

LIFE & CULTURE



Tessa York has cultivated a reputation as Philly's foremost matchbook aficionado. She features photos of boxes from spots like Center City wine bar Superfolie and books from Queen Village restaurant Cry Baby on her Instagram account, Meet Your Matches, where she documents matches from Philadelphia and beyond to her more than 8,300 followers. Tessa York / For The Inquirer

Philly matchbooks: A striking trend returns

By Emily Bloch
Staff Writer

Tessa York has cultivated a reputation as Philly's foremost matchbook aficionado.

She features photos of matchboxes from spots like Center City wine bar Superfolie and matchbooks from Queen Village restaurant Cry Baby on her Instagram account, Meet Your Matches, where she documents matches from Philadelphia and beyond to her more than 8,300 followers. She'll post lists of Philly spots offering matches at the moment — though it's nearly impossible to have an exhaustive list because inventory and availability change so often.

Her guides are met with hundreds of interactions from locals crowdsourcing where else to find them and trading advice. She's since launched a merch line with mugs that have illustrations of local matchbooks.

"Matches are having a moment and I'm loving it," York said. "I've noticed a handful of restaurants that, just a year ago when I was

first exploring Philly, did not have matches and now they do."

Souvenir matchbooks are experiencing a resurgence thanks to a mix of local collectors, independent artists, and social media creators dedicated to the craft.

Content creators on TikTok document their "matchbook hunts," show off their home collections, and showcase custom versions they've designed for when friends come over. On Etsy, hundreds of artists sell illustrations and photographs of flat lays of both real and fictional matchbooks that customers display to commemorate significant locations in their lives.

"I think it's one of those small things people can style on their coffee table and make into a conversation piece," said Katie Nist, owner of Old City's Elektra Vintage. Nist recently had a run of custom matchbooks made for her store. "It's kind of like getting a postcard from a destination. But they're also more useful than a postcard."

Other local businesses, like marketing firm Punch Media, use custom matchbooks in lieu of business cards.

"We thought it would be a fun keepsake," Punch Media CEO and

founder James Zeleniak said. "The matches help tell our brand story by serving as a touchpoint. We put them in goody bags and have a jar of them in the office for folks to take."

Punch's matchbooks feature an image of Zeleniak's great-grandfather, Grampa Yarosh, a Pennsylvania coal miner who emigrated from Poland and was noted boxer in the 1920s.

York may be the most well-known local matchbook chronicler, but she certainly wasn't the first. For 20 years, Matchbook Traveler has hosted lists of crowdsourced matchbook spots across the country. The Philly list is periodically updated to note when spots no longer offer matches and highlight newer spots like Meetinghouse in Kensington.

Still, Philly matchbook collectors are turning to York, 37, for guidance on beefing up their own collections.

York was a fashion buyer and merchandiser for brands like Nike and Kate Spade before going full-time with Meet Your Matches. She started collecting matches as an inexpensive way to document the places she'd traveled.

Over the years, York has showcased matchbooks from places

she's lived, including San Francisco and Manhattan. About two years ago, she and her husband moved to Washington Square West.

After her move, York quickly discovered Philadelphia was a hotbed for collectors like herself.

Some participating venues, like McGillin's Olde Ale House, have made matchbooks for years, dating each one.

Newer spots, like My Loup — chef power couple Amanda Shulman and Alex Kemp's critically acclaimed space — also recognize the interest.

"The matchbooks are by far our most requested take-home item," Kemp said. My Loup's matchbooks feature an illustration of the restaurant's mascot, the couple's mini dachshund Tootsie Marie. "We loved the idea of guests taking home their own little piece of Tootsie." The restaurant's matchbooks were designed by Kemp and Shulman's friend, artist Massimo Mongiardo.

Restaurateurs say that the newfound interest in a longtime practice may be driven by factors including the void left by the lack of restaurant dining during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well

as chronically online audiences looking for nostalgic, analog relics, like film cameras and vinyl.

York suspects social media has also played a large role in current matchbook collecting.

"There's an element of showing off your experiences," she said. "Matchbooks on a coffee table from different places tell a story about the person and how they spend their time."

Beyond shops and eateries, York's local collection also spans sports teams (including the Phillies and Eagles, naturally), golf courses, hotels, fashion brands, and colleges.

"I think it all goes back to nostalgia, memories, the things that really matter," she said. "It's amazing that this small object has the power to evoke such strong feelings."

She added, "the sentimental value assigned to each matchbook is compelling. I often hear things like 'This is where my partner and I had our first date,' 'This place was my local bar in my 20s,' or 'My dad and I used to go here together when I was a kid.' It can be really moving."

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Philly sound

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talent here. It's great to see people getting their shine and I'm blessed to play a small part."

As an audio engineer and producer, Thomas is partly a curator and a connector. He has linked the city's biggest artists and helped craft their solo or collaborative projects. And through his work with Uzi and other local artists, he has turned the once-regional Jersey club sound into one also helmed by Philly artists, and opened doors for emerging musical talents.

In the years of knowing Thomas, Def Jam signee Friday said Thomas has always made a way for Philly artists to flourish. "He's definitely gone outside the box with a lot of records in Philly," he said. But his work across different genres is what's elevated Thomas' profile.

Thomas, a New York native who moved to Philadelphia in 2009, attended Germantown Friends School and met now-mentor Brandon Jones, the school's then assistant athletics director and varsity basketball coach.

When Thomas majored in business at Temple, it was Jones who convinced him to change course and pursue music full-time. "When you combine passion and work ethic with a skill set like [Thomas'], the result is what you see today," Jones said.

After deferring a job offer from Deloitte, Thomas started a make-shift studio inside the basement of his mom's Mount Airy home. This



Sound engineer Ben Thomas working in his Philly studio. Chill Moody calls Thomas "one of the greatest producer-engineers of all time across all genres." Monica Herndon / Staff Photographer

is where artist Chill Moody began working with Thomas.

Never taking up that Deloitte offer, Thomas met Lil Uzi Vert through their manager and became his dedicated sound engineer for three and a half years.

He recently branched out to pursue audio mixing and songwriting, which has led to collaborations with the likes of Justin Bieber,

Bryson Tiller, Jazmine Sullivan, and Meek Mill. Or in other words, "the stuff that's getting the national attention, like the big stuff," as Moody puts it.

For Thomas, "It's just me planting a lot of seeds." He likes to think he is just "doing me, and that some of the stuff I'm doing is winning. But I also don't want to be complacent. It's important to get on the new

wave as it changes."

When DJ Don Cannon met Thomas through Uzi, he was immediately struck by how Thomas studied the business and evolved as an audio engineer. "He was never late and his ear was always tuned for today's work. It's something a lot of people would look past," the Generation Now label cofounder said. "And unlike most engineers and

producers, Thomas didn't smoke or drink; ... [he] used to watch *Jeopardy!* in his free time."

"This new phase of Philadelphia music has been brewing since 2015 or 2016," said Armani White, who shot to fame with his viral hit "Billie Eilish." "We've all been around each other, and in some way crossed paths, and [Thomas] has been in those rooms with a lot of different names."

As Thomas continues to perfect his craft and pursue songwriting ventures, he wants to put the same energy toward community service and engagement, especially for young students of color. Along with opening the doors of his Kensington recording studio to local artists, Thomas mentors young students who are a part of GettingtheMAX-outoflife, a community-based program ran by life coach and motivational speaker Maxwell Brown.

"I think he has qualities that will make him one of the greatest producer-engineers of all time across all genres," Moody proclaimed.

And while Thomas is happy to receive the recognition, and he's hopeful Uzi's name gets called on Grammy night, awards are not a source of motivation for him; it's community itself. "It's not a one-person show over here," he said. "There's a lot of support that allows me to shine, and I'm very thankful for everybody."

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