



Food&Wine

Thinking outside the bottle

Quality wine with a quirky, pop-culture label? It's a clever combination, writes *Max Allen*

MY FAVOURITE WINE LABEL OF ALL TIME IS ON THE 1924 Mouton-Rothschild from Bordeaux. Graphic artist Jean Carlu's striking design was commissioned by Baron Philippe de Rothschild to celebrate the first year of chateau-bottling at Mouton. To our 21st-century eyes the cubist label looks fairly tame, with its stylised ram's head, but at the time it was audacious: here was a "modernist" label for a prestigious chateau, designed by a commercial artist who usually painted posters for shaving cream. The radical departure from tradition achieved precisely the effect the Baron had intended: it made Mouton stand tall above the conservative crowd.

Eighty-five years later, slapping some bold pop culture references on your label is still a good way to get your wine noticed. Visit any bottleshop and you'll find a whole new wave of Australian labels featuring comic art, street art or retro images. You can't miss them: these new labels don't so much stand out from the crowd as reach out and grab you by the eyeballs.

Margaret River's Brad Wehr was one of the first Australians to adopt the pop-art theme with his Roy Lichtenstein-inspired Wine By Brad range, launched in 2003. "The concept was developed over a few wines with friends," he says. "We were discussing all the dull packaging out there. The Oz wine industry had gone through a huge growth period, with new wineries opening and new labels springing up, but all you could see on the shelves was a sea of dullness."



Wehr has succeeded at what many wine marketing gurus say is the biggest challenge of all: attracting occasional 20-something drinkers. "People who aren't wine buffs and like the fun irreverence of it all are my biggest customers," he says. "Plus a lot of guys called Brad. Or wives of Brads. I should have called it Wine By John. Would've sold a bucketload more."

For some winemakers, using comic or retro labels is less about standing out, and more about making a stand. "The truth is that we choose our packaging to match our personal vision," says Col McBryde of Some Young Punks. "Our goal is not to provoke a shock response or to play the 'irreverent wine rebel' card; it's to match fantastic art with our wines in a way that communicates what we are about ... If we're successful with this approach it's because we're appealing to like-minded people."

Quirky labels are all very well, of course, but what about the wines inside? There's a law of wine marketing: the label might sell the first bottle; the quality of the contents will sell the second. The wines featured here comply fully with this law: they look cool, and they're bloody good drinks. The Baron would have approved.



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Larry Cherubino's Ad Hoc wines www.larrycherubino.com.au

Part-whimsical, part-Pythonesque imagery – particularly on the Mix Master (right), a lively, spicy blend of Pemberton merlot and Frankland shiraz – and a sense of humour: the name of the Margaret River Straw Man semillon sauvignon is explained thus: 'Because the best examples of this regional blend show aromas of fresh straw and cut grass ... and calling something out of Margaret River 'Grass Man' would have been more trouble than it's worth...'