

BY LAURENT GUINAND, F98 GIRAMONDO WINE VENTURES

## Learn from the Label

The outside of a wine bottle can speak volumes

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OST PEOPLE WALK INTO A WINE SHOP with a budget in mind and never have an opportunity to sample anything. They inevitably end up inspecting labels. As a recent paper published by the American Association of Wine Economists points out, labels are the single most important consideration in the purchase of wine. Fortunately, they're also highly informative for those who know how to read them.

For Old World wines, the label serves as a certificate of authenticity. First, it tells you the wine's "appellation." Countries devise appellation systems to ensure that grapes for certain wines come from certain areas and that quality standards have been respected in winemaking. For instance, France has four levels of appellation: *vin de pays*, *vin de table*, *vin délimité de qualité supérieure* (VDQS), and *appellation d'origine contrôlée* (AOC).

At the AOC level, wines are further ranked according to "classification," and a wine thus ranked is called a *cru* (growth). The most famous is the 1855 classification of Left Bank Bordeaux wines, on whose labels you would read "grand cru classé en 1855" (great growth classified in 1855). These wines, by the way, are some of the most expensive in the world.

Old World labels must also state where the wine was bottled, which can tell discriminating wine drinkers about the "terroir."

Terroir refers to the grapes grown in a specific place, the kind of wine making that's practiced there, and the local climate; all these things combine to yield a particular "style" of wine. In Valpolicella, for example, only three grapes are grown—corvina, rondinella, and molinara—and a distinctively full-bodied, fruity wine called Amarone is made by drying the grapes in small vats for six months before pressing and fermenting them.

Wines from the New World are subject to less stringent regulations, so more space on the label is available for an appealing

design. With the development of wines from Australia, New Zealand, Chile, Argentina, and, of course, the United States, the label is becoming a marketing tool. Labels sport fake blazons—or, more commonly, animals (in the industry, this is called the "zoo" category). Probably the best-known animal brand is Yellow Tail, with its signature kangaroos. Yellow Tail, now selling more than 10 million cases a year in the United States, has boosted all Australian sales in this country, including me-too labels like Black Swan and Little Penguin.

The label as marketing tool has its upside. Winemakers such as Randall Graham of Bonny Doon Winery in Santa Cruz have distinguished themselves by both the quality of their wines and the creativity of their labels.

Bonny Doon's Vin Gris de Cigare, a Rhone-style rosé with a spaceship on the label, has scored at least 90 on a 100-point scale from different wine critics.

Indeed, these days more and more wine aficionados are becoming wine label aficionados. Among the wineries that have managed to develop interesting, artsy labels are the Leeuvin estate in Australia and Weingut Breuer in Germany. And then there are the labels from the prestigious Château Mouton Rothschild, which may be the most coveted collector's items of all.

Every year since 1945, a world-class artist has been invited to decorate these labels—artists like Jean Cocteau (1947), George Braque (1955), Salvador Dalí (1958), Joan Miró (1969), Marc Chagall (1970), Wassily Kandinsky (1971), Pablo Picasso (1973), Andy Warhol (1975), Francis Bacon (1990), and Niki de Saint Phalle (1997).

Finally, a label can clue you in to the age of the vines. The term "*vieilles vignes*" or "old vines" generally tells you the vines are more than 25 years old and therefore mature enough to deliver grapes with full flavors. During the first five years, vines are too young to deliver interesting grapes for winemaking. Bear that in mind the next time you spot a bottle from a winery established in 2002 or later.

