

IN CONTEXT: **MARKETER**

Beyond taste

Move over Ernest & Julio, irreverent wines are catching on BY EVE LAZARUS

Tempted by a glass of Cat's Pee on a Gooseberry Bush? Perhaps Two Left Feet, Four Emus, Fat Bastard or a tote of Little Penguin is more appealing. However unappetizing some of these names may sound, wacky brands and funky labels are the new calling card of the wine industry in Canada.

No one knows this better than Bernie Hadley-Beauregard, whose Vancouver-based marketing consultancy, Brandever Strategy, has notched up about 25 new wine names, starting with Blasted Church in 2002. Since then Brandever has helped create fun wine brands like Laughing Stock, Lotusland and Dirty Laundry. "If you take a fresh approach and add a bit of levity and some interesting storytelling you take away the snobbery of the category," he says.

The fact more unusual brands are surfacing now is no coincidence. In B.C. many wineries that started in the late 1970s and early '80s are going through a rebranding process. The owners "realize that they have to compete with some of the really great labels and marketing that's going on in New Zealand, Australia and California," says Alexandra Parr, marketing manager at the B.C. Wine Institute in Kelowna. Parr adds there's been a huge surge in people in their

20s and 30s drinking wine, which is driving the industry to become more trendy.

While that may be true, wine is more popular with Canadians overall. In 2005 sales rose 6.5% compared to 3.3% for beer and 2.3% for spirits, according to Statistics Canada. And while beer remains the most popular alcoholic beverage with 50.4% market share, wine surpassed spirits for the first time last year, capturing 25.2% of sales compared to 24.3% for spirits.



Hadley-Beauregard says the funkier brands are having a huge impact on wineries' sales. When the Scherzinger Estate Winery changed its name to Dirty Laundry and introduced a graphic with a red iron last August, sales skyrocketed. "Nothing else changed," says Hadley-Beauregard. "We calculated that their sales had gone up on a month-to-month basis by about 520%."

But rebranding a winery is not as simple as randomly choosing a funny name. Hadley-Beauregard believes the new brand has to be steeped in historical or personal relevance. Dirty Laundry, for example, refers to a Chinese laundry that operated in the late 1800s with a bordello upstairs. Laughing Stock's owners work in the finance industry, and Blasted Church takes its name from a local church dynamited in 1929.

About a year ago, The Mark Anthony Group in Vancouver introduced Painted Turtle to B.C. The wine, which sports a bright green turtle, follows in the tradition of "critter labels" sparked by Australia's Yellow Tail—the top-selling wine in B.C. with a 10.8% increase in sales over last year. Karen Pearce, account director at Taxi in Calgary, says Painted Turtle will launch in Ontario with an ad campaign in the new year that will give the "wise turtle" on the label some character. "We find that there is a specific target group that is attracted to wine because of the label," she says. "We are connecting with young, open-minded consumers who are choosing wine not on tasting notes, but on the attractiveness of the label."

Meanwhile, in Ontario, 19 grape growers and a winemaker recently came out with a line of wines under the moniker 20 Bees. Helmut Klassen, CEO and chair of Niagara Vintners, says the name and label (which shows a man riding a bee) resonates with consumers. "We are friendly, we are somewhat whimsical, somewhat irreverent, and we don't take ourselves too seriously. It very much catches on to a demographic that doesn't want this hoity-toity wine."

It's too soon to tell whether catchy names and wild labels will end up a short-term grab for sales or a long-term marketing strategy, but Hadley-Beauregard believes it's a "sweet spot" in the market right now. He points out that sales of Blasted Church have risen 38% over last year, even though the brand is now almost five years old. "Will it last 50 years? I don't know," he says. "My philosophy in the wine world is that safe is dangerous. If you play it safe and you emulate all the others, from a marketing standpoint that's a kiss of death."