

Reflecting on a Career of Wine Packaging

Randall Grahm, well-known winemaker and one of the original Rhône Rangers, kicked off the conference with a keynote speech covering his experiences, successes and missteps in packaging, design and brand marketing.

Grahm is known for standout wine labels incorporating everything from pop art to fine art, intellectual plays on words to “doon” right dirty jokes. But the truth is, as a young winemaker entering the industry, Grahm’s not-so-simple goal was to craft Californian Pinot Noir as elegant and refined as those found in Burgundy. And his wine labels reflected, what he called, this “naïve” goal: simple, elegant wine with simple, elegant labels. “I thought, ‘let the wine do the salesmanship,’” he said.

But there was nothing about the fine script relaying basic wine

facts — name, varietal, vintage — that spoke to the wine consumers: nothing that told the story of what was in the bottle; nothing that told Grahm’s story as a winemaker.

Through the course of his speech, Grahm illustrated his evolution as a winemaker. He found that California *terroir* (defined by Grahm as “the reflection of nature’s order”) was more suitable to the wines of southern France, namely Châteauneuf-du-Pape (CdP) and the Rhône varieties Bonny Doon is now so well known for.

Playing with what was back in the 1980s, “unconventional” grape varieties, Grahm realized he needed a way to speak to consumers to tell them, “it’s ok to try this unknown.”

But, how does one tell the story of the CdP on the confines of a wine label? For those who aren’t familiar with the story behind Grahm’s famed Cigare Volant, the

name — and subsequently the label illustration — is connected to the local CdP government’s regulation banning flying saucers (*cigare volants*) from flying over the vineyards:

“The flying overhead, landing and taking off of aeronautical machines called ‘flying saucers’ or ‘flying cigars,’ of whatever nationality they may be is strictly forbidden on the territory of the commune of Châteauneuf-du-Pape.”

Bringing a bit of French history, wit and of course a comedic illustration (showcasing a flying saucer hovering over a vineyard), Grahm was able to play down the stereotypes of pretension surrounding French and French-inspired wines.

Using humor to contextualize the unknown created an inclusive relationship between winemaker and wine drinker. Grahm and his roster of well-known artists such as

Chuck House and Wendy Hook among many others have continued this tactic to the delight of consumers and critics alike.

But when asked “what’s next” in the world of packaging design, Grahm admitted, “I don’t know.” He said that in a day and age when everyone is being clever, being clever isn’t necessarily going to make a label stand out.

Grahm apologized for his reputation for often times irreverent label art. “I owe the wine world a formal apology for my onslaught of goofiness,” he said. “Forgive me world, I have committed a ‘Cardinal Zin.’”

Jokes aside, Grahm’s key takeaway was about the ability of the bottle to form a relationship with potential buyers. “The important thing to remember is that creating a package is a partnership between the design and the consumer,” said Grahm. Create that relationship, solidify that partnership and those are the building blocks to a successful brand.

— Stacy Briscoe



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