

Scherzinger Vineyards struggled to sell half its production.

Dusty castles give way to naked bodies

Cheeky labels win awards, wine sales

BY BEPPI CROSARIOL

France may still hold the edge in crafting the world's finest wines, but when it comes to selling the stuff, stodgy Bordeaux and Burgundy might learn a few things from Summerland, B.C.

The bucolic town in the heart of the Okanagan Valley is home to Dirty Laundry Vineyard, the latest in a string of Cinderella stories epitomizing the rise of the B.C. wine industry and the region's budding reputation for cutting-edge marketing.

When previous owners Ron and Cher Watkins decided last year to change the name of Scherzinger Vineyards to Dirty Laundry, their once obscure little operation, which had been managing to sell barely half its annual production of between 1,500 and 2,000 cases, rapidly sold out and became the toast of Vancouver's fine-dining scene. This year, it sold out its inventory in July, halfway through the big summer sales season — and all without changing a thing about the wine.

"The response to Dirty Laundry was phenomenal," said John Schreiner, Vancouver-based author of *The Wineries of British Columbia*. "Restaurants were calling them, and this had never happened before."

Credit the transformation to Brandever Strategy Inc., a Vancouver design shop that came up with an unusual packaging concept rooted in local lore. Searching for a hook, Bernie Hadley-Beauregard, Brandever's founder and principal, happened upon the story of an early 1900s Chinese railway labourer in Summerland who ran a laundry that eventually became a front for a brothel. Its nickname? Take a guess.

Dirty Laundry's name isn't the only grabber. The new, crisp-white label depicts a subtle, embossed pattern of what appear to be steam plumes rising from a red clothes iron. "It's actually a whole bunch of naked bodies," Mr. Hadley-Beauregard said. "It was a cheeky way for me to try to get some interest and attention into a brand."

And late last month, in a footnote emblematic of British Columbia's new oil-stoked wine economy, the Watkinses sold Dirty Laundry to a group of Alberta business partners, including Fort McMurray lawyer Bob Campbell and Mr. Justice Adam Germain, for an undisclosed sum reputed to be in the many millions. Mr. Campbell has plans to double production to 4,000 cases "just to keep up with demand" for the winery's \$16-to-\$24 wines. "It was the marketing's success that intrigued us," he said.

Since founding Brandever in 2001, Mr. Hadley-Beauregard has

helped a slew of B.C. wineries ignite sales with snappy designs that eschew stuffy European châteaux imagery and tap into a growing consumer preference for bold, memorable brands. Notable successes include Blasted Church, Therapy Vineyards and Lotusland.

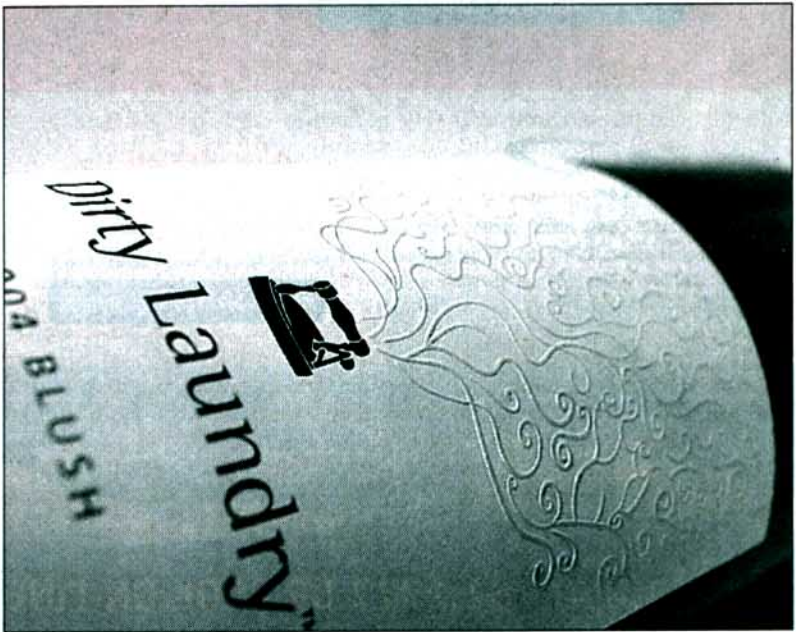
In a remarkable coup this past June, Brandever took home seven of the eight highest awards for label design at the San Francisco International Wine Competition, the largest and most influential wine fair in North America. In addition to Dirty Laundry, medal winners included Laughing Stock, owned by financial consultants David and Cynthia Enns. The wine's name is a self-deprecating warning of what can happen to otherwise sane business people who catch the vineyard bug. But the packaging is anything but kitschy. In homage to the Ennses' profession, Brandever's handsome label features a swirling ticker tape depicting actual stock prices of selected equities on the day the grapes were harvested.

Mr. Hadley-Beauregard says his labels transcend the ubiquitous but now tired animal-themed labels, typified by the cartoon kangaroo of Yellow Tail, a hugely successful brand from Australia. Some liquor stores have in fact begun to kick out the critters because they've lost their point of differentiation. "Wine stores are starting to look like Noah's Ark," he says.

Brandever's new-era designs would appear to be more than flashes in the pan, too. The firm's first success, Blasted Church, once struggled to sell 1,000 cases of under-\$10 wine under the name Prpich Hills back in the late 1990s. Today it produces about 10,000 cases a year and charges \$16 to \$30 a bottle. (It's named after a church that was moved off its foundation to a new location in 1929 with the help of, yes, dynamite charges.) Catchy labels aren't the only marketing twist deployed by B.C.'s rising wine makers. Producers are also tapping the proven strategy of courting high-end restaurants. Having your name on a fancy wine lists offers not only exposure to the sweet spot of the premium-wine market, well-heeled foodies, but also the invaluable third-party endorsement of a chef or sommelier.

The next frontier for B.C. wine marketing? Exports. Mr. Hadley-Beauregard says his success in British Columbia has led to new projects around the world, from New Zealand and Australia to the United States.

One export market remains elusive, though. "I've never gotten a call from Niagara. I certainly welcome them some day. There's certainly a lot of work to be done."



With a new name and label, Dirty Laundry can't keep up with demand.