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Designer Dreamscapes

Creative wine packaging concepts are out there, but not all find a home

By Jane Firstenfeld

Star packaging designers who addressed *Wines & Vines*' second annual packaging conference in August 2015 seemed to agree: The North American wine industry tends to be extremely conservative about adopting novel packaging designs and solutions.

For a business that is inherently creative (a new vintage every year, farming and legal challenges, shifting market strategies), this might seem off-kilter. On the other hand, the New World's belated embrace of wine as a mass-market beverage—and the practicalities of retail display and home storage—do, in some ways, mandate conservative decisions. Even if it might stand out, few dare try to sell a wine that won't fit on shelves and wine racks. On-premise sales are often ignored in the design process.

Winemaker and restaurant consultant Pietro Buttitia, who attended the *Wines & Vines* Packaging Conference, commented afterward: "It is often assumed that restaurant wines don't need creative packaging, but the buyer still needs to have interest and the packaging can help anchor that decision-making process, especially in that meaty \$10-15 wholesale per bottle zone."

Buttitia's Rosa d'Oro brand produces some 2,000 cases annually in the Kelseyville Bench. The packaging for Rosa d'Oro draws heavily upon an Old World southern Italian style.

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appellation of Lake County, Calif., giving him first-hand understanding of marketing boutique wines.

"Small producers are often not so great with general brand design and integrating website, packaging, print collateral, etc., in a meaningful way. With the plethora of brands out there, there really isn't much reason to assume that anyone is unique, or that 'small, family-owned' means anything," he said.

"Label design seems like a burden to many small producers, the last thing they want to think about. Or it is outsourced and clearly unconnected. I encourage small wineries to think of it the opposite way, as chefs think of their menus.

"The bottle is the primary document, and though dialing it in is a long process I feel that grower/producers (whom I prefer to work with) need to think of it as the executive summary of their business plan—that icing on the cake. Especially when you only have a few hundred cases, keep it meaningful and personal. So many bottles out there lack integrity, like a menu that doesn't deliver or transparently convey the experience to come. Even small labels spend a lot of time guessing what the consumer wants, rather than focusing on the nature of their product," he said.

For Rosa d'Oro, Buttitia worked with Kerri Green Design of Oakland, Calif., to draw heavily on Old World southern Italian packaging for the style. This, Buttitia said, "Gives it a sense of location in time and place using screen-print

bottles that work with our limited bottling space. The wine was not made in an international style, so hopefully the packaging reflects the style markers to some extent," he said.

"This might be the exception when brands reach for either modern labels or classic. Nothing is more disappointing than super-neat packaging and boring, oak-chipped, sweet 'anywhere-wine.'"

Design inspiration

"The only thing this team loves more than untangling a challenge and doing good, strategic work is having fun doing it with people we like," said Jim Carey of Doubleknot Creative design agency in Seattle, Wash. "We specialize in helping businesses reveal their brands and differentiate themselves."

Some wine companies will take a risk to do that, Carey said. "At the time when silkscreen was just becoming popular, we proposed a full frosted bottle with gold leaf silkscreen on a burgundy bottle. It was beautiful, but it was also quite expensive. Trying to prevent scratches presented a real bottling line challenge."

Since then, he noted, "The silk-screen application has become more mainstream in the wine industry, but we've moved away from it as most

KEY POINTS

Specialists in winery packaging are sometimes frustrated when conservative clients reject their most original ideas.

Despite continuing strides in materials and techniques, costs and timing can inhibit commercial adoption of new approaches to packaging.

Many wineries start with a concept resembling other packages. This is not a good idea: Be authentic to yourself and your brand.

ents. While that's helpful in getting to know their dream and their taste, we want them to have their own unique, memorable brand. The most receptive clients are fairly small and well-funded," Nelson concluded.

Supply-side viewpoint

TricorBraun provides bottles and other services to the wine industry. Based in St. Louis, Mo., Mike Murphy heads its design group, which works on both plastic and glass containers.

According to Suzanne Gordon, regional sales manager in Santa



TricorBraun created glass bottles that feature the AVA where they're from.

Rosa, Calif., TricorBraun created AVA-specific bottles for Ballard Canyon on California's Central Coast. "Several wineries are using it. The bottle has an embossed cartouche; reading it does not take long," she said.

The designers had to modify the package to accommodate different labels. Numerous wine producers have adopted the bottle, and it's practical for those producing as few as 1,500 cases. "As with other cartouches, the label needs to fit below," Gordon noted. Oregon's Yamhill/Carlton AVA also has a TricorBraun bottle.

The AVA-specific bottles are not mandatory, although the organizations must coordinate and agree on the shape, Gordon said.

"Being innovative is a hard sell. As (winemaker) Jean Charles Boisset says, "The egg is the perfect package." To our knowledge, wine is not yet available in an egg (or an egg-shaped package), so there is still opportunity to improve on perfection. 🍷