

Wineries Create Custom Glass Bottles to Build Brand Recognition

Achieving sales success through the impact of glass shape and design on ultra-premium and luxury-tiered wines

Stacy Briscoe

Key Points

- Custom glass creates brand recognition — in the tasting room, in the supermarket and online
- Glass manufacturers and suppliers offer advice on custom designs for wine businesses of any size
- Winemakers share their custom glass successes and challenges

SEVERAL ULTRA-PREMIUM AND LUXURY brands have found success in creating custom glass bottles. “From what we hear from our clients, custom bottles seem to be the preferred bottles purchased in the DTC marketplace,” said **Franck Collet**, president of **Saverglass, U.S.**, going on to say that once brand recognition occurs, these purchases then translate into significant increases in wholesale orders.

Collet, along with his colleague **Régis Maillet**, group marketing director for Saverglass, said they’ve seen an increase in custom glass orders from wine clients that want to add an identifiable personal touch to their bottles. “They want bottles to be instantly identified as their own,” Collet said. And, yet, he also acknowledges that the market is “quite traditional when it comes to code and design.”

John T. Shaddox, general manager, wine at **Ardagh Group North America**, agreed, saying, “The wine industry, out of all the beverage alcohol categories, probably has the most history in its glass bottle shapes.” He called out the classic Bordeaux and Burgundy shapes specifically, noting they continue to appeal to the majority of wine consumers. “People appreciate the rich history of the shape,” he said. “Despite the rise in popularity of alternative packaging, like bag-in-a-box, traditionalists will always want wine in a traditional glass bottle.”

So how can a winery or wine brand maintain the nostalgia and consumer expectation while simultaneously providing the “wow” factor and demand consumer attention?

Advice from the Manufacturers

Shaddox suggests leveraging that history, elegance and romance of the traditional bottle shape by employing simple changes to the frame, such as a unique neck taper, a pronounced punt or an engraved signature or emblem. One “trend” Shaddox said he’s seen resurge is embossing, embedding a wine’s insignia or emblem by blowing the design directly into the glass. “You can do this with a stock mold at a reduced cost,” he said. “Don’t just assume it’s not worth looking into because it can be highly effective.”

He does warn, though, when considering an embossing embellishment, to be aware of the bottle shape’s “contact areas.” These are spots on the glass, such as the shoulder or the heel, where the bottles will touch when set side by side, as in a bottling line. “The bottles are created to withstand contact, but embossing should be done on a smooth, flat area designed for it,” Shaddox said.

For clients concerned about the look, feel and functionality of the final product, Shaddox noted that Ardagh supplies both 3D renderings and/or small sample orders of custom glass designs.

According to Collet and Maillet, many of their clients want to rush development. Collet explained the timeframe for product completion and delivery is dependent on the complexity of the bottle being designed; but as a rule of thumb, clients should give themselves approximately six months for the development of a full custom bottle. “Lead times are shorter if we are only personalizing the base plate or the ring finish,” Collet added.

The most important piece of advice all experts agree on is that those looking to invest in custom glass bottles for the first time need to plan ahead: Take time to develop a story and solidify who the target audience is before beginning the designing process; Be aware of the time it will take to develop a design from scratch and turn that design into reality; Ensure winery equipment, such as bottling lines and labelers, will be able to accommodate any unique shapes or molds; And, of course, choose a glass supplier that can best accommodate specific needs and expectations, including budget.



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What's Working for Winemakers?

Harken Ancient History

Modus Operandi 2011 Orange Wine

"I'm always thinking about how to market wine and stand out in the crowd," said **Jason Moore**, winemaker at **Modus Operandi**, adding that marketing is another passion of his. In 2011, Moore decided he wanted to try his hand at making his first orange wine. It was a "super funky and weird" experiment from the start.



Moore said the winemaking method was a nod to the way wine was made three to four thousand years ago in ancient Greece, Rome or Syria. He utilized 100 percent destemmed Sauvignon Blanc, skin-fermented the grapes in upright open-top French oak barrels and gently hand-pressed over his pump-over screen at 12° Brix. The wine then aged in 100 percent French oak barrels, one new and one used, for three years.

After the first six months of aging, Moore and his colleagues taste-tested the experiment. The general consensus: "That is gross." But Moore kept the experiment going. A year later, his colleagues' opinions became more adamant: "You need to dump those barrels. They are nasty." Still, Moore waited.

"Two years later, I tasted it—I couldn't believe how much of a corner it turned," he said. "It really started to come together." Six months after that, for a total of

two-and-a-half years of aging, Moore was "blown away" by the results.

"In my mind, I knew the exact bottle I had to use," Moore said. Moore had first seen the uniquely shaped bottle at the **Bruni** stand during the **Unified Wine & Grape Symposium**. To him, the shape was reminiscent of the clay amphorae pots used in traditional Georgian or Syrian winemaking. "It's an ode to that sense of history," he said. "It tied together the story of ancient wine production to this one."

Though the bottle was one of the company's stock molds, called **Bacchitectus**, it was still considered a custom order and took six months to ship from the manufacturer's Italy-based factory. It cost Moore \$3 per bottle, \$36 per case. "It's the most expensive glass I've ever put wine into," he said. "Totally worth it."

Moore only produced 50 cases of the orange wine, and it was sold exclusively DTC through his wine club at \$125 per bottle. But, he said, if this wine ever was on the shelf, he's confident that the bottle alone would be enough for someone to pick it up. "There's a huge ocean of competition out there. What are you going to do, as a brand, to have a customer pick up a bottle and explore more? That's what I think about," he said.

The orange wine, which released in spring 2015, sold out "basically immediately," according to Moore, and he said he still hears from customers who have held onto the empty bottle as decoration and a few who haven't even opened it yet because they view it as such a collector's item.

Moore admitted he did lose one wine club member who drank the wine and "didn't get it." Upon release, Moore created a **YouTube** video for his customers, explaining the difference in the wine's fermentation process and warning that the wine does not taste like a classic Sauvignon Blanc. The lost club member did not watch the video.

Mix it Up with Modernity

Adobe Road Winery 2016 'Shift'

"Red wine may—or may not—raise your adrenaline levels, but this new series of four exceptional wines will definitely start your engine!" So reads the **Adobe Road Winery's** marketing materials for the winery's new "Racing Series," a series of four red blends aimed at the mass-consumer marketplace.



Race car driver, race team and winery owner, **Kevin Buckler**, said that the idea for this high-production series is one he's always "toyed with" but was hesitant because he's protective of his petite brand. Founded in 2002, Adobe Road Winery today produces 4,000 cases annually with an average bottle price of \$48, selling approximately 60 percent of their wines DTC. "It's hard to get much traction in the distributor market," Buckler said. "They're working with a lot of 'big guy wines' that can sell 10 times what we have."

To rev up his marketing game, Buckler, along with his winemaker **Garrett Martin**, changed trajectory to create the new portfolio, crafting wines normally out of their wheelhouse and designing packaging to match.

While two of the four red blends are vesseled in traditional Bordeaux bottles and one in a Burgundy bottle, the appropriately named "Shift" (\$56) is by far the stand-out design — both inside and out.

The blend is comprised of Zinfandel, Barbera, Grenache, Petite Sirah and Carignan. "I like to watch the wine business from afar," Buckler said. "I see what the 'young buck' winemakers are doing—interesting, sometimes odd blends." Buckler remembers when blends like this were categorized as cheap table wine. Today, he noted, winemakers are seeing success with innovative blending. "And selling them at top dollar," he added.

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Buckler and Martin employed this same tactic when creating the blends for the new portfolio. “The idea with Shift was Zinfandel as the backbone then using varieties that usually take a back seat to enhance the flavor profile” he said. The two worked on the blend for over a month, playing “chemist” and taste-testing each other’s creations blind. “There were no preconceived notions, no expectations, other than let’s create a delicious red blend,” Buckler said.

The name is a reference to the out-of-the-norm winemaking process for Adobe Road Winery as Buckler and Martin “shift” away from the single-variety, single-vineyard offerings Buckler built his business and brand on.

Of course, the name is also a nod to Buckler’s other passion, racing. The bottle, which is a Bordeaux port-shaped bottle (the supplier/manufacturer information is proprietary, according to Buckler), includes a metal label that resembles a vintage, gated shifter. The cork is topped with a five-speed shift knob.

These two elements, designed by Buckler himself, had to be applied to the petite bottle by hand. “Because of the uniqueness of the label the application had to be so precise. It was time-consuming and a bit expensive, but we like doing things right,” Buckler said. The first few bottles that were shipped directly from the winery’s offices were hand-labeled by the Adobe Road Winery team. But Buckler said the fulfillment house and warehouse for distributor sales completed the majority.

Adobe Road Winery produced 5,000 cases of the racing series, and Buckler plans to double that next year. As of this writing, the wines haven’t been released in the marketplace yet, but Buckler has already garnered the interest of consumers because of the packaging, and the wines themselves have received top marks from critics.

“We crafted a fine wine, good packaging and tied it all back to our successful story,” Buckler said. “This opens up the market for us and will help our distributors sell our product.”

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Say it with Subtlety Larkmead Vineyards 2013 Bottle Redesign

In 2013 **Larkmead Vineyards**, which produces approximately 10,000 cases annually with an average bottle price of \$113, implemented an entire package re-design, which included minute, easily over-looked changes to the winery's bottles.



The bottom of the bottle now includes an inscribed mold that reads "Larkmead Founded in 1895." "It can be looked at as a custom design feature, but also an identifying feature in matters of authenticating the bottle in a 'post-Rudy' world," said winemaker **Dan Petroski**. He said the redesign was not something the winery self-promoted, instead it was intended as a "subtle find" for the drinkers of Larkmead's wines.

Larkmead's winery relations manager, **Erinn Maloney**, called the decoration an "Easter Egg" for the winery's customers. "They don't find out about the customization until their orders arrive at their home and they are putting the bottles away in their cellar," she said.

Maloney said the winery hasn't tracked whether the custom glass has motivated customers to purchase again or sign up for memberships. "But we can say that those who comment on it find it a really innovative, creative way to add branding and security to our wines," she said.

The redesign also included a re-crafted bottle lip, intended to improve both style and functionality. Petroski said the previous lip had a high, thick ring that caused a great deal of dripping along the bottle when pouring the wine, resulting in a stained label. The new current bottles have a thinner ring placed lower on the neck of the bottle. "It made the neck and lip slightly more elegant," Petroski said.

Build Brand Consistency Quintessa

Quintessa winemaker **Rebekah Wineburg** wasn't on staff when the winery bottled its first 1994 vintage, so she can't speak to the bottle's design conception or development. But what she can say for a fact is that the bottle design has been consistent from that first bottling through the current day.

"Quintessa was founded and developed by the **Huneus** family, whose goal was to establish a vineyard and winery that would be a timeless classic. Everything we do is a reflection of that," Wineburg said. The bottle, she added, is a perfect example of that mission statement.

"A custom bottle like this reflects something about us — the winery, the wine inside," she said.

Quintessa is renowned for its Bordeaux-inspired blend, with each vintage containing some or all of the five Bordeaux varieties grown on the organic and Biodynamically farmed property: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Carménère. The bottle is a traditional Bordeaux shape, the cartouche a common embellishment from the region.

From the consumer standpoint, Wineburg said that the classic, consistent look has allowed customers to connect with the total

package design. She said she's had customers send her pictures of their birthday cakes—shaped like a Quintessa bottle. "One customer just the other day brought me a drawing his 10-year-old son did for him. It was a Quintessa bottle," Wineburg said.

"Everything, from the shape to the label, is recognizable," she said. "And readable," Wineburg added, referring to social media. While the bottle doesn't evoke any "wow" factors per se, the sizeable 'Q' on the shoulder and the clearly scripted winery name on the label are easily visible when scrolling through the ream of wine brands now showcased on **Twitter, Instagram and Facebook**. "This is where people are making friends over wine now...people share experiences and recommendations," Wineburg said, emphasizing the importance of brand consistency and recognizability with an online presence.

But Wineburg does caution wine industry colleagues who are considering implementing a custom mold into their permanent portfolio that "it is a big commitment." "It will be a marriage between you and that glass supplier," she said. "It's your brand, your bottle, but their mold." She warned that this relationship can be a potential difficulty if one doesn't work closely with their supplier and maintain open communication.

Everything, from price increases ("You can't bargain hunt when you have a custom mold," Wineburg said) to scheduling ("Bottle production schedule doesn't line up with winery bottling schedule," she added) can impede a winery's production process.

She also advises running any change to a bottle—big or small—by the winery's bottler. "An idea may sound great, it may even look great—but at 70 to 80 bottles a minute, certain beautiful designs are not always feasible," she said. She recommends asking the glass supplier for a sample to show the winery's bottle mechanic or mobile bottler—he or she will be able to discern whether the machinery can accommodate the glass mold. **WBM**

