



JULIANNA
HAYES

Grape Expectations

Stylish labels creating an advantage

When a local winery decided to air its "Dirty Laundry," it got wine consumers in a flap.

Since the Fall Okanagan Wine Festival, I've received more than a half dozen e-mail queries about the winery and I can't seem to go anywhere without the name coming up.

"I tried some terrific wines from a new winery called Dirty Laundry," wrote one individual. "I was wondering, where can I buy their wines?"

Emphasis on the word "new" — because there is nothing new about them.

Dirty Laundry is, in fact, the former Scherzinger Vineyards of Summerland. For 10 years it struggled in relative anonymity, barely a blip on the radar screen of wine-savvy consumers.

It didn't help that the focus of their products were aromatic, fruit-forward whites made at a time when big, meaty reds were all the rage.

Consumer preferences haven't changed that much, but thanks to a clever name change and a spiffy new label, voila! Dirty Laundry wines have made their mark on the wine industry.

Ah, the power of superior marketing. We are loathe to admit the profound influence it has on our buying habits. But Scherzinger's story is a pretty strong argument to the contrary. As is Blasted Church's, which, under the name Prpich Winery, couldn't give their wines away.

One might argue that this isn't right or fair to those who put their money where your mouth is — producing what is inside the bottle, not what is on the outside. In fact, one winemaker made this very point at the wine festival when I stopped to chat at his rather deserted tasting table.

"I should have put all my resources into a sexier name instead of what I'm pouring," he said.

He's got a point. But I have another. It's not that Scherzinger made crappy wines. On the contrary, they've made fine product under the old name and continue to make stylish ones under the new one. What the playful new handle does is draw people in to finally try them.

After all, does it matter how good your products are if nobody bothers to taste and buy them?

In the early days of the wine festival there were just over a dozen wineries operating in the province. Today, there are more than 100. The competition for the consumer dollar is fierce, even if you only consider domestic products. No way are you going to succeed in this cutthroat arena without some sort of edge.

Unfortunately, a name can make or break you. Several years ago, wine-makers Ross and Cheri Mirko began creating a line of fine handcrafted wines under the label Calliope, named for a hummingbird that is native to the Okanagan. They did reasonably well among those aware of the Mirkos' skill and creativity. But regular wine buyers couldn't wrap their heads around the name — it was too obscure and nobody knew how to pronounce it. Cheri later said the name, while there was a charming story attached to it, had been a mistake.

While switching up a name is an extreme and costly undertaking, a lot can be done to improve a winery's position in the marketplace with a change of face, er, label. For example, Golden Mile Cellars — a functional, if not sexy, name — recently adjusted its rather trashy purple and yellow look to a classy white label with a small amount of gold embossing, which better suits its stylish products.

The British Columbia Wine Museum's annual Wine Label awards pay homage to this very art.

Each year, B.C. wines are judged for what's on, not what's in, the bottle. This year, not surprisingly, Dirty Laundry picked up gold for domestic, for they not only repackaged their name, but revamped the look. The winning design was a whimsical white and red embossed label depicting a steaming antique iron.

Other winners were Nk'mip Qwam Qwmt Chardonnay, Hawthorne Mountain Ping, Hester Creek Gewurztraminer, Laughing Stock Vineyard Portfolio, Sandhill Cabernet Merlot and St. Hubertus Canadian Red.

There was also a People's Choice category which saw gold go to Red Rooster's Cabernet Frank — which featured an image of the controversial sculpture of a naked baggage handler, dubbed Frank, who found a new home at Red Rooster after being vandalized at its previous perch in Penticton.

Judge Robert Belton Dean of Creative and Critical Studies at UBCO summed up the thoughts on wine labelling with these words: "There are lots of types of excellence in design, but the types that grab and hold my attention are those with novelty and visual interest, an absence of overused images, ideas and materials and an interesting story to tell about what's in the bottle and the people who made it."

■ Julianna Hayes' wine column runs weekly in *The Okanagan Sunday*. E-mail her at: julianna@canoemail.com