

# How do you judge a book, then?

## Consumer perceptions of wine labels

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***Wine Intelligence recently conducted a study of UK and US consumers to assess the general meaning and value placed on certain styles of wine labels. This article is a brief overview of the key research findings.***

If you have ever been taken to task by a fully paid-up wine snob about the importance (or, more accurately, the lack of importance) of wine labels, I know how you feel. This year, I celebrated 10 years in the wine industry and, during that time, I have lost count of how many occasions I have been ear-bent by some expert or other (be they industry practitioners or just highly involved consumers). Their thesis, in summary: label designs, and words on labels, are trivial window dressing; what's in the bottle is the only thing that matters. Typically, they will then go on to trash the idea of market research in the wine sector, at which point the conversation tends to stiffen up somewhat, given it is how I earn a living.

One thing that a decade in the wine industry has given me is a sense of perspective. It does not mean that I can speak with authority of an industry eminence grise – quite the opposite, in fact. Most people that my company, Wine Intelligence, works for have been in the industry for far longer than me, and know more than I ever will about terroir, pruning, frost, and the encyclopaedia of functions that are required to turn grapes into wine. Instead, I offer the perspective of one who is still relatively 'wet behind the ears' in wine industry terms, and still remembers life as an ordinary shopper and restaurant-goer.

If I were able to telephone my earlier, pre-industry self and interrogate him, I expect he would say something like this: "Sure, the actual wine matters – I want to buy something I like. But, in the end, I have to decide on what to buy based purely on the outside of the bottle – the label, the wording, and, of course, the price – so, of course, packaging matters, too."

Fortunately, I don't have to dip into my sub-conscious to remind myself of this fact. I am in the privileged position of listening to consumers around the world talk about wine on a regular basis through the various focus groups, in-depth interviews and street-intercept product tests that Wine Intelligence undertakes for its clients. A consistent element in all of these pieces of research is how significantly the label influences how people feel about the product.

Once, a client and I played a rather underhand (but legitimate) trick on respondents who were gathered for a sensory testing focus group in the UK. We poured four tasting samples of a white wine from four very different bottles: one was a tall Riesling-style green bottle with a Germanic label; one looked a bit like a Loire Sauvignon Blanc; another looked like a typical New World wine; and one was made up to look like an Italian white. The trick: all the samples were exactly the same wine (a pleasant, reasonably priced German Riesling, as it happens).

We didn't mention anything about the packaging, but simply asked people to taste and record their thoughts on answer sheets – which one was their favourite, what the taste was, etc. Our objective, in case you hadn't guessed, was to see what happened when UK consumers were given a product that many of them thought they disliked (Riesling) in packaging that suggested it was another type of wine entirely.

A couple of the respondents almost rumbled our scheme, but the remaining six gave what they felt were genuine answers that differentiated between the 'products' being tasted. Several respondents were quite adamant that they liked wine B much better than wine D, and gave quite detailed explanations, despite the fact that they were describing the same wine. The result: the Riesling bottle came last by a long way, and the 'Loire' bottle came first, with the Italian and New World bottles a fairly close second and third, respectively.

Of course, a contrived test with a few respondents in a focus group proves nothing, but the episode has always stuck with me. Despite my growing experience in this industry, I do find myself buying wine for my own consumption that fits certain visual cues of attractiveness in terms of label design and presentation.

Rather than leave things there, the researchers in us wanted to get to the bottom of this label-centric behaviour. Earlier this year, we invested our own money in a series of research exercises in the UK and US using a series of dummy labels designed by Neil Tully MW, of Amphora, one of the best designers operating in the wine label business.

Tully developed eight different label designs which broadly reflect the way consumers themselves categorise the bottles they see on shelves. We gave them names such as 'stately', 'contemporary' and 'light-hearted' (see Figure 1). Different types of label appealed more so to different age groups and genders – more of which shortly.

Wine Intelligence chose France and California as sample countries of origin for the experiment, because these are the top-selling producers of wine in the US market. For the corresponding piece of research in the UK, we chose France and Australia, the number two and number one selling countries, respectively.

Our primary research question focussed simply on how the label cues would influence how people felt about the product, what occasion it would be appropriate for, and how much it would cost. We then showed these series of labels, plus accompanying questions, to a sample of 2000 consumers in the US, and 1000 in the UK, in an online survey conducted in March 2011.

We discovered some interesting things as a result of the work, which we made into a report (see note at the end if you're interested in learning more). Some of the top lines: wine labelling in the US is a bit of a broader church, with more opportunities for



Figure 1.

a broader spectrum of symbols and semiotics. In the UK, however, the 'code frame' of what a wine label should do was much more prescribed, and it was harder to get British consumers to empathise with more quirky approaches.

Broadly speaking, older consumers find traditional labels reassuring, especially for more formal occasions. It's an oversimplification to say that that over-55s are suckers for a crest and a little gold panelling, but such design cues certainly seem to resonate with seniors.

Women are drawn to eclectic and contemporary label designs more than men, the research found, but that doesn't mean they think they are the highest quality. Neither does it mean that such wines will always trump rivals with more conservative labels when it comes to actually making a purchase. Such wines may be fine for an informal occasion, but for a dinner party or a celebration, women actually prefer the labels classified as 'stately'. They are also more comfortable offering wines with stately labels as gifts.

One thing that the work rather punctured was the conventional wisdom that the wine category needs to 'jazz itself up' to appeal more to the young. It is true that younger consumers (especially in America) were more open to modern and contemporary styles, but not to the exclusion of the more conservative approaches. Humour was something of a lit firework when it came to wine labels: more knowledgeable and confident consumers were happy to play

along if the joke was low key, and appropriate; on the other hand, inexperienced consumers (who are often younger) generally found it a turn-off.

The secondary research question was around how the country of origin as listed on the label affected people's views. Suffice to say, there are certain things that Old World countries can get away with that don't fly for New World countries – and vice versa. I apologise that page space, and my colleagues in the sales team, prevent me from revealing more: if you want the details, you'll have to buy the report!

Having done the exercise, we took a step back and tried to rationalise what we had found. Certain home truths were clear: packaging, in general, and labels, in particular, form a crucial element in the decision-making process (take that, harrumphing wine snob!) Most people are not going to spend hours choosing a wine to buy. Amid a wide range of choice, they are looking for short-cuts – 'heuristics' to use the behaviourist's phrase – to get where they want to go.

The short-cuts could be rational or emotional: 'Merlot' is a big signpost for lots of people; so is the picture of a Chateau (or something that looks a bit like a Chateau). The use of gold tells people things; as does the use of calligraphy and stamps or icons.

Our work has only really scratched the surface. The language of wine labels is a dream study for a university semiotics department: layers of meaning, complex consumer needs, competition between the rational and emotional. It's almost as complex, perhaps, as making the wine itself. As it turns out, it's just as important...if not more so.

*The Wine Intelligence Labels Report is available for the UK and US markets: contact [Reports-Shop@wineintelligence.com](mailto:Reports-Shop@wineintelligence.com) or go to [www.wineintelligence.com/reports-shop](http://www.wineintelligence.com/reports-shop) for more details.*

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