

A Brew by Any Other Name



A Brew by Any Other Name Sitting alongside traditional cabernets, merlots and sauvignons today are Fat Bastard and Wild Pig from France, Mad Dogs & Englishmen from Spain, Cat's Pee on a Gooseberry Bush and Glamour Puss from New Zealand, and Dirty Laundry from Canada. Clearly, this isn't your parents' wine store.

The goal behind these seemingly ridiculous monikers is differentiation—get your product in the mouths of consumers for the first time because of the name and they'll come back for the taste.

Al Bowness, manager of specialty purchasing at the Manitoba Liquor Control Commission in Winnipeg, says there is more wine being produced around the world today than at any other time in history. And thanks to modern technology, the vast majority of it is top-notch and very drinkable.

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“It boils down to branding and marketing,” Bowness says.

Interesting names aren't new to the liquor industry, he says—wine lovers from 20 and 30 years ago will remember Fuddle Duck, Gimli Goose, Strawberry Angel and Lonesome Charlie—but they've certainly exploded in number in the last few years.

Bernie Hadley-Beaugard, principal at Vancouver-based Brandever Strategy Inc., says it's tradition in the wine industry to name your company after a geographical landmark or a visionary family member. That may seem meaningful to the owner as he's standing in the middle of his vineyard but it does nothing for a consumer trying to buy a bottle for a dinner party that starts in half an hour.



“A great proportion of individuals can’t remember the name of the wine they had at dinner last night,” he says. “That’s evidence to me that the [traditional] naming protocol has surpassed its effectiveness.”

A wine’s name is particularly critical in restaurants, he adds, where customers can’t look at the label or hold the bottle in their hands—they can only read the name on the wine list.

“There’ll be ‘Something Creek’ and ‘Something Valley,’ and then you come across something like ‘Laughing Stock,’ ” Smith says. “It arrests the read. You think, ‘What’s this all about?’ ”

If the name is particularly intriguing, the server may chime in with his two cents about what is known of the wine’s story, he adds: “Then you’ve got value added. That makes it rise above the others.”

Cynthia Enns and her husband, David, who founded Laughing Stock Vineyards in British Columbia’s Okanogan Valley three-and-a-half-years ago, began as vintners making wine out of their garage. The Laughing Stock name originated from David’s goal of making wine tasty enough that people wouldn’t consider him an embarrassment to the neighborhood. When they paired it with their experience as consultants to the financial services industry, they knew they had a winner.

“We wake up every day trying not to live up to our name,” Cynthia Enns says. “We have a huge following in the investment industry. We’re being used in corporate gifting programs and client appreciation events. Everyone has invested in stocks or mutual funds, so the theme resonates with everybody.”

The label only adds to the brand. It features a ticker tape that goes around the bottle with stock quotes from the Standard & Poor’s 500 on the day the grapes used in the particular bottle were harvested.

“The bottle becomes a time capsule for the day we pick the grapes,” she says. “We thought the label needed to have some curiosity about it. You won’t clue in until you spend some time with it. In a restaurant, patrons at other tables will have bottle envy. They’ll be curious as to what wine you’re drinking because the bottle looks so cool.

“The wine industry is so subjective, the packaging means a lot. A lot of people will walk in to the wine store, see 500 selections and they’ll pick by the label,” she continues.

To carry the investment branding further, Laughing Stock is sold in futures, just like pork bellies and orange juice.



“From a business point of view, we get the cash early. From a consumer point of view, they get a bottle of wine early that typically sells out within weeks of its release, [and they’re getting it] at a discount,” she says, noting its main wine is a Bordeaux blend. The tongue-in-cheek tone continues on Laughing Stock T-shirts that read, “Buy, hold and cellar” or ask, “How liquid are your assets?”

Crazy names are no stranger to the beer industry, either. Competing for your taste buds on hot summer days are beers such as Old Engine Oil from Harviestoun Brewery Ltd. in Scotland, Blithering Idiot beer from Weyerbacher Brewing Co. in Pennsylvania, Dragon’s Milk Oak Barrel Ale from New Holland Brewing Co. in Michigan, Stumblin’ Monk from AleSmith Brewing Co. in California, and La Fin du Monde (The End of the World) beer from Unibroue in Quebec, Canada.



Probably the most freshly minted brand in the Canadian beer industry belongs to Dead Frog Beer. Derrick Smith, CEO of what used to be called Backwoods Brewery until May, says the previous nine-year-old name wasn’t working for him.

“It wasn’t memorable enough. People would have our product, enjoy it, and two days later couldn’t remember the name of it. That made it very difficult to reorder in a different establishment,” he says.

If that wasn’t bad enough, trying to ask for a “Backwoods Brewing Timberwolf Pale Ale” after having already consumed a few got pretty tricky, Smith says. The brewery also makes a lager, honey brown and nut brown beer.

Now, with a catchy name and graphics and tap handles in the shape of big green frog legs, recognition of those same four beers is no longer a problem. “We have to compete against these companies that have millions of dollars to bang their brand into people’s heads,” Smith says. “We don’t have that kind of cash so we have to go for something that’s eye-catching and memorable.

“If people want to jump on the bandwagon because we’re killing frogs, phone me up.” (During a serious moment, Smith is emphatic that no, repeat no, frogs were killed in the making of his beer.)

Smith, who studied how wine companies named their products, says a number of other potential names came out of brainstorming sessions—Wild Duck, Mad Duck, Salty Fog—but Dead Frog jumped to the front of the line.

“It’s catchy, distinctive, a bit risky and makes a bit of a statement,” he says. “It’s also a little controversial. People say, ‘Why would you name something after a dead frog?’ ” Smith adds that consumers are now coming for the name and

staying for the beer. Sales are up 25 percent since the introduction of Dead Frog, a number Smith attributes entirely to the attraction of deceased amphibians.

T-shirt sales have gone through the roof as well. Smith says he used to sell the odd Backwoods shirt at a festival but now he's being inundated with phone calls and emails. He can also employ catch phrases that he couldn't have previously, such as "Nothing goes down like a cold, dead frog," "My pad or yours?," "There's more hops in a dead frog" or "Do it froggy-style."

The attitude continues on the Dead Frog web page. Depending where you are on the site, a cartoon frog gets mowed down by a truck, riddled with machine gun bullets, felled by an anvil or whacked by a hockey puck.

To ensure a smooth transfer of the brand, Smith and his people went to their accounts in advance and told them about Dead Frog.

"We haven't lost a single customer because of the name change," he says. "A few were a little tentative at first. A lot of customers wouldn't necessarily identify Dead Frog with Backwoods so we made sure the serving staff knew and they could tell customers they could still get their favorite Backwoods beer as a Dead Frog."

Hadley-Beauregard says a brewery's rebranding is the perfect opportunity to be more daring.

"My motto for small players has always been: Safe is dangerous and dangerous is safe when it comes to naming," he says. "The shelves are absolutely saturated. The winner will be the one who comes up with a clever name with a story behind it to propagate the name."

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