

Judging a Wine by What It Wears

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Illustration by Brian Stauffer for The Wall Street Journal



'A good wine label provokes a question,' says designer Madeleine Corson, who can spend as much as three years creating the right label for winery.

While readers are urged not to judge books by their covers (and are less likely to do so in this Kindle age), wine drinkers have long been expected to buy bottles precisely because of their labels. From the world-class artistry of Château Mouton to the marketing masterpiece that is Blue Nun, there are wines and wineries and even entire winemaking countries whose reputations have been earned, at least in part, on account of their labels. (And yes, that country is Australia, possibly home to more wine-label animals than the actual kind.)

The label is the first—and often the only—piece of information a potential buyer might have about a particular bottle, and possibly the best reason to make a purchase. No wonder there is enormous pressure on wineries and designers to get the label right. According to San Francisco-based designer Madeleine Corson, who creates labels for top Napa wineries like Spottswoode and Silver Oak, it can take her as long as three years and cost her clients as much as \$100,000 for a perfect piece of work.

Ms. Corson might spend months combing through her clients' files for details of their lives and their wineries, in a process she dubs "forensic." (Designing labels sounds a lot like working for the IRS.) Her goal is to create a label that represents the winery and its owners but also invites the curiosity of a buyer. "A good wine label provokes a question," she said.

I've certainly had my share of questions when looking at labels (often beginning with "What were they thinking?"), but good, bad or mediocre, wine labels are a source of fascination for me. I like looking at labels nearly as much as drinking wine. At its best, a label is a tangible expression of the wine's personality, the winemaker's point of view and the place where the wine was made. (And at its worst, it's little more than a marketing tool.)

Mollydooker, a top Australian winery, expresses the personality of its owners in extravagantly colored cartoons depicting boxers, dancers, violinists and carnival acts. The figures are eye-catching but also autobiographical; the violinist on the Mollydooker Verdelho label is winemaker Sarah Marquis, who once tried to play the violin; the dancer on the Two Left Feet Shiraz blend is her husband, Sparky. (Mollydooker means "left handed" in Aussie slang; the Marquises are both lefties.) Mr. Marquis said the labels are meant to convey that they don't take themselves too seriously.

Does Mr. Marquis worry that his labels might give buyers the impression his wines were also a bit of joke? "People know the quality when they taste the wine," Mr. Marquis replied with the equanimity of a man whose wines—some costing more than \$100 a bottle—have regularly been awarded top scores from critics. "Besides," he added, "when the bottle is poured it's not about the label anymore."

That's something his fellow Aussie producers might do well to remember. A few weeks ago, I was shopping at Varmax Liquors in Port Chester, N.Y. The Australian section was brighter than any other part of the store, practically glowing from all the neon labels on shelves. The effect was visual cacophony as each winery seemed intent on outdoing the others in eye-catching colors and designs—this wasn't whimsy, it was marketing gone wild.

Of course there are plenty of labels, like the 2010 Capture Sauvignon Blanc, that tell their story in quieter terms. I found both the wine and the label straightforward and well-made: a stylish typeface and two gold squiggles. Simple and elegant, or so I thought.

And yet, according to Capture's co-founder Tara Sharp, the label actually contains layers of meaning. The squiggles aren't squiggles at all, but representations of California gold miners, the vineyard's Pine Mountain location and the winery's three married couples (the squiggles are apparently their embracing forms). I looked to see if I could conjure all three, but could only make out the mountain and the miners; the embracing couple was invisible to me. Still, the multiple meanings made me want to retaste the wine.

For many buyers, of course, the most important bit of paper on the bottle is the one that comes from the pricing gun. Despite a boring label (black letters on plain white paper), the 2010 Florian Mollet Sancerre is quite popular at Varmax, according to Tracy Maxon, a buyer for the store: "After all, it's a \$16 Sancerre."

But how often are the label and the wine a true match? I decided to put the question to some wine-drinking friends, several of whom are graphic designers. This tasting was all about how the wine looked—and then how it tasted. The bottles I chose had all kinds of labels; their only commonality was that the wines were all good. Alas, the results were mixed, artistically speaking. Sometimes the labels were at one with the wines, sometimes the two seemed to have nothing in common. Only one wine—the 2002 André Clouet Millésimé Brut Champagne, with a flashy blue-and-gold label—had the complete and favorable consensus of the crowd. "Gorgeous!" said my friend Allison, a designer. For my part, I found the wine as rich and sumptuous as the label. (And, incidentally, a bit of an anomaly; most Champagne labels, like most Champagne houses, are quite conservative.)

The 2009 Occhipinti SP68, a Sicilian red, won raves for the wine (bright red fruit, good acidity, soft tannins), but the label was derided as ugly and the alphanumeric name was deemed "cheesy" (never mind it's the road that runs by the winemaker's house). Opinions about the 2009 Mollydooker The Boxer were mixed. "It looks like a beer label," said Joanie, another designer. But Allison and I agreed the 1940s-style cartoon of a boxer looked fun. The wine definitely matched its label; weighing in at 16% alcohol, it could take on just about anything.

Such dinner-party conversations aside, how much do labels matter when it comes to wine sales? At Crush Wine in Manhattan, buyer Joe Salamone said that customers didn't care about labels if the wine was sufficiently cheap (\$20 a bottle or less). In general, Mr. Salamone estimated that most people spend less than 45 seconds looking at labels.

Perhaps the worlds of wine and books are not so far apart. According to Ben Schrank, publisher of Razorbill, an imprint Penguin, a book's cover is important, especially for a new author, but a book never sells because of the cover alone. "Word of mouth is key," he said. And so it is with wine. For example, I know at least five people who will happily recommend a certain bottle of Sicilian wine with what they believe to be an ugly alphanumeric label—on account of the delicious wine inside.



2010 Capture Sauvignon Blanc Les Pionniers, \$40

Although the label of this Sonoma Sauvignon Blanc is fairly restrained, it actually contains multiple allusions to the winery and its owners. The wine, made from fruit grown on the steep shoulder of Pine Mountain, is elegant and medium-bodied with citrus notes in the nose and a fairly long finish. It's a lush Sancerre, rather than New Zealand-style Sauvignon Blanc.

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