

Open Bar

Juicing Up Wine Labels

Fine art, wacky names and sexy images all help bottles stand out from the crowd.

By Elin McCoy

◆ Passion Has Red Lips, an Aussie bottling with a trailer-babe image, is just one example of the new wave of provocatively named wines that are adding some juice to the staid art of the wine label.

Lately, I've encountered dozens of wines with startling labels of all shapes and sizes that sport bright colors, quirky lettering and nostalgic, funky, irreverent or even outrageous images that bear no relation whatsoever to grapes, vineyards or somebody's estate. Some have names as weird as rock bands. The aim is to seize your attention when you're facing hundreds of selections in shops by conveying loads of attitude and appealing to an idiosyncratic sense of style. They're all about pulling in buyers who are happy to judge a book by its cover or who just want to put a conversation-starting, zany-looking bottle on the table.

While the creativity of the label is no certain guide to the style of wine inside

the bottle, some of these in-your-face labels, surprisingly, really do match their wines perfectly. And some will lead you to a bottle you'll actually enjoy emptying.

It all started with the exploding category of inexpensive "critter"-labeled wines, so called for the animals featured on them. Animals have been on labels for years, but recently, they've gone wild. Creatures from aardvarks to zebras can now be found on bottles, many with playful names such as Dog House, Fat Cat, Four Emus, Monkey Bay and Smoking Loon. Marketers are thrilled that consumers find critter names easy to remember and regard the wines as friendly and approachable. The cheap prices help. Most are easy drinking—simple, fruity and boring.

With animal labels, you generally get what you pay for. Nonetheless, market research firm ACNielsen reported last year that critter brands accounted for almost 20 percent of the 438 labels launched successfully from 2003 to '05 and outsold noncritter labels 2 to 1. Industry giant Constellation Brands Inc.'s 2004–05 Project Genome study identified six types of wine consumers: enthusiasts, savvy shoppers, traditionalists, satisfied sippers, image seekers and the overwhelmed. The last two are the most likely to go for fun animal brands like 3 Blind Moose.

A wider "adventure" category is now challenging the critters; these labels try to match lifestyle with *vino*.

Many feature vehicles, such as good-value Red Truck, full-throttle Red Car and new market leader Twin Fin, which shows a convertible that has a surfboard sticking up from its back seat.

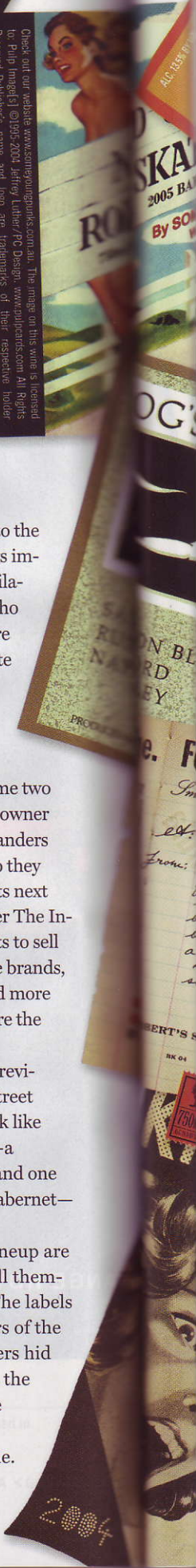
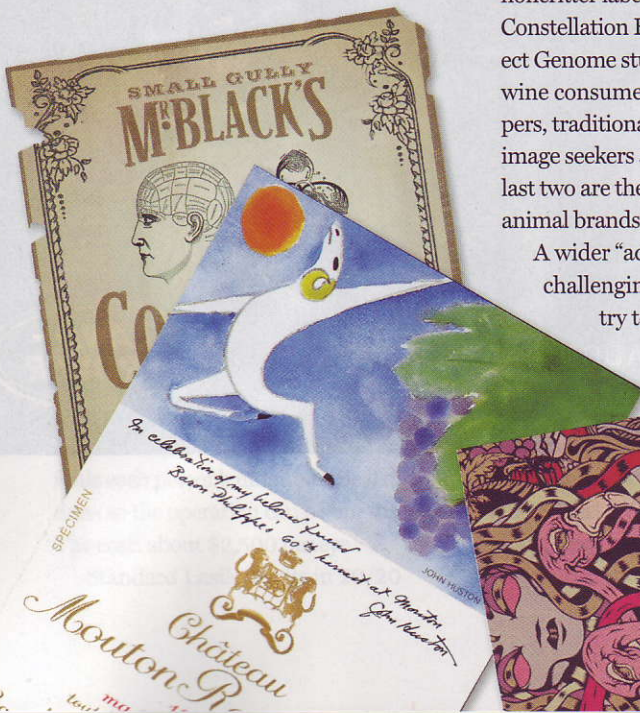
That image looks tame next to the edgy ones on the Aussie bottlings imported by Ronnie Sanders of Philadelphia's Vine Street Imports, who says he's convinced that labels are all-important. "The Shinas Estate had a terrible label but great wines," he says. "Their shiraz was called Shallow Creek, and the label was a picture of where the owner went fishing. It took me two years to sell 600 cases." Shinas's owner was a criminal court judge, so Sanders suggested changing the labels so they "tell a story." The winery called its next shiraz The Guilty and its viognier The Innocent. This fall, Sanders expects to sell 5,000 cases of the Shinas Estate brands, up 20 percent from last year and more than 16 times what he sold before the labels were changed.

Killibinbin, dumped by its previous importer, is another Vine Street turnaround. The new labels look like posters for 1950s horror flicks—a woman screams on the shiraz, and one man strangles another on the cabernet—and the wines are hits.

My favorites in Sanders's lineup are the labels from a trio who call themselves Some Young Punks. The labels are copies of the lurid covers of the kind of paperbacks teenagers hid from their parents back in the 1950s, and the wines have names such as Naked on Roller Skates and Quickie.



Check out our website www.bloomberg.com. The image on this wine is licensed to Pip Images © 1995-2004 Jeffrey Leiber/PC Design. All Rights Reserved. Publisher's name and logo are trademarks of their respective holder.



dog house

Charlie's Chard

2005 CHARDONNAY CALIFORNIA

Alc. 14.5% by Vol.

Vintage 2003

Dry Creek VINEYARD

Beeson Ranch Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley

SINGLE VINEYARD Family Winery EST. 1982 DESIGNATION



WHY THE BARREL MONKEY IS A SEXUAL MISFIT Masquerading his corporate attire, the barrel monkey looks every inch the sexual he-man, lady charmer. Don't you believe it. Just listen to what the experts say.

BARREL MONKEYS

2004 SHIRAZ McLAREN VALE 15.5 BY.VOL.ALC 750ML



PLUNGERHEAD

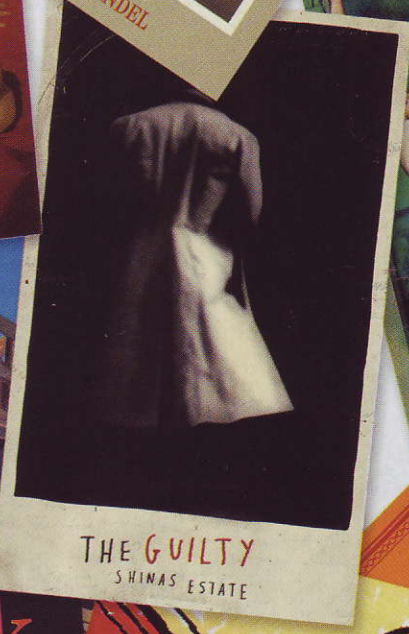
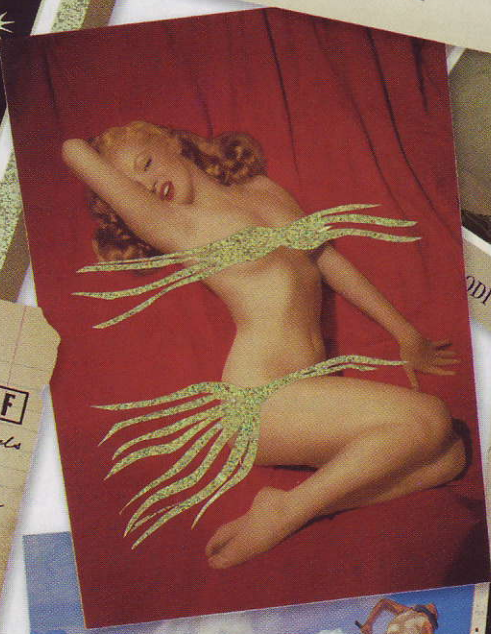
Old Vine

RODY | ZINFANDEL

VINTAGE TWO THOUSAND AND CABERNET SAUVIGNON



15 ALC./VOL CONTAINS SULFITES



THE GUILTY SHINAS ESTATE



Passion has Red L

LEAP

South Australia

Formula

small parcels... vineyard... selecting the barrels to be... to produce... filling...

BINBIN

red truck

2004 california cabernet sauvignon



SMOKING LOON... COMPANY ESTABLISHED 2000... CALIFORNIA... VIGNON... ALC. BY VOL. 750 ML

5,000 RID



2007

Bloomberg Markets

Case of the Month

Twelve wines with eye-catching labels to try in October

2001 Bedell Cellars Merlot Reserve, Eric Fischl Artist Series (\$200 a magnum)

A plump, soft and elegant Long Island red whose label shows a watercolor nude

2006 Bonny Doon Vineyard Vin Gris de Cigare (\$19)

A refreshing rosé with a UFO-in-the-vineyard label

2004 Casanuova di Nittardi Chianti Classico (\$29)

Bright and fruity, with deep, rich flavors. Yoko Ono drew the art for the label.

2005 Château Calon-Ségur (\$100 as futures)

A great Bordeaux with a romantic heart label

2003 Dry Creek Vineyard Beeson Ranch Zinfandel (\$30)

An elegant old-vine zin with a classy sailboat label

2005 Francis Ford Coppola Director's Cut Chardonnay (\$20)

Bright, lemony and creamy textured. The label twirls around the bottle like a roll of film.

2006 Frog's Leap Sauvignon Blanc (\$18)

Zingy and crisp. Made from organically grown grapes. Label shows a low-key frog.

2003 Kenwood Jack London Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (\$30)

A plummy, toothsome red with a wolf's head etched in the bottle

2004 Marilyn Wines Velvet Collection Red (\$200 a magnum)

A rich cabernet-merlot blend with an R-rated label

2005 Some Young Punks Passion Has Red Lips Cabernet Sauvignon-Shiraz (\$20)

A brash, ready-to-burst Aussie red with a provocative label

2005 Red Car Shake Rattle Roll Syrah (\$50)

A full-throttle red that features a red trolley car on the front and a film noir-type story on the back.

2003 2480 Hollywood & Vine Cabernet Sauvignon (\$90)

Bold, ripe plum and black-berry flavors. Stenciled numbers replace the label on an ultraheavy bottle.



ELIN MCCOY

Sex sells, and these days even porn stars make wines. But buyers seeking classic label allure need look no further than Marilyn Monroe's iconic image. Nova Wines debuted a Marilyn Merlot back in the 1980s, and the latest guises now include a youthful, fresh-and-fruity Norma Jeane merlot and a plush Velvet Collection cab-merlot blend with lip-nibbling tannins and a "peel-and-peek" overlay on the label that reveals Monroe in her famous nude calendar pose.

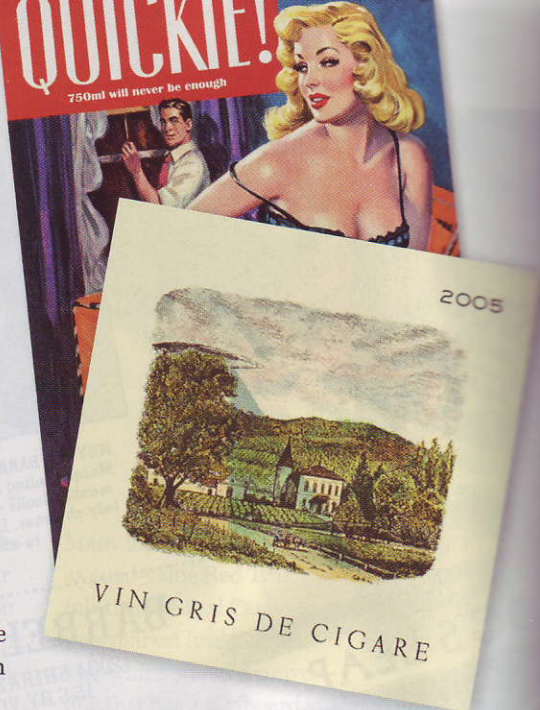
All of the Marilyn wines have become hot collectibles. Bottles from the 1980s traded at \$200-\$3,000 each in early August, while the 1993 Marilyn Merlot, which was \$18 on release, traded at about \$400. Magnums of the 2002 Velvet Collection blend went for double their \$200 release price.

A label designed by a well-known artist is usually a tip-off to a pricey, serious wine. Château Mouton Rothschild was the first to commission a different artist each year to dash off something for the label, a practice that's been adopted by a number of wineries. Since 1981, German art collector

Peter Femfert, owner of Tuscan estate Fattoria Nittardi, has commissioned a different artist every year to create a label for a limited edition of his Casanuova di Nittardi Chianti Classico. For the 2004, released this year, Yoko Ono contributed a colored-ink drawing of glasses and bottles titled *Imagine you*.

Just imagine what's next. >

Columnist ELIN MCCOY is based in New York. emcwine@aol.com



Boutique Tonic Water

Luxury spirits are the industry's fastest-growing segment, so it was only a matter of time before someone pioneered ultrapremium mixers. These three superior-tasting, all-natural tonic waters banish the high-fructose corn syrup, artificial flavors and synthetic quinine used in mass-produced versions. I grabbed limes, ice and gin; mixed up a few gin and tonics; and discovered that each brand gave the drink a slightly different character.

Fever-Tree

(\$5.99 a four-pack)

THE HOOK: Made with "pharmaceutical-grade" African quinine and flavored with African marigolds, Italian coriander and lime oil and Tanzanian bitter orange. Launched in the U.K. in 2005 by Charles Rolls and Tim Warrillow, it's now available in the U.S.

G&T: Floral, bracing, citrusy and rich



Q Tonic

(\$4.99 a four-pack)

THE HOOK: New York-based G&T fanatic Jordan Silbert spent several years perfecting the blend, which is sweetened with organic agave nectar and includes quinine from handpicked Peruvian cinchona bark. Contains more bubbles and 60 percent fewer calories than the big brands

G&T: Edgy, spicy, refreshing and very dry



Stirrings

(\$4.99 a four-pack)

THE HOOK: Uses triple-filtered water, cane sugar and lemon and lime extracts. Fall River, Massachusetts-based Stirrings, founded by ex-bartenders Bill Creelman and Gil MacLean, specializes in cocktail garnishes and mixes. It added tonic water two years ago. Now available in the U.K.

G&T: The sweetest. Very citrusy



ELIN MCCOY

PHOTOS COURTESY OF COMPANIES

For arts and culture news, type MUSE <Go>.