



So many wines, so little time

Jane Faulkner investigates the role packaging has in our wine-buying decisions.

THE COOLEST wine label William Downie ever saw was on a commemorative crock wax-top half-bottle of Rutherglen muscat. The bottle was a tribute to a friend of his parents, and Australian artist Arthur Boyd had painted the picture that was superimposed on to the ceramic bottle. Not exactly modern but, then again, it was 1980 and Downie was only six years old. Still, he remembers vividly the impression that label made, especially when deciding on his own in 2003.

In recounting the story to his partner, Rachel Needoba, while driving through Italy after a vintage in Burgundy (he's a pinot noir nut), Downie said: "Wouldn't it be cool to get an artist relevant to us? Arthur's stuff is maybe for another generation. Reg Mombassa! I grew up with Mambo T-shirts. I think everything he did was awesome — the records (as a member of the band Mental As Anything, guitarist Mombassa designed several album covers) and

being a musician (Downie also plays guitar). There were all these nice connections."

Soon after returning to Australia, Downie and Needoba headed to Sydney to visit Mombassa's gallery, where the artist handed over an extensive folio, 10 years of design work. "He said pick what you want," Downie recalls. "I opened to the first image on the first page and said 'That's what I want'."

Serendipity, perhaps. Then Mombassa told the young winemaker that particular landscape painting was done at Arthur Boyd's place, Riversdale. It now adorns William Downie's Yarra Valley pinot noir, and only the picture features on the front — there's no writing. It's simple, modern, yet stylish and provocative. "The label is like a television screen or a window into the bottle, so you look in and see the Yarra Valley. That is the point of the wine," Downie says.

Downie, winner of the *Gourmet Traveller* young winemaker of the year award in 2006, believes the

wine is most important, but what surprised him was discovering the importance of looking good too. "Plenty of people say they love the package, love the label, and by the way, we like the wine."

It proves one thing: a label is a potent marketing tool. You need to stand out in a crowd, and an ever-expanding one at that. According to the *Wine Industry Directory*, 138 new wine companies were created in 2006, adding to the national total of 2146. In the past decade, there has been an average of 121 new wine producers emerge in Australia each year. Add that to the number of imported labels — well then, no wonder we're confused when we go to a bottle shop; there are tens of thousands of wines on offer. And all we want is a decent drop to have with dinner tonight.

Wine shelves in retail outlets resemble collages, with all those different bottle sizes and shapes, colours and design variations. In vying for the consumer's attention, a label can be anything from glitzy,



Winemaker William Downie (above) says a wine label is like a "window into the bottle". His pinot noir (left) is decorated by a painting by Reg Mombassa.

PICTURE: DAVID HANNAH



kitsch, classic, stylish or simple, to the truly appalling. Competition between brands has never been tougher. So how does a wine boldly state: choose me?

The answer is complicated, says Jody Tucker, of Tucker Creative, who runs one of Australia's leading wine-label design firms, with decades of experience in the wine industry. "Consumers are more aware and more educated about wine, and more experimental than consumers of the past," Tucker explains. "But there is also a need to have labels that do have some shelf presence, have an interest and stand out." It's about a subtle point of difference, he says.

As a designer, he says part of that process is to understand what the client wants and stands for, and be able to tell their story on the label. Also, it has to appeal to the target consumer. Clearly there's a lot more going on than just rudimentary design-school principles.

The wine industry is rather traditional and conservative, says Tucker. "While I respect traditions, I prefer stylish, simple graphic labels that have some sophistication and stand out."

He cites several newish labels impressive for their design, including Catalina Sounds from New Zealand,

Oakridge's second label, Over The Shoulder, and he cites Wynns as recognisable and classic. Of his own designs, he particularly admires Samuel's Gorge, a producer from McLaren Vale.

"The concept was essentially a representation of all the attributes that made up this wine and the winemaker. The idea was to represent that in a series of tiles or mosaics." The label is made from about a hundred photographs depicting some element of the winery, which were then placed together to create a single picture.

The label won a silver medal at the Australian Packaging awards last month for excellence in labelling. The gold medal went to a beer produced by wine company Knappstein.

Alex Doran, awards manager at Australia Packaging, says the gold medal for beverage packaging went to a Reschke fume blanc, a wine sold only in restaurants, with a label that peels off to reveal an embossed silhouette so the bottle can be reused as an attractive water bottle.

In marketing, a wine's label has long been its key selling point, its only differentiating exterior feature. But other elements have also been recognised, Doran says, such as the bottle shape. Overall packaging is important. Why? Apparently the

average shopper will take 2.6 seconds to make a decision, so the product must be immediately enticing.

Foster's, one of the four biggest wine companies in Australia, knows that branding is fundamental to success; it spends thousands of dollars on research to gauge the efficacy of its labels and buyers' attitudes towards them. There are only two types of drinkers — those who know what they want and those who don't. It is the latter group that Foster's is most interested in, as are all the other wine producers, big or small.

Oliver Horn, global brand ambassador for Wolf Blass (a Foster's brand), says one study conducted in April last year of 321 shoppers found that 45 per cent were not influenced by what they saw — they'd already made their minds up before entering the shop. But the other 55 per cent were influenced by the package. Of that group, 55 per cent said brand name was the single biggest determining factor in buying a wine, with 38 per cent saying they were influenced by label design. Certainly price determines a shopper's choice; someone who is determined to only spend \$10 generally won't be inspired by a label to buy up.

Horn says clarity of the label is important. "If consumers shop

on brand and varietal, they want to clearly see what the variety is. One reason why Australian brands are so successful overseas is consumers understand exactly what they are buying." Market surveys indicate Americans tend to respond to animals and bright colours on labels, whereas Australians consider them garish and gimmicky.

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OLIVER HORN, Wolf Blass

Obviously branding is most significant in supermarkets and chains such as Dan Murphy's and Vintage Cellars, but less so in fine wine shops. But that doesn't mean shoppers won't be influenced by a label in such outlets — witness Emmerich Knoll's over-the-top, gothic-looking design and the elaborate Gran Bazzan albarino label.

"In our store, we need to engage the customer in a short time and we

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usually think they don't buy because of the label, but certainly a lot of people do," says Phil Hude, owner of Armadale Cellars. "Although the final decision to purchase might be based

on a number of criteria, packaging does have a large influence on a purchasing decision."

Hude also believes packaging often relates to quality. "In a benchmark tasting, if you line up all the wines, we could generally

tell which are going to be better because of the care and money spent on packaging," he says. "In some respects that transforms to how good the wine will be."

Hude adds that labels can be an art form, on the right bottle. But plenty of wine companies spend too much on packaging and not enough on winemaking, and some marketing managers will readily blame the label if a wine is not selling. "The problem is, they'll say the reason the wine's not selling is because the label is shit. But nine times out of 10, it's not the label but the wine," he says.

An aesthetically pleasing wine package — including the label, the capsule and the bottle size, colour and weight — will give the consumer confidence to buy the wine inside.

A lot of science has gone into understanding how this works. What drives consumers to buy one wine over another is being studied at the University of Adelaide.

Research fellow Dr Simone Mueller, under the auspices of the Grape and Wine Research and Development Corporation, is taking part in a three-year project analysing



The team at wine-label design specialists Tucker Creative (clockwise from top right): Michaela Hill, Jody Tucker, Gary Anderson, Craig Clapham, Grant Wilson, Filomena Musolino and Cathryn Blair.

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'Our visual sense is our strongest ... our taste buds are not so well trained.'

SIMONE MUELLER

consumer preferences when it comes to wine choice.

The project won't be complete for two years but some fascinating trends are already emerging, Mueller says.

In one study, a group was asked how they felt about the colours and styles of labels, and they responded that such factors were not important. Mueller then tested this and the results were to the contrary. What she found within the group was four different clusters: two were price sensitive — those who don't spend much and those who do; one was very much into label style; and the fourth was influenced by brands.

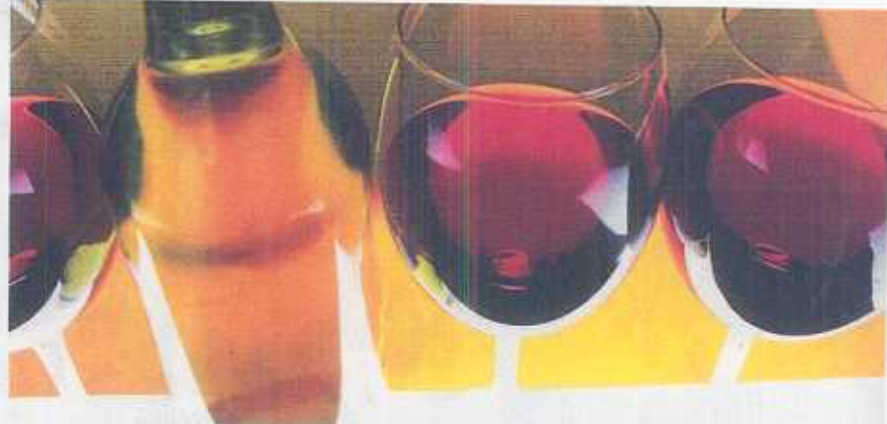
Her conclusion? She believes there is a subliminal effect when it comes to choosing wine, and the look

of a label is part of that — labels are meaningful.

But what about the wine? Ah, yes, the wine. It must meet an expectation, Mueller says. That is, once sold on the label, if the wine delivers, that consumer will continue to buy it simply because they remember what it looks like. "Our visual sense is our strongest, and it's easier to recognise the label over anything else because our taste buds are not so well trained," she says.

Even at this early stage in the research, there are some key signifiers, such as: orange is a no-no but cream is regarded as elegant; a traditional appearance such as the Penfolds white label is agreeable; and anything, it seems, with a graphic of a chateau tends to get the thumbs-up.

For vignerons dedicated to their craft and all that is honourable in winemaking, to those wanting to express terroir and grape variety, they'd all prefer people to buy the bottle for the wine — surely the most significant element. But if the package includes a stylish label that stands out, then all the better. The wine might just sell as well.



WHAT MUST APPEAR ON AN AUSTRALIAN WINE LABEL FOR SALE IN THE DOMESTIC MARKET

- The word "wine" or the variety, such as shiraz or chardonnay, must feature to indicate that it is indeed wine, although the variety is optional. So it's perfectly OK to say Penfolds Grange, with the word wine somewhere in the text, but not necessary to say it's a shiraz or a blend (Grange is a multi-regional blend, mostly shiraz, but often cabernet is added). The vintage is not required.
- Only the volume (quantity) is mandatory on the front label, in lettering that is a minimum of 3.5mm high on a 750ml bottle.
- Alcohol content is mandatory, as are the number of standard drinks. But what is a standard drink? It relates to the alcohol content.
- If applicable, allergens declarations are mandatory, as wine may contain milk products.
- The name and address are mandatory, as is country of origin. These are usually printed on the back label.
- A Geographical Indication (place name) is not required on a wine label, but if it is included, it must be true and conform to AWBC regulations, which state that the fruit is sourced from the region and the grape variety stated must be no less than 85 per cent of the total. There is nothing stopping a winemaker from adding up to 15 per cent shiraz to a bottle of pinot noir and not stating it on the label.

Source: The Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation.

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