it more sustainable than a traditional winemaking supply chain?

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:15:01] The supply chain of producing wine is kind of one thing, and the supply chain or the logistics supply chain of distributing wine is kind of another piece of this that is a bigger drain on the environmental concerns. So when you think of wine being in that glass bottle, it's pretty heavy. So you get a case of that with 12 bottles and then you get a pallet of that, which is fifty six cases, and then you fill up a big semi truck of all of this wine to distribute across the country. It's pretty heavy. And so that distribution model is something that we haven't cracked the code on yet of how to do a better job. We're doing things like buying wind power credits to try to offset some of this effect that we're having on the environment. But we haven't figured out a different way yet to distribute this.

You know, it's this hundreds of years old tradition of having wine in glass bottles. And so although lots of alternative packaging options have been introduced into the marketplace, they're all at very, relatively small scale. And so we're testing some of those alternative packaging as well. But I don't have an answer for that yet. That's definitely something that's on our mind of how we can do better in the supply chain.

We're doing lots of things, as I mentioned in the Vineyard. I mean, we have things like sprayers that recycle 90 percent of the spray so that it doesn't get wasted and that it gets recycled back into the component of what's getting sprayed on the next row. We are trying to do different things for sure in the winery where we're trying to be more efficient. One of our latest buildings we kind of built into the hillside so that we can not only use gravity flow and moving wine from different buildings underground so that it can get to the lower level where the bottling happens. You know, and also helps with some kind of traditional heating and cooling by being in the part of a hillside. So we're trying to do lots of those things.

You know, one of my favorite taglines, which is a B Corp tagline is, Measure What Matters. And if you don't measure the types of things that you're doing, it's really hard to improve them. So we try to set goals around that both in the vineyard and at the winery. And we need to do more work on that within our logistics supply chain to make sure that we're getting the healthiest and highest quality fruit, but also that we're having the least effect on the environment as we go.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:17:20] And on the supplier front, how do you help your suppliers meet your standards?

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:17:25] I think it's really about relationships. It really comes down to people. It has to come down to the relationships, how you communicate.

As far as supply chain, I mean, how glass is made isn't particularly environmentally friendly, depending on the age of the glass plant. I've seen all these glass plants here in the U.S. that are over 100 years old and we had made the choice several years ago to actually start buying our glass bottles for A to Z from Asia. So my colleague and I had the chance to go to China to see this glass plant. It was very environmentally friendly, wonderfully run, and lots of robotic equipment. The way their smokestack works off of their furnaces is that it's all tied to different standards of air quality. And when they hit the level that's not considered environmentally friendly, it shuts down automatically. And so, the things that they've been able to do through

technology really offset the kinds of things that were happening here in the plants that I had visited in the U.S.

But really that solution and the comfort that A to Z has from buying from that company was because our glass agent was willing to have that relationship with us. And we both invested time and money to make that trip to the plant.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:18:39] Wow, there's so many things that I hadn't thought about in running a business. What advice do you have for others that are trying to create a sustainable business?

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:18:47] To just get started, right? I mean, to really try to capture what you're already doing? Well, and then just start making a list of the types of things that you can improve. It can start small and then can grow from there.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:19:03] Before I let you go, this is the best and funnest part, I want to do my lightning round. Are you ready?

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:19:10] I'm ready. These are hard for me.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:19:12] So what advice would you give to your younger self?

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:19:15] Advice to my younger self? I'd say quality over quantity. I mean, that probably goes for wine. I don't know, books, friends, quality over quantity.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:19:26] What's one thing that you do to take care of yourself?

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:19:29] The main thing I do probably is read. I do that to recharge. I do it to learn. I do it to fall asleep. Tune out the world. Get ideas. Read.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:19:40] What's the best advice that you've ever received from a mentor?

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:19:44] Know your value. It's OK to say no to things. It has to be right. So know your value.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:19:50] What's a book currently on your nightstand table or your favorite, go to book.

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:19:56] I just have to pick one. Is that what you're telling me? I don't know if I can pick one book.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:20:01] Maybe like two.

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:20:02] Well, I don't know if it's my favorite, but our leadership group actually read this book called Anti-Fragile in 2019, which is about how complex, interdependent globalization of things hit you. And you don't expect it. Could be big consequential event – hello COVID. So I've been referring back to that book a lot throughout these last kind of 15, 17 months. So I'll say Anti-Fragile.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:20:30] And what's a gadget or device that you can't live without?

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:20:35] I would say probably self checkout. I'm a fan of the self checkout at the library, at the grocery store. And even if they have Apple Pay even better, you don't have to get your wallet out. You just pass your phone by. So I'll say self checkout.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:20:47] I completely agree. I don't know if it's my anxiety or what, but the self checkout is like, amazing.

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:20:55] You're just in control, I guess. If it goes well, yay for you. If it goes terribly and you, you know, you spill the veggie tray at the self checkout, it's your own problem.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:21:04] It's probably like type A personality that I have.

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:21:07] Absolutely.

**Leah Thomas:** [00:21:08] Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. I really appreciate our conversation and learning about the world of wine. There's so much that I want to know. And you've definitely given me an excuse to check out the wineries not too far from me in California, and hopefully I'll make it up to Oregon at some point. But thank you so much, thank you for joining us today.

**Amy Prosenjak:** [00:21:29] Thanks, Leah.

**[Music]**

**Leah Thomas:** [00:21:31] To find out more about Amy and the other women that we are profiling on our show, visit [meansandmatters.com/podcast](https://meansandmatters.com/podcast)

Special thanks to Hallowed Halls in Portland, Oregon for providing the recording space.

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Thanks for listening.