

# WHAT'S IN A LABEL?

written by Darrell Corti

The label of a wine bottle is generally considered the way information is given for that particular bottle. It contains, according to U.S. regulations, all the information needed for the consumer to make a reasonable choice in selection. By law a wine label must show the name of the producer of the wine, where the wine came from, what variety (varieties in percentage) it is made from, how much alcohol it has, and the address of the producer. Fanciful names or generic names are accepted provided they are not obscene, national (an American flag is not permitted on a wine label), or otherwise deemed inappropriate by the TTB which regulates such things.

The earliest labels known are those impressed on Egyptian amphora of the earliest dynasties. These hieroglyphics indicated the date of the vintage and the winemaker. Where the wine came from was obviously known and thus not impressed on the clay pots. Also, winemakers were already well known, thus obviating the name of the wine, but specifying the producer.

Roman amphorae were sealed much the same way. Curiously, the entire period from the Late Roman to the beginning of the 1700s, has no idea of a wine label. When wines were labeled in England, for example, the label was a small silver or porcelain label, hung by a chain around a decanter, identifying the wine. (It was considered poor taste to put an ugly dark bottle on the table.)

By the time bottle labels appeared on wine bottles, they were composed of numerous diverse types. Paper labels would not only state what was in the bottle, but would have art work of some type to render the label more conspicuous and give the consumer something to remember if remembering the name was not possible. The classic one from Germany, the land of really outrageous labels, is the famous for its label, Kröver Nachtarsh, showing a vintner spanking a young boy's bottom for having stolen some wine from a cask in the cellar. The unmemorable village of Kröv, thus becomes the basis of a now notorious label.

By the mid 1920s, Phillippe de Rothschild, at his property in Bordeaux, Chateau Mouton Rothschild, commissions the French artist Carlu to create a label for his 1927 vintage. This forms the basis of the now legendary collection of artist labels for this property's wine, which is an unbroken line dating from the first in 1945 to the present vintage. In some instances, these labels themselves have become more famous than the wine wholes bottle they decorate.

In California, **Corti Brothers** was the first to use a specially commissioned artist label. This was for a special Cabernet Sauvignon bottling from Anderson Valley in Mendocino County in 1974. This was for a Cabernet Sauvignon made by Jed Steele, then winemaker at Edmeades vineyard. I had seen the work of Bill Zacha, a local Mendocino artist at his exhibit at the California Room of the State Library, and decided that he would be a logical choice to do a label for this wine. Since the wine was very special, I gave him the choice of using two artistic methods for the label. One was drawing of the now disappeared Mendocino apple driers, very typical for this area. The other was to use a saying from the noted British writer of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Love Peacock, reading, "If I drink water while this doth last, may I never again drink wine." Which to use was his choice.

When I picked up the artwork, Zacha had combined both elements: the apple drier and the saying. This was then reproduced by Sacramento's Fruitridge Printing and has been used for further vintages of the same vineyard wine: 1975, 1983, and 1993. The artwork was specific to that Cabernet wine and has only been used for it. Since the vineyard has now been pulled up, and cabernet sauvignon usually ripens there one year out of ten, there will no longer be any further bottlings.

David Lance Goines has done several labels for Corti Brothers, both for wine and olive oil. The first olive oil labels were commissioned by Corti Brothers for the Antinori firm in Tuscany from whom we bought their two estate oils, Santa Cristina and Castello della Sala. After 1985, when Tuscany's olive groves were decimated by a terrible freeze, Piero Antinori returned the labels to Corti Brothers and we have used them since for our own label oils, Pallido and Verdesco, which are bottled for us by N. Sciabica and Sons of Modesto. We still sell these oils.

In 2005, to commemorate my sister **Illa**, my partner in Corti Brothers, who left us in May of that year, I decided we would select a very good Pinot Noir to carry her name from the 2005 vintage, a fine vintage that made tasty wines. The winery selected was Pellegrini Brothers in Sonoma's Russian River Valley, known Olivet Lane. The winemaker is Kevin Hamel who is from Sacramento and was my assistant in two periods for almost ten years. Once the wine was composed, then next question was how to label it.

The **Illa 2005 Pinot Noir label** was a fortuitous combination of things: Seeing the artwork of **Zbigniew Kozikowski**, his use of color and his willingness to create a label, and his actual realization of what I wanted. There are two labels for this one wine, bottled only in magnums. One label is the original Kozikowski concept: color with a rather impressionistic image of my sister with her pet rooster, Hey Nonny Nonny. This was an element which I insisted upon. The "white label," is the result of the artist's idea of doing something outside his normal range. This almost black and white figurative drawing was brought to me and my brother in law at the same time as the colored label. We liked both and could not decide. Thus both versions were used. Never having met my sister and working from a few snapshots of the bantam rooster Hey, the effect is very pleasing.

This label reminds me of the famous Renaissance painting "The Lady with the Ermine." In some respects the dominant white chicken in the work forces your eye to the center of the label, where Illa's signature forms the letters for the wine's name. I think the ensemble to be pleasing. After all, is his not one of the properties of wine?