

MARCH 2006

WINE ENTHUSIAST

M A G A Z I N E



WINE CHANGES ITS IMAGE

Three Years of Great California Chardonnay

Chile: Home of Bordeaux's Forgotten Red?

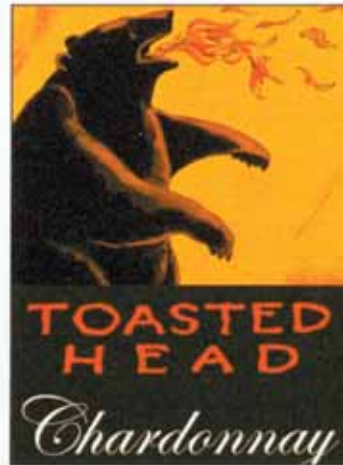
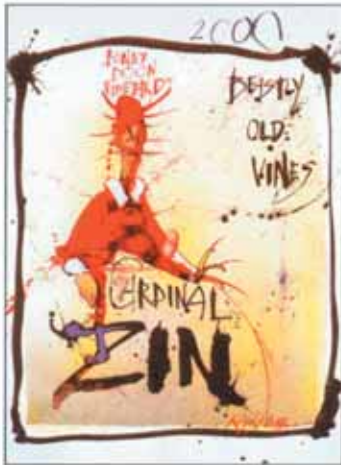


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Critters, cleavage and cartoons are replacing elegant script and clean surfaces on wine labels. Why now, and where is this heading?

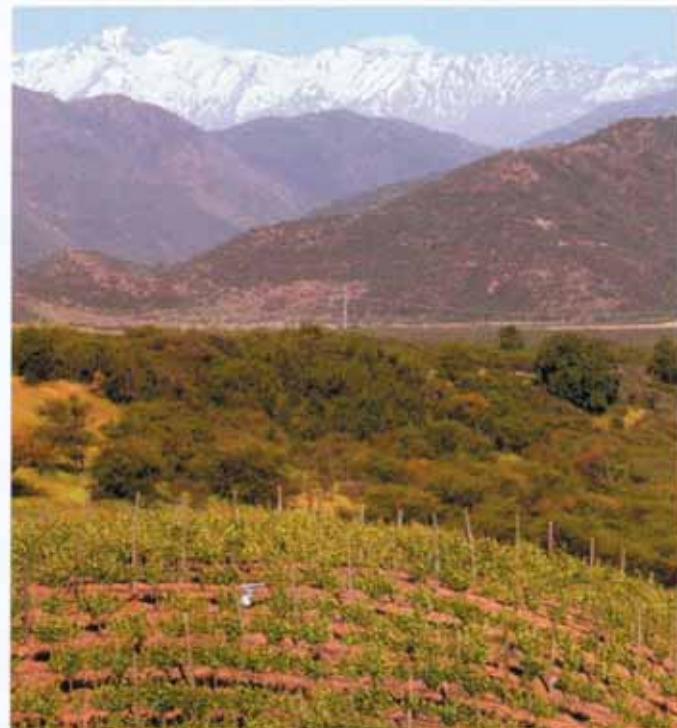
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CRITTERS, CLEAVAGE, CARTOONS AND A GENERAL CACOPHONY

LABELS

GONE

BY PAUL FRANSON

WILD

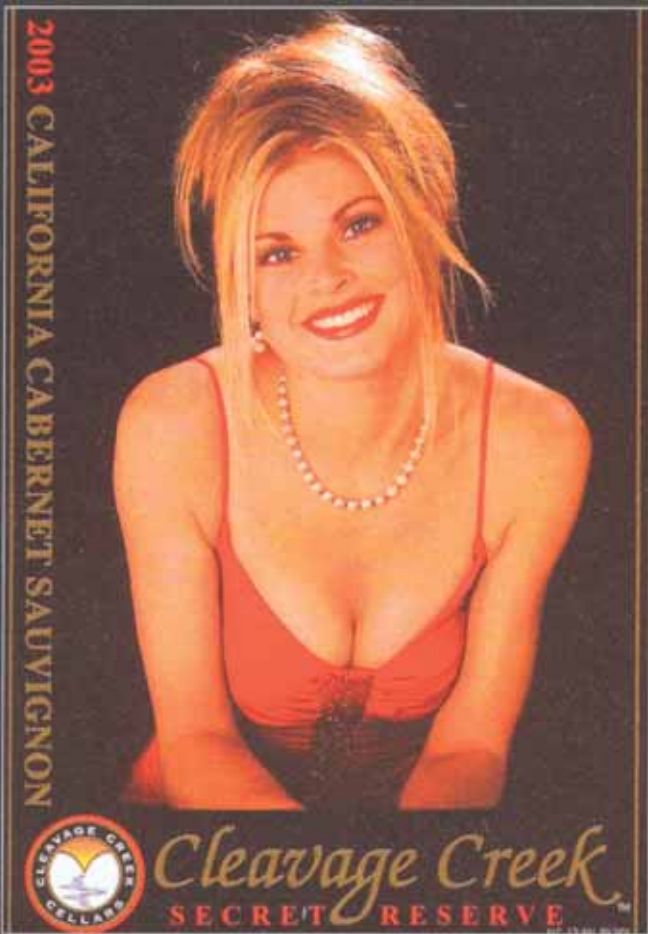
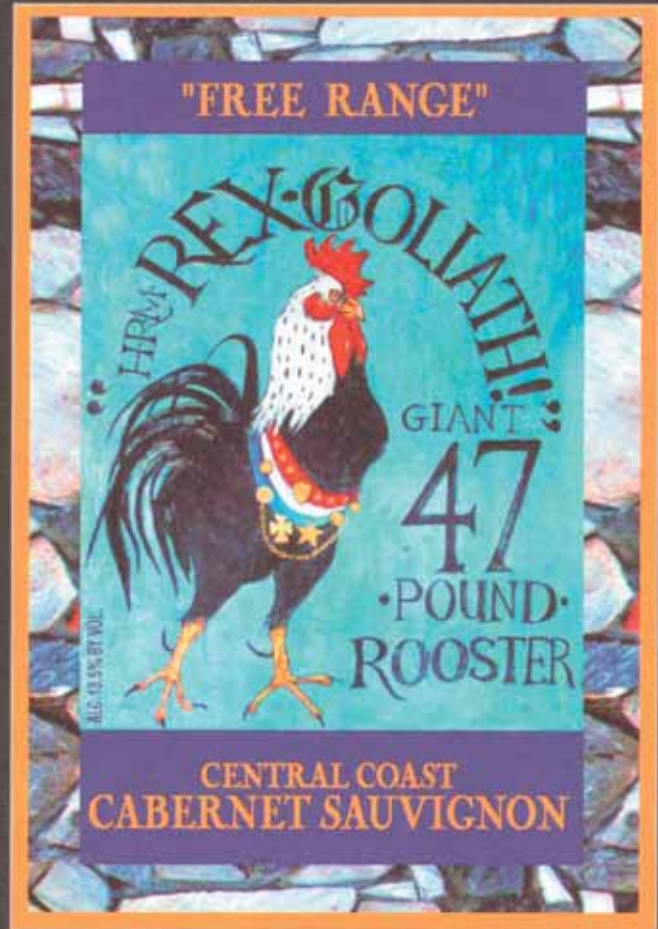
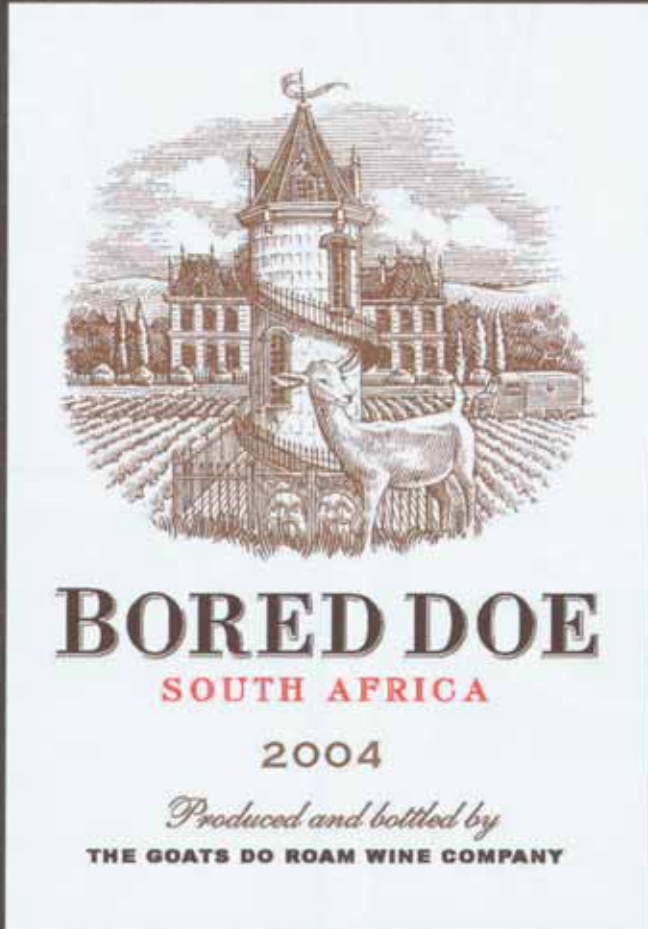
Wine labels used to be simple. They were designed to tell you what was in the bottle, though, admittedly, it sometimes seemed as though German and French labels were created to obscure that information and require buyers to become experts before they could even tell what they were buying.

Those days are long over. Now wine producers strive to create flashy, eye-catching packages that yell "Buy me." Sometimes these packages have questionable connection to the wine, and some are even in bad taste.

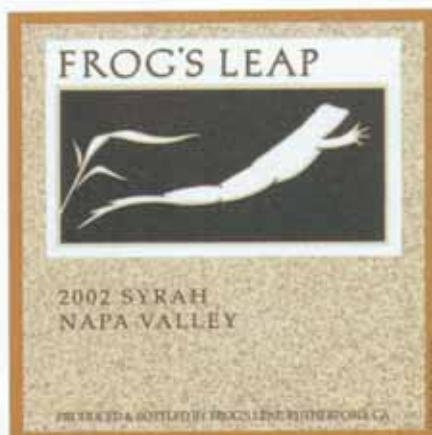
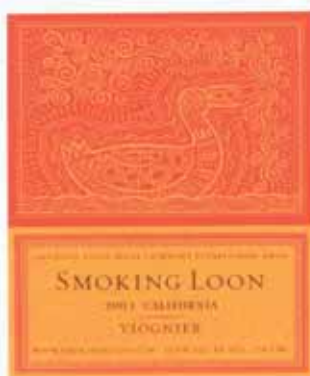
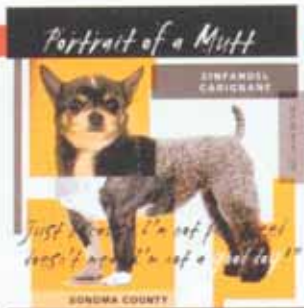
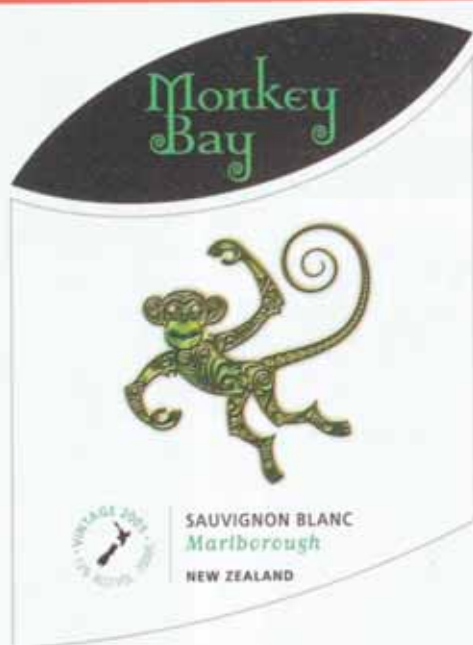
France contributes Fat Bastard with its chubby hippopotamus, and Italy, the reportedly undrinkable Il Bastardo. (There are a few other brands sporting that "Italian" term, too.)

Even worse are Stu Pedasso (say it aloud), Old Tart and Old Fart. The descriptive Cat's Pee on a Gooseberry Bush Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand recalls critics' favorite descriptors of that wine. Spatzendreck, a wine from Germany whose name, roughly translated,

OF OUTRAGEOUS IMAGES ARE REPLACING ELEGANT SCRIPT AND



CLEAN SURFACES ON WINE LABELS. WHY NOW, AND WHERE IS THIS HEADING?



means sparrow, er, droppings, was named after a bird that once contributed fertilizer to the yeast in a fermenting vat.

In the past, most traditional European labels bore geographic names, and American producers followed that lead, choosing the names of popular European wine regions for their products with little regard for the varieties involved, or the characteristics of the wines.

As wine lovers became more sophisticated, however, New World producers sought to distinguish their wines from cheap jug wine. They chose to name the wines after the grape varieties used to make them rather than adopting the geographic conventions of most of Europe.

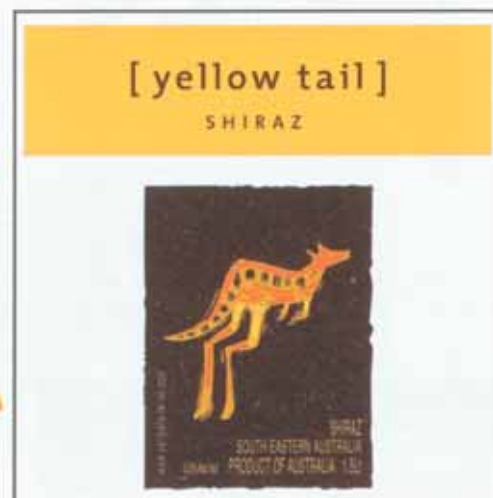
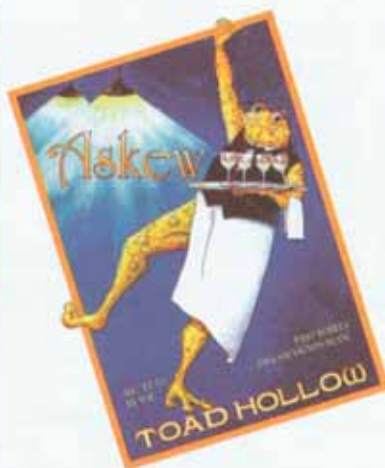
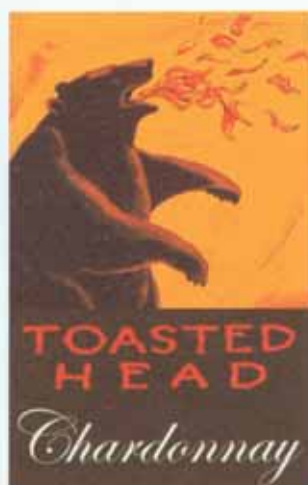
Tradition led to conservative labels, with many producers using the same label for all products except for changes in the variety and vintage year. There were only a few brands, anyway, and buyers found it easy to choose their

favorites from the relatively small shelf space they occupied in most stores.

Those were the days. Fast forward 40 years to today: There are reportedly more than 10,000 wine brands offered to U.S. wine lovers, in varieties from Albariño to Zinfandel. Enter any wine store and you have to choose from literally hundreds of bottles, your eyes assaulted by the visual cacophony of labels and packages, each seemingly more colorful than its neighbor. Producers are all trying to stand out from the competition and attract the buyer, especially the young, hip consumer.

It's no surprise that many of these wines come from California and Australia, which worship youth and cool. These labels strive to distinguish themselves from stuffy Old World and Old Boy wine traditions. "Millennials [those in their 20's] are turned off by the labels with a picture of a chateau on them. They think that's their grandfather's wine,"





says Liz Thach, a professor of wine marketing at Sonoma State University who recently supervised a study of attitudes among younger wine drinkers.

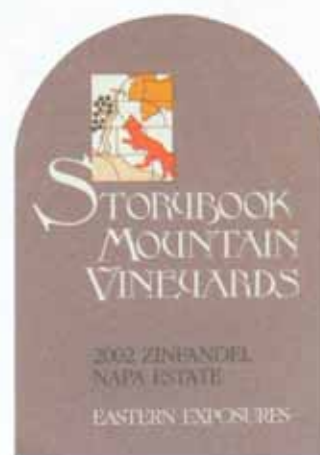
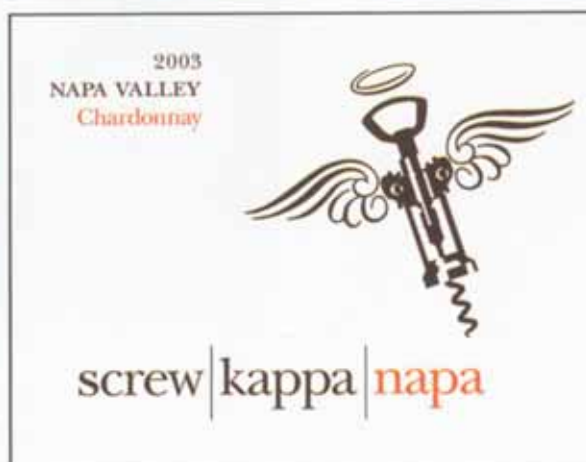
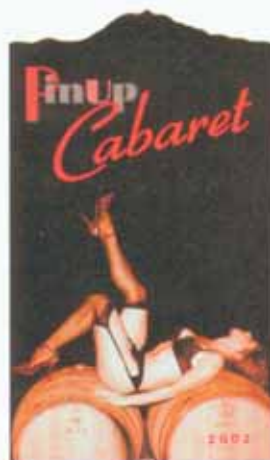
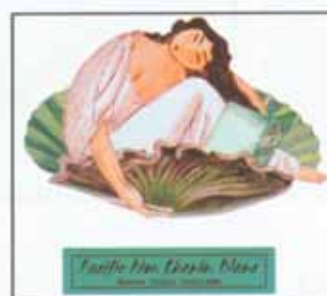
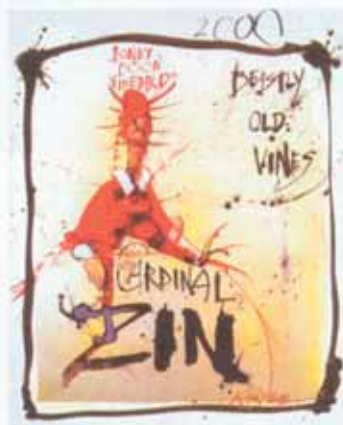
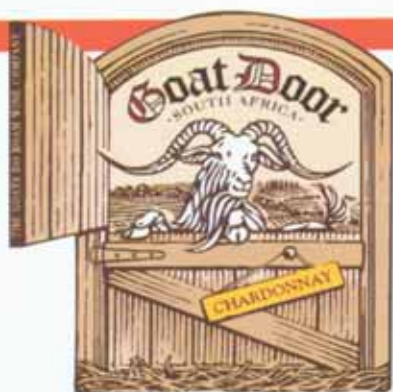
Some labels are quite strange, none more than those from Randall Grahm's Bonny Doon Winery. They include bad puns (My Favorite Marsanne, Originally Zin), strange drawings by artist Ralph Steadman (Cardinal Zin features a freakish church official; Domaine des Blagueurs, jokers), and marketing ploys from Bizarroworld: Big House Red's label features a drawing of Soledad prison; Le Cigare Volant is named for the French version of a flying saucer, and there's Le Pousseur (The Pusher) and il Fiasco. Thach notes the appeal to certain buyers: "One of the traits of Millennials is that they like the quirky, the offbeat. The preceding Generation X is more cynical."

Of late, however, the action among labels seems to be in the jungle.

Animals, mostly those perceived as noble, have long graced serious wine labels. Eagles and other birds, deer, foxes and members of the cat, dog and horse families are especially popular, including the quail of Covey Run, the crows of Croze and ravens of Ravenswood.

A few brands' identities are synonymous with the whimsical creatures on their labels. These include Toasted Head with its fire-breathing bruin, Frog's Leap with its classic leaping frog, lighthearted Toad Hollow and Goats do Roam, a tongue-in-cheek allusion to Côte du Rhône. Goat Roti is a similar take on expensive Côte Rôtie; then there's Goat Door (Côte d'Or) and Bored Doe.

Gundlach-Bundshu Winery, itself subject to jokes about its name, makes a Bordeaux blend called Bearitage (their play on "meritage"). Cayuse has a Flying Pig, a retort by eccentric "biomic Frog" winemaker Christophe Baron to those who doubted he could produce a



fine Bordeaux blend from an unlikely site in Walla Walla, Washington.

More recently, the wine shelf has turned into a veritable zoo of inexpensive wine, a situation many attribute to the phenomenal success of [yellow tail] with its stylized, yellow-footed rock wallaby, a small kangaroo that's known to roam the producer's vineyards.

The truth may go a bit deeper, however.

Cartoons attract children, and most of us maintain our nostalgia for Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse long after we've started to drink wine. It would seem a natural for wine companies to introduce Mickey Mouse Merlot and Charlie Brown Chardonnay but the wine

industry's code of ethics naturally prohibits promoting wine to minors, so that's out.

Cartoon animals may serve the same function. They appeal to younger buyers, and those who treasure their youth. Many of these same people regard animal brands as a refreshing alternative to the perceived stuffiness that pervades much of wine culture.

There's Jackaroo, Four Emus, Crocodile Rock and The Little Penguin from Australia, and Fat Cat and Monkey Bay from New Zealand (a land that has no monkeys). American companies, too, have their share of creatures, including Papio with its own monkeys, Three Blind



BEHIND EVERY LABEL...

Moose, King Fish and HMS Rex Goliath, which was named after a 47-pound sideshow rooster. "It's hard to believe the cuteness of the animals is not significant," notes Karen MacNeil, wine expert and chair of the wine department at the Culinary Institute of America's Rudd Center for Professional Wine Studies. "It helps create that first purchase."

Many brands appear targeted at female buyers, who purchase the majority of wine. "Women consume 60 percent of wine," observes MacNeil, though, she notes, "Women have bought most of the wine for decades—just not expensive wine." Women are said to be more attracted to packages than to numeric scores, and that may have led to some labels, like the venerable flowered Georges Duboeuf Beaujolais, and the Perrier-Jouët Champagne bottles, as well as brands like Beringer's White Lie and Mad Housewife, to be aimed specifically at women.

It's certainly true that an increasing number of marketing and advertising executives are women, and their different perspectives may be significant. As to whether a blatant appeal to women—or other categories of buyers—works, there's some controversy. "No one appreciates blatant marketing," says John Gillespie, president of the Wine Market Council and a partner in consulting firm Wine Colleagues. "The trick is to create product appeal without being overt."

MacNeil also finds "women's wines" slightly condescending. "There's a fine line between being culturally playful and [being] demeaning," she warns.

And while some producers target women, others cherish their macho images as outsiders. These include Three Thieves and Bandit, the Prisoner from Orin Swift, and Don Sebastiani's Screw Kappa Napa, which tweaks the corks of upscale Napa producers. Don Sebastiani and Sons also makes Smoking Loon, a name I can't figure out though the wine has proven very popular.

"Dead celebrities," particularly labels starring Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley, is another category marketers are exploring. Marilyn Merlot wine started out as a whim, but has evolved into one of the most collectible of wines; prices for multi-year collections approach those of fine Bordeaux and Burgundies. It is actually excellent Napa Valley wine, perhaps a shame since no one ever pulls its cork.

The latest in the Marilyn Merlot family is the Velvet Collection bottling, featuring the most famous nude photograph of all time: Monroe's original shot from the first *Playboy*. To placate the government and other would-be censors, the label sports strategic peel-off pasties, but I suspect that removing them would reduce the bottle's value.

Sadly, most of the wine was destroyed in a devastating warehouse fire, so that what remains fetches a remarkable price.

In a similar groove is Cleavage Creek wine, with proceeds benefiting breast cancer research, and PinUp, whose wine club members compete to grace the label.

At another level, Clos Pegase features original artwork each year, and once had a serious abstract painting featuring a subject's family jewels rejected by the government as too risqué. Happily, today's equivalent bureau has become more enlightened, and artistic nudes can pass muster.

Among other interesting labels is Carneros del Notte, which glows in the dark, and Dynamite, named for the explosive needed to plant its original vineyard; the brand sports a different label each year. Other producers also seek to create distinctive labels, and some naturally turn to designers who produce packaging for expensive cosmetics and other luxury goods.

Some of these wines with weird labels are actually quite good, others merely curiosities. It's said that people will buy an inexpensive wine once for a cute label, but the success of [yellow tail] and Rex Goliath proves a clever name can grace tasty wine.

As my father used to say, "There's no law that says a beautiful woman has to be dumb," and I guess a strange label can front excellent wine just as easily. ■

...there is a story. It can be difficult for a budget-minded winery owner to decide between a buttoned-up, conservative, old-school design approach and the more free-wheeling, quirky one on display in these pages. For small wineries, it can be a wrenching personal process for the owner's vulnerable ego.

The three labels of California's Palmeri Vineyards, based in Geyserville, are both quirky and classic. Winery co-owners Denise Prentice, Kerry Damskey and Damskey's wife, Daisy, decided to highlight the environment of their vineyards, choosing the name from the scrubby *Quercus palmeri* oak that grows in the dry mountain ranges that winemaker Damskey favors for his wines.

As graphic elements for the labels, they chose animals that inhabit the vineyards: the wild boar (really, it's a feral pig), an offbeat choice since most growers consider the pigs nuisances; the fox, an appealing animal that eats gophers and other pests, though it also loves ripe grapes; and the bat, a vineyard hero because it will eat insects that threaten vines and grapes.

Having chosen the subjects, the Damskeys and Prentice decided they liked the style of old naturalists' pen-and-ink drawings, a style that seemed classic while distinctive.

To implement the designs, they turned to Australian Linda Schroeder, an artist married to winemaker Mick Schroeder of Geyser Peak Winery; Schroeder has designed wine labels for 17 years. For Palmeri's project, she researched old illustrations on the Internet for inspiration, and used ancient paper as background for the images.

She found it took a lot of tweaking to give the animals more kindly mouths—let's face it, none of the three is warm and cuddly. She did the drawings by hand, then scanned them to complete the process on the computer. After numerous iterations, she showed the labels to the clients, who found them perfect.

