

## Judging a wine by its label

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THERE THEY ARE on the shelves hundreds of bottles from all over the world. How do you choose? Country? Price? Quality? The picture of the bird on the label? You may scoff at the last, but the marketers say that we are more influenced by labels than we might like to think. The past few years have seen an upsurge in critter labels featuring dogs, birds, even turtles. The Australian Yellow Tail brand, with a kangaroo on the label, has had phenomenal success in the US, becoming its biggest-selling imported wine in 2005.

Marketing is a vital tool in the winemaker's kit. It's a brave producer nowadays who takes the view that the wine in the bottle should speak for itself and doesn't need any help from the packaging. Traditionally, German labels have been the most challenging, but many producers have dropped the Gothic lettering and are transforming their labels with simple, attractive designs, burying the legalities on the back label.

The label is very important, says Lynne Coyle, head of wine development at Gilbeys. The wine has to stand out on the shelf. People are not prepared to pay a premium price for a label that looks cheap, but neither do they want an inexpensive wine to have a cheap-looking label. It doesn't matter what the price is, people want quality.

What do we look for on a label? Most people want to know where the wine comes from and which grape varieties are in the bottle. For wines above table-wine level, EU regulations require labels to state the appellation, geographic origin, volume in the bottle, alcohol level, producer name and vintage but not grape variety. A red Bordeaux, for example, can contain Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, but, unless there is a back label, the consumer will have no idea which grapes are in the wine. The style will be different, depending on whether Merlot or Cabernet Sauvignon is the dominant variety and whether the wine is made from all four varieties or just two.

Which is where back labels come in. (Or should.) Many European producers miss the opportunity to explain to their customers what's in the bottle. Which grape variety? Is the wine dry? What kind of food does it go with? In so many cases there is no back label, no information, and perhaps no sale.

Coyle agrees that back labels are desirable, but points out that it's a costly business for small producers. New World producers take every opportunity to exploit back labels, sometimes with more information than we need, including family history, details of the vineyard, exact proportions of grapes, how the wine was made all bar the wage bill for the pickers.

But how straightforward is the label? If a wine says Cabernet Sauvignon on the label, doesn't that mean that it contains purely Cabernet Sauvignon grapes? Perhaps not. The legal minimum for wines from Australia, Chile, California, South Africa and New Zealand is 85 per cent, so a Cabernet Sauvignon could be blended with up to 15 per cent of something quite different.

It may be legal to add 15 per cent of, say, Shiraz to a Cabernet and label it Cabernet Sauvignon, but is it fair to the consumer? At least the rules in Europe are clear for example, wines from Burgundy and Alsace must consist 100 per cent of the named variety, while Chianti, Rioja and Châteauneuf-du-Pape are subject to strictly specified blends.

Different types of label are designed to appeal to different types of consumer. So-called critter and jokey labels are aimed mostly at the mass market. At the upper end, labels have to reflect the price paid for them, with heavy paper, imposing castles and tasteful typography. Wine is one of the few products that's consumed in its original packaging breakfast cereals being another and the bottle is often in full view when we're drinking it, so it's important that it sends the right message.

### WINES OF THE WEEK

This week's bottles of the week illustrate six different label styles.

#### Traditional German

Max Ferdinand Richter Brauneberger Juffer Riesling Kabinett Trocken 2007, 12%, EUR 18.95-EUR 19.95. Traditional label, but nothing old-fashioned about the wine. Brauneberger means that it's from the village of Brauneberg, Juffer is the name of vineyard, Riesling is the grape, Kabinett indicates the quality level and Trocken means dry it's all perfectly logical. The palate has apple and pear fruit with racy acidity and a layered, mineral finish. It's light-bodied and ideal as an aperitif but robust enough to cope with seafood or chicken. Stockists: The Corkscrew, Chatham Street, Dublin; Liston's, Camden Street, Dublin; Power Smullen, Lucan; Wicklow Wine Company.

#### Modern German

Lingenfelder Vineyard Creatures Hare Label Gewürztraminer 2005, 13.5%, EUR 14.99. Modern, eye-catching label. Aromatic, floral aromas of roses and lychees backed by a full-flavoured palate of spiced apples, pears and cloves. Perfect with mildly spiced Asian food. Stockists: Deveney's, Dundrum; Donnybrook Fair; Holland's, Bray; Jus de Vine, Portmarnock; Martin's, Fairview; World Wide Wines, Waterford.

#### Consumer-friendly from France

Bergerac Sec Ch. des Eyssards 2007, 13.5%, EUR 10.75. Combines a classic French label with a back label in English describing the wine style and giving suggestions for food matches. Dry, medium-bodied, zesty, refreshing wine with apple and citrus notes. Its fresh acidity makes it an ideal aperitif, but it would also be very good with lighter fish or chicken dishes. Stockist: Wines Direct ([www.winesdirect.ie](http://www.winesdirect.ie)).

#### Critters to the fore

MadFish Shiraz 2004, 14.5%, EUR 17.99.

The Aboriginal water turtle design symbolises perseverance and tolerance. Not much perseverance needed to enjoy the fleshy dark cherry and bramble fruit with peppery spice. Tannins are ripe and there is a nice twist of liquorice/coffee on the finish.

Stockists: Anderson's Food Hall, Glasnevin; Claudio's, Newtownmountkennedy, Co Wicklow; Egan's Food and Wine, Portlaoise; Fahy's, Ballina, Co Mayo; Morton's, Galway; O'Briens Off-Licences; Worldwide Wines, Waterford.

#### Reassuringly classic

Chianti Classico Badia a Coltibuono 2006, 13.5%, EUR 20-22. Badia a Coltibuono's thousand-year history of winemaking is reflected in the quintessentially traditional label: medieval castle, coat of arms. The wine is classic too. Made with Sangiovese and Canaiolo grapes, there are ripe black cherries with a touch of mocha on the palate; it's medium-bodied, with grainy tannins and excellent length. Terrific food wine for red meats or pasta with meat sauce.

Stockists: Donnybrook Fair; Drinkstore, Manor Street, Dublin 7; Gibney s, Malahide; Morton s, Ranelagh Galway; Wicklow Arms, Delgany, Co Wicklow; Wolfe s, Capel Street, D1.

Storybook

Setanta Black Sanglain Cabernet Sauvignon 2006, 14.5%, EUR 22.95. The Black Sanglain was the faithful horse that pulled Setanta s chariot. This is mature, elegant wine with cedar, mint and some leathery notes on the palate. It s full-bodied, with supple tannins and delicious mocha and loganberry fruit.

Stockists: The Coach House, Ballinteer; Daly s, Boyle; Gibney s, Malahide; The Gourmet Bank, Churchtown; Holland s, Bray; Jus de Vine, Portmarnock; The Kitchen Foodhall, Portlaoise; Martin s, Fairview; O Neill s, Carrickmacross; Silver Spoon, Castleknock; Sweeney s, Glasnevin.

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