

WINE » REMEMBER THE STRAW CHIANTI FLASK?

The shape of bottles to come



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You may be familiar with the cynical wine-industry adage that many people drink the label rather than the wine. I think most of us are guilty of that to some extent, buying hyped-up brands that offer more in the way of bragging rights than hedonistic pleasure.

But have you stopped to think that some people drink the bottle as well? By which I mean its size, shape and even colour.

It's no accident that some of the most iconic and popular wines of the 1960s and 1970s – when Canada was in diapers as a wine-drinking nation – came in non-standard containers.

There was Mateus in the ovoid bottle (technically called a *bocksbeutel* and inspired by a goat's scrotum); Black Tower in its dark, Gothic cylinder; Blue Nun in neon-blue glass; and Fazi Battaglia Verdicchio, the Italian white in the hour-glass shape modelled after ancient Rome's clay amphorae.

They're all still available, by the way, and all still selling well. They stand in contrast to one of the other great wine-packaging phenomena of the time, the straw Chianti flask, which has all but vanished, a casualty of the Chianti region's bourgeois aspirations to become Bordeaux with a better view. The point is, shapes – not just labels – make a strong impression.

You can see it most conspicuously in the spirits world, of course, with brands like Absolut vodka.

But bottle shape also can have a big impact in the much more brand-congested wine world, as Australian winery Rosemount Estate recently discovered after it relaunched its entire line in an unusual new bottle that features a regular, Bordeaux-style top but a bottom that resolves into a diamond-shaped footprint.

The brand, which in the 1990s did as much as any other



Labels featuring sleek designs include, from left: Fazi Battaglia Verdicchio, Megalomaniac Eccentric Savagnin, Rosemount Shiraz and Noval Special Reserve Port. TIM FRASER FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Pick of the week



Jean Geiler Cremant d'Alsace Pinot Noir Brut (\$19.95, product No. 047191). This French bubbly from Alsace is a nice bargain alternative to more expensive Champagne. Made from the red pinot noir grape, it has a slightly pink, salmon-like hue and a fruit-forward flavour hinting at cherries and citrus. Available only in Ontario.

to put Australian shiraz on the North American map, suddenly hit the skids in the first half of this decade. There were a few reasons, but mainly the bottle, with its once-innovative flanged top and its critter-free label, started to look frumpy in a sea of bright kangaroos and other exotic fauna. Curiously, the wines themselves, with their rich but soft, fruit-driven style, didn't waver much under the supervision of long-time winemakers Charles Whish and Matt Koch.

As sales started to decline, retail inventories would build up, making the wine harder to sell because it was no longer as fresh as consumers had come to expect. "We start to see older and older vintages on store shelves, and that doesn't suit our style at all," Lachlan Hayman, Rosemount's global brand manager, said in a telephone interview.

The slump, which lasted from 2001 to 2005, prodded Hayman's team into action. They organized focus groups in Australia, the United States and Britain and discovered that the diamond-shaped label still act-

ed as a beacon for the brand.

But then it occurred to Rosemount's marketing minds that, of the hundreds of thousands of wines in the world, the vast majority still come in standardized containers. That uniformity stands in stark contrast to the bottle-conscious worlds of, say, perfumes and aftershaves, where differences between liquids can be just as subtle.

After coming up an array of prototypes, the winery decided on the svelte and innovative diamond-footed shape.

Result: In Britain, where the line was first relaunched last Christmas, sales shot up 30 per cent in the first five months, according to AC Nielsen, a market tracker. In Canada, where the new shape started rolling out in January, Rosemount says sales in the first half of the year have grown 11 per cent – a 19-percentage-point turnaround. "It's got a real pickup appeal," Hayman said. "Consumers want to pick it up and feel it and hold it."

Rosemount isn't the only winery experimenting with new shapes in the wake of the label-design explosion of the past decade. One of the more interesting new bottles I've seen comes from Niagara and was conjured up by Vancouver's Brandever Strategy Inc. The wine is called Megalomaniac Eccentric Savagnin from a new winery called John Howard Cellars of Distinction (that's right, Savagnin, not sauvignon). It bears a slight resemblance to a rotund Courvoisier Cognac bottle, but with shoulders broader than the base. Another is the tall, narrow, square-sided, clear-glass Noval Special Reserve Port, a big departure for the tradition-bound fortified-wine category.

One problem with odd bottle shapes is that they can be awkward to store horizontally in a cellar. That's where the Rosemount design, which is being applied up and down the winery's vast line, including the cellar-worthy \$18-to-\$30 Show Reserve wines, and the top tier that includes the \$65 Mountain Blue Shiraz Cabernet Sauvignon, may meet with approval from collectors. Most of the bottle's torso is rounded just like a regular Bordeaux-shaped bottle, so you can store it right along with all those overpriced wines with vaunted labels.