



WINE LABEL WHIMSY

Fun labels can wrap around a good wine

Must be global weirding: A carny barker-snakeoil hustler gets elected president of the U.S.; ice forms on December rosebuds; and in the wine world, someone launches a War of Labels.

How important are labels? They're just packaging, right? Commonly, a wine label gives the brand name, the varietal, vintage date (if there is one), alcohol percentage, a warning "(contains sulfites)"; somewhere on the bottle we find the retail price, critical info. No more, at least for those enlisted in the Label War.

I stood in the wine aisle of a major supermarket, checking the hundreds of facings of mass-market vinos. A couple that was shopping scanned the offerings; woman shopper said, "Let's get this one. I love their label."

My head snapped as I tried to peek: They had chosen an otherwise undistinguished red, cheap, but not bad — most wines these days are drinkable, not poisonous.

But the label popped. And there's the key. Wine producers are in a stiff competition for buyers' bucks. It's not really a war, just elementary marketing, selling the package, not the contents, sizzle not steak.

It works. We know it does. And the folks who do it well bring innovative thinking, often wit and whimsy, sometimes real art. Some of the new wine packages are charming, engaging. Cases in point:

Circus Posters: For some (non)reason, circus images abound. **Freakshow 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon**, from Lodi's (\$16) Michael David Winery, wears a label that invites magnifying examination, finding Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, the Bearded Lady, W. C. Fields and many more. It's fun — and the wine's quite good. Another "Michael David joint" label shows two fat elephants (Republicans?), sitting in a circus "green room," sucking on glasses of wine amid buckets of peanuts; this label fronts

PetitePetit 2014 Petite Sirah (\$18) — blended with 15 percent petit Verdot, very serious red and very good. Even the back label's fun: "prepare yourself to be amazed." OK! Wine at the circus!

Not So Funny: Glenrowan Wines (Australia) darkens the shelves with their "19 Crimes" series, labels of sepia-tinted mugshots of first-century men convicted of any one of 19 crimes for which they could be exiled to the penal colony of Australia. The back label of **19 Crimes 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$12) wavers between swelling pride and lingering bitterness. The wine, however, centers on bold flavors, no cringing.

Curiouser and Curiouser: Catch the consumer's eye. How? Wrap the bottle in paper covered with death images, dancing skeletons, call it **Curious Beasts 2014 "Blood Red Wine"** — a Napa blend — (\$14); back label reveals names of producers Truett Hurst, Healdsburg, the "witchiest and warlockiest winemakers California has to offer." Fun. Only problem is timing; all this is Halloweeny and we're shopping at Christmas. Oh, the wine is toothsome.

Trackin' Kraken: Two labels (so far) feature the Kraken, mythological deep-sea monster: Oregon's **Teutonic Wine Company 2015 "Attack of the**

Kraken" Pinot Noir (\$24) is lovely wine despite the ominous image of the Kraken wrapping drippy tentacles around dorymen. **Force of Nature (California) 2014 Chardonnay** (\$20) is a Santa Barbara beauty, yummy, but the label shows the Kraken cracking into a Medieval port village and castle. Huh?

But we bought it, along with many others, far too many to detail in one brief column — there's more comedy, some fine art, beauty, mysticism. The label battles are just beginning. But we can't fail to mention the Madman of the North and his "packaging coup."

KISS: Charles Smith brought a rock 'n' roll spirit to Walla Walla wines; his K Vintners used simple labels to package superb wines. For just one example, **Charles Smith K Vintners 2012 MCK (Motor City Kitty) Syrah** (\$30) is a knockout wine, deep, spicy, stylish. All Smith's K wines are distinctive, inside and out — the labels eye-catching. If this is crazy, we'll take some.

Note: Bo Wiedenfed-Needham at Bo's Wine Depot points out that K Vintners was just bought by a mega-corp, allowing Charles Smith to retire, his pockets bulging with millions, which might prove that some sorts of madness attract money. Is this what President-elect Tweety has shown us?

Well, Happy New Year, whatever your label. ■

