

# packaging

## The Thought Behind A Wine Label

WINE IS A PRODUCT category like no other. The closest comparison in the United States would be breakfast cereal brands. Like breakfast cereals, wine has a multitude of products competing for consumer attention on the grocery store shelf, often taking up an entire aisle, sometimes two or three. Each brand must, therefore, catch the consumer's eye and communicate its message as quickly as possible. Also, like cereals, wine is one of the few consumer products that actually sits on the table as you consume it, allowing for further and closer inspection of the package, and thus, the brand message as you work your way through the bottle.

As designers, these two commonalities challenge us to create a package that not only quickly attracts our target consumer but also offers more subtle details and information that can be revealed at a much gentler pace. This is the perfect opportunity to reinforce the brand's positioning, deliver a message and encourage repeat purchases. Considering the large amount of competition fighting for attention on-shelf, first impressions are crucial and, in most cases, are made solely because of the package.

As brand developers and packaging designers, we take responsibility for a consumer's first purchase. Once we have convinced a consumer to try a product, we relinquish responsibility of repeat purchases to the producer and the relationship they have developed between price and wine quality. Admittedly, our responsibility does continue as it is equally important that the first impression be a memorable one, allowing a consumer looking to make a repeat purchase to easily locate the brand on a crowded store shelf.

Ten stances on brand positioning through the eyes of a designer.

*Tony Auston*

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**BRAND IMAGE**

Beyond the select few top tier brands of the wine industry—the ones making sales based on reputation and reviews—the most important aspect of any product is its brand image. Image is initially communicated through package design. It is comprised of a variety of individual components that, when combined, create the gestalt of the brand. It's not only the label; it is the union of bottle type, cork, capsule, closure, shipping carton and point of sale materials that visually tell the story of the brand. These basic elements work in concert to present the right image to the consumer, no small task in

a market flooded with thousands of competing brands from all corners of the world.

As brand developers and wine label designers, we are challenged daily to present the unique attributes of each brand. Taking into account the myriad brands lining retail shelves, one can understand the level of importance we place on knowing our clients and to whom they are targeting their products. We learn this through in-depth research gathered by interviewing our clients, sorting out what makes them who they are and determining how to best leverage and present that story to the world. We study their brands along-

side competitive brand sets to ascertain how they best fit into that specific set while at the same time stand apart as unique.

The fact that no two human faces are identical and we can recognize someone we met only one, two or three years ago is mind boggling to me; but it is this simple principle that allows us to continue to present fresh and uniquely memorable packages for each one of these thousands of brands. Every brand has its own face—a unique history and personality, its story. This must be reflected in the package to ensure that, once introduced, it is easily remembered and recognized for years to come.

These attributes can be broken down by specific brand categories, which, primarily, should then be divided by price-point. Within each price-point are as many sub-categories as there are stories to be told and faces to be seen. Some may tell the individual stories of the various proprietors, their family history and personal interests while others may be more marketing-driven and focused on attracting a specific target consumer.

There are a number of stances to take on positioning, and I will touch on 10 that I have found have a commonality and are effective and viable in their own right.

## The Kama Sutra of Brand Positions: Traditional, Heritage, More is More, Boutique, Demystifying Wine, New World, Provoking Curiosity, Story Telling, Understated Elegance and Contemporary

**TRADITIONAL:** Represents the oldest, most common and safest positioning. The traditional look is based on European wine label design that, until recently, hasn't changed much in the last few hundred years. With classic Roman or script type and an engraving style illustration—often vineyard and winery on a cream background—it clearly has appeal to a certain demographic and at all price-points. It is attractive to those who just feel like that is what wine should look like. While it is safe, it is also the most common look and shared by many competitors. Thus, it doesn't do much to set a brand apart from the pack.

At lower price-points it represents what could be considered a "safe purchase" by an inexperienced wine consumer. It helps give them confidence in choosing a safe wine to bring to a dinner party or to serve to guests. At mid-level pricing it is much more difficult to use successfully. There are so many small to medium producers fighting for attention in this segment that are not high-end enough to warrant the hand-sell and often lack the financial backing to promote through advertising. Therefore, it is essential that they don't blend in and that their stories be told quickly and appealingly. This is difficult to do when your package fails to stand apart from the pack.

At the high-end, the traditional look can stand to represent the history of the winemaking tradition and act as further endorsement to the superior quality of a brand. In the New World segment, California specifically, leveraging any heritage is a good position to take if a winery has existed for, say, 30 years or more and has a history and reputation of producing high quality wines.



**TRADITIONAL [Edward Sellers]:** This Central Coast brand focuses primarily on Rhône varietals. Typographically, the design mimics the look of an elegant French wine label. The compass rose replaces what might more typically be a coat-of-arms. A little smoke and mirrors, along with sculpted embossing dies, create the look of an antiques piece of pulpy paper.

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**HERITAGE:** Reflects the lineage and/or longevity of a brand. Closely tied to the traditional positioning, the look is sometimes used by brands that aren't fortunate enough to have that pedigree yet want to evoke the historical look and feel of a pre-Prohibition wine estate.

The label design is usually fairly conservative and traditional in appearance. A monogram or coat-of-arms is often the central focus positioned directly above the brand name (often the family name). It is not uncommon to feature an engraving style illustration of the winery or a prominent landmark associated with the history of the brand.



**HERITAGE [Regusci]:** This brand was founded in the late 1990s. The family has owned the property since 1932, and the original winery was erected in 1878. The Heritage positioning was based on the history of the property and the Regusci family's three generations of farming and winemaking. The design simulates a pre-Prohibition steel-rule engraving, utilizing classic typography, a coat-of-arms and a simulated engraved illustration. It was printed using techniques of the era, specifically bronzing, a metallic effect once common and now almost extinct due to environmental issues.

**MORE IS MORE:** Increases the perceived value of a brand by appearing to over-deliver. This can be achieved at all price points (excluding the über-premium) by taking on the look of brands at a pricing tier two or more levels above the brand's actual price-point.

At the lower end this is often done through excessive, yet masterful, use of gold foil stamping, embossing and use of traditional engraving style illustrations (the chateau in the vineyard). Again, this category represents a safe purchase by a less knowledgeable wine consumer.

**BOUTIQUE:** Evokes the look and feel of a small, limited production producer. Most consumers like the idea that their wine was handmade by a real person with a small vineyard and winery, nestled in the most romantic setting imaginable. Whether this is true or not, the look can be achieved in a number of ways, such as the simulation of pulpy handmade papers, possibly with torn or deckle edges; illustration of a bucolic setting; simple, yet elegant, typography or handlettering; and a sensitive use of soft colors.

While still boutique in essence, this soft, romantic look can be countered by the look of small, edgy, underground brands that use less traditional (or non-traditional) wine cues to make their voices heard in the world.



**BOUTIQUE [Bogle Vineyards]:** This package was launched back when Bogle actually was a boutique winery. Choice of glass, along with a unique label shape, sensitive use of typography, delicate application of color and illustration combine to create the look and feel of a small boutique brand.

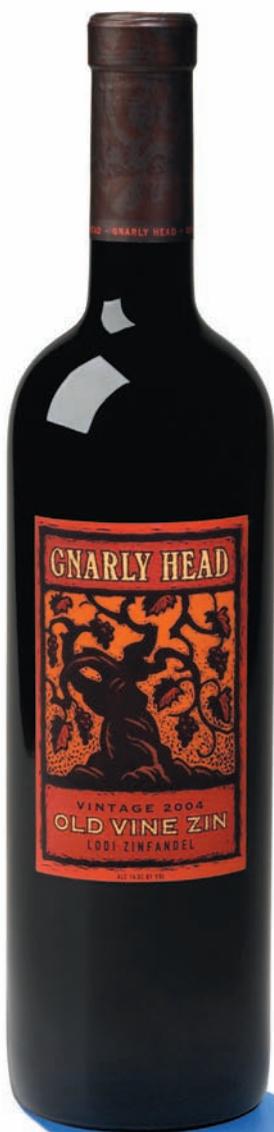
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**DEMYSTIFYING WINE:** *Presenting wine as a mass-consumer beverage.* Nothing seems more wrong to a Gen-Y or Millennial consumer than drinking wines they watched their mom and dad drink while growing up. The demystification of wine, through packaging, appeals to a broader market than just Gen-Y and Millennials, but these two groups tend to be the main focus of this positioning.

The look tends to throw convention to the wind; use of clever, often irreverent names and illustrations, non-traditional graphics and bright colors make up this new category that has taken wine from being a special occasion product and turned it into a “beverage”—a consumer good.

Obviously, this is considered a very positive milestone to the wine industry that has experienced unprecedented growth with younger consumers. Often considered an entry-level positioning, it is believed as these younger consumers grow up, like it or not, they will become their parents. With this metamorphosis, it is hoped and believed that they will embrace wine as a daily part of their lives and, as they age, continue to trade up into higher quality and higher priced wines.



**DEMYSTIFYING WINE** [Gnarly Head]: With its provocative name, this colorful and friendly label appeals to many age groups, but is focused more directly to Gen-Y and Millennials.

**NEW WORLD:** *Represents nearly any look other than that of traditional European brands.* The New World category is somewhat synonymous with the Demystifying Wine category and has led the charge in treating wine as a mass-consumer beverage.

The fun, often irreverent, wine labels and market positioning were introduced to the world by the Australian wine industry. It has been wildly successful and launched a global revolution in the wine industry with explosions of similarly positioned wines from all over the world. The effect has had such a negative impact on sales of French wines that the historically steadfast French wine industry has been forced to finally undo their top buttons, loosen their neckties a bit and try to have some fun in attempts to regain market share.

The proliferation of “critter” labels is no surprise; you know the ones—every animal possible has been irreverently depicted on a label in some way or another over recent years. You could argue that the Yellow Tail brand single-handedly changed the face of the global wine industry. Critters are on their way out now, but the ideology continues to evolve and take shape in as many directions as the imagination can come up with.

In addition, the New World position has successfully evolved with a natural migration into the use of alternative closures and packaging. In North America, folks are no longer horrified at the thought of serving a Sauvignon Blanc with a screw top; in fact, it is even considered chic to those “in-the-know.” It is the same with casks (boxed wines), tetra paks, PET and aluminum containers. Consumers are much more open to these alternatives and are having fun exploring the options.



**NEW WORLD** [Rock Rabbit]: Could also be loosely defined as a critter label. This uniquely shaped and brightly colored label is marketed in the U.S. and was designed to compete directly against the insurgence of the more playful Australian and New Zealand brands.

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**PROVOKING CURIOSITY:** *Inviting inquiry by an innate need to know.* This positioning makes use of wine label artwork that may be quirky or not easily identified at first glance. It is most applicable to mid- and upper-tier brands. It is key that the design be visually striking enough to invite inquiry, either verbally or by enticing the consumer to lift the bottle from the shelf for closer inspection.

Wine lovers revel in sharing their “in-the-know” knowledge and finds with friends and family. This position empowers those folks to flaunt their behind-the-scenes knowledge of a brand beyond solely what’s in the bottle.



**PROVOKING CURIOSITY** [Joseph Phelps Ovation]: This design combines many categories of positioning—Provoking Curiosity, Contemporary and Understated Elegance. This minimalist design sports a strong graphic image that upon first glance might be perceived as barbed-wire or a signature. The design invites inquiry or closer examination to come to the realization that the images are the part of a grape tendril that remains on a trellis wire after winter pruning.

**STORY TELLING:** *Evoking the story behind the brand.* Creatively, this is one of my favorites. Since we can’t always count on a salesperson to be there to push the brand at point-of-sale, this approach allows for meaningful conceptual solutions that can clearly evoke the essence of a brand at shelf. If we do have the luxury of a salesperson hand-selling the product, the package can act as a visual aid in describing the unique attributes of the brand.

The stories are limitless but may touch on family history: proprietors’ interests, be it fly fishing, symphonic music, vintage cars, etc.; the terroir of the region; specific vineyards; historical aspects of the region, etc. Illustrative components may include maps, illustrations of property or region, musical scores, symbology or whatever it takes to tell the story in a visually compelling way.

Information on the back label can help explain or reinforce the message conveyed on the front. Perhaps best suited to mid- and upper-tiers, it is effective to some degree at all price points.



**STORY TELLING** [Arietta]: This design represents Story Telling and Understated Elegance. The founders of this ultra-premium brand shared a love of classical music, particularly Beethoven’s last piano sonata, Opus 111. The label incorporates a fragment of Beethoven’s original manuscript of the Arietta movement. The brand mark was scanned from a copy of the first-ever printed version of the manuscript.

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**UNDERSTATED ELEGANCE:** Reflecting the highest quality through a minimalist approach to design. The polar opposite of the More is More theory. In our studio we refer to this category as the formal announcement look or the beautiful white label look. It is best suited for mid- and upper-tier brands that have the luxury of being coveted by the consumer. They are usually found only in high-end wine shops or up-market restaurants.

With limited productions, good reputations and good reviews, these brands don't need to shout it out to the world; the world will seek them out. So the role of the package is to reinforce the consumer's confidence in their often pricey purchase and in some cases to, dare I say, show off a bit with its austerity.

These designs are often on white paper with the brand name, appellation, varietal and vintage presented in simple typography, all in one or two colors. No art, no foil, no frills. Think super high-end cosmetics or an invitation to dinner with Britain's royal family.



**UNDERSTATED ELEGANCE [R. Collection]:** We call this the Tuxedo label. Restrained use of color and type in a field of white present this brand as both elegant and contemporary. The bright red capsule makes up for any lack of color in the label and gives the package just enough color to compete with other brightly colored brands that share the price-point.

PAUL KIRCHNER STUDIOS, SAN FRANCISCO, CA

**CONTEMPORARY:** Presenting the perception of advanced winemaking practices through an alliance with cutting-edge thinking in art and design. Excluding the Heritage category, a modern angle could be applied to any of the above listed categories although it probably works best with the Understated Elegance approach.

In the past, due to its often classic and minimalist look, this approach was typically used only for high-end, small production brands. In this enlightened age of wine packaging, that is no longer the case. Contemporary packaging transcends price-points; and as long as the selling environment and target consumer are thoughtfully considered, it presents equally well in both grocery store and fine wine boutique.



**CONTEMPORARY [Five Vintners]:** Less is definitely more in this case. The combination of classic-contemporary typography and a bold, black graphic on a field of white sets this Napa Valley brand apart from the competitive set.

DAVID BISHOP STUDIOS, SAN FRANCISCO, CA

## THERE IS A NICHE FOR EVERYBODY

As the world continues to become smaller and smaller, people feel more of a need to express themselves, their uniqueness, their individuality. This has allowed the wine industry to micro-market specifically to smaller demographic subsets, targeted to the tastes and interests of the individual.

In the soft drink world, two main players produce the majority of the cola on the planet, and they are competing for market share. Their packaging must appeal to the broadest demographic and has what we call a “commercial” look. Wine, on the other hand, is made by tens of thousands of producers ranging in size from a few hundred cases a year to many millions per year. This is what has allowed wine labels and wine marketing to maintain individuality and creative appeal. Integrity. It hasn’t been beaten down and homogenized to appeal to the lowest common denominator.

It is the smaller producers who have the luxury of being able to express themselves in a more creatively risky manner. As long as they have the quality to back it up, they can put out the wackiest packaging imaginable and get away with it. As completely unique as they may be, they are more than likely to fall into, and appeal to, a similar demographic subset as the niche consumer they are trying to reach; put out a label with a sail boat on it, and I will guarantee you that the sailing community will embrace it and keep it on hand in their galleys.

Like the cola giants, large wine brands find themselves needing to move massive amounts of product from vintage to vintage. This requires a less risky and broader approach with more mass-appeal to the positioning and packaging. This accounts for the less creative and more commercial look of some of the larger grocery store brands. That said, the beauty of marketing wine is that even the more com-

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mercial brands can be presented in uniquely creative and interesting packaging.

The above-mentioned positioning categories represent only a few of the endless possibilities for strategically building a strong and memorable brand image. At the end of the day, there really is no wrong “position” as

long as the thought behind the positioning is developed properly and thoroughly. It must communicate the brand essence in an effective, attractive manner that stands out on-shelf and can be easily recognized for future purchases. And above all it must say, “I am wine, drink me.” **wbm**