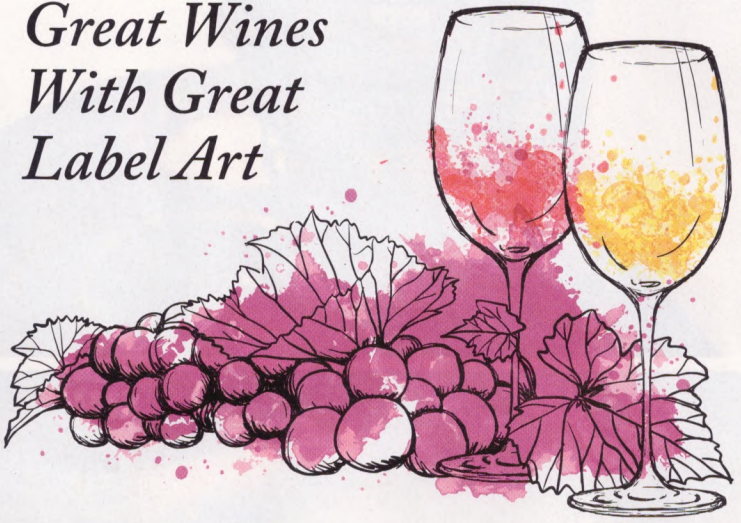


EMBRACING *the Labels*

Great Wines With Great Label Art



It may be heresy for a wine writer to say this, but there's more to admire about wine than just the liquid inside the bottle. There's the wine bottle itself, including its shape, color and, especially, its label.

Although wineries obviously focus on making wine, they also pay careful attention to the appearance of their bottles. Wineries relying on sales in wine and grocery stores know it is essential their bottles stand out from the many others on store shelves. Although some customers select wine based on wine reviews or recommendations from wine-store staff, most either pick something they've enjoyed before or, consciously or subconsciously, pick bottles with attractive labels.

Wine labels serve multiple purposes. They carry information

about the wine, including health warnings and other required specifics (many of which appear on back labels). But beyond that, labels are a sales tool in which wineries invest time, money and marketing savvy. In the process, many labels end up being artistic, with the art ranging from classic to humorous.

Competitions to select and recognize the most artistic wine labels have appeared over the last decade or two. This column also does that, but with a very important twist. Instead of judging only on the basis of labels, I decided to simultaneously judge the quality of the wines. Therefore, the following wines are highly recommended not only for their attractive, interesting labels on the outside, but also for their attractive, interesting wines on the inside:

CLOUDY BAY 2014 Sauvignon Blanc *"Marlborough, New Zealand" (\$27)*

THE LABEL: The beauty of this label is its dimensionality. A row of dark conifers frames the bottom of the image, followed by hills and mountains of increasing height that progressively fade in the background. The print on the label blends in perfectly.

THE WINE: This is a classic among New Zealand Sauvignon Blancs. It emphasizes purity of aroma and flavor, as both feature crystal clear, finely honed, well-focused fruit and—like its label—emphasizes beautifully integrated, multidimensional layers.



J non-vintage sparkling wine "Brut Rosé, Russian River Valle" (\$38)

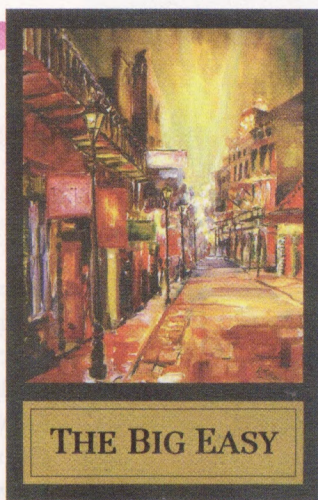
THE LABEL: Here, it's the total package, because the label is solely a stylistic "J." But put that label on a beautifully curved bottle, make the bottle clear to show off the salmon-colored wine, top it with a bold, black, angled capsule and result is visually stunning.

THE WINE: This delightful sparkling wine features textured, mouth-filling froth. Highly enjoyable to sip alone, it is also wonderful with a variety of foods thanks to expressive Pinot Noir fruit, fresh on-the-mark acidity and a prolonged finish.



THE BIG EASY (BY FESS PARKER)
2012 red blend "Santa Barbara County" (\$35)

THE LABEL: Bold, brassy, busy and bright, just how I imagine the streets of New Orleans as the Basin Street Blues blares through open doors. Plus, the assertively printed, evocative name of the wine supports the strikingly colorful painting by Diane Millsap.



THE WINE: This Syrah-dominated Rhône blend has a bold, complex nose that demands attention, just like New Orleans. Its flavors feature rich, smoothly textured fruit, a well-integrated profile, and a long, strong finish. Reminds me of Dixieland jazz at its best.

MAISON L'ENVOYÉ 2013 Pinot Noir
"The Attaché, Willamette Valley, Oregon" (\$38)

THE LABEL: The three-tiered, stylistic images of Oregon landscapes captivates long after first glance. The scenes of farmland to mountain, city to farm and vineyards texturing hills are in black and white, beautifully set off by gold lettering and a splash of orange.

THE WINE: This leaner style of Pinot Noir reflects the winery's vineyards in Oregon and roots in Burgundy. I loved its complexity in both nose and palate, especially as it developed throughout the long-lingering, well-balanced finish.



CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE 2012 red blend
"Artist Series, Columbia Valley, Washington" (\$60)

THE LABEL: An image of artist Dave Chihuly's glass sculpture cast in silver dominates the black label. The winery's name and vintage above and the author's signature below are in classic gold and are subtly separated from the sculpture by textured bars.

THE WINE: This ageable Bordeaux blend of mostly Cabernet and Merlot is now a bit closed, so uncork well before drinking to allow its expressive nose and complex flavors to fully develop. Moderate tannins provide structure and are tamed by pairing with beef.



LEEWIN 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon
"Art Series, Margaret River, Australia" (\$58)

THE LABEL: Some wineries commission artists for their labels, such as this distinctive work by Tim Storrier featuring eye-catching flames below beautifully hued clouds. Gold lettering on a light background informs on the wine without detracting from the artwork.

THE WINE: This powerful Cab has strong fruit, medium-soft tannins, and attention-demanding complexity. Not everything is revealed at first sip, but the wine grows and finishes big, complex and with a length that extends for minutes. ▲



RECOMMENDED WINES CAN BE ORDERED FROM YOUR FAVORITE ARIZONA WINE STORE. WRITE TO JOHN VANKAT AT AZPINEWINE@YAHOO.COM.