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Care for a glass of Coldhearted icewine?

Eye-grabbing labels taking off in Niagara

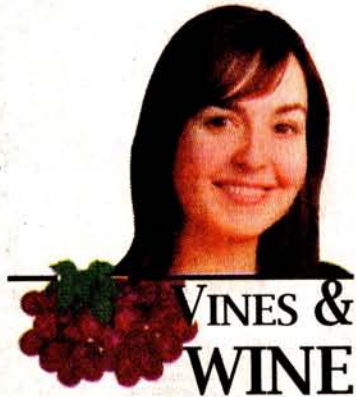
Driving up to the site of Niagara's latest line of wines, making a splash with its panache, a gate must be crossed.

It's a spectacular iron gate, grapes woven throughout, guarding the castle John Howard, the Vineland man behind Megalomaniac wines, calls home — and his winery.

Thing is, it's an unfortified gate without walls. But a grand entrance. To be a winery owner and successful businessman, sometimes you've got to be a little megalomaniacal, says Howard, the former proprietor of Vineland Estate Winery from 1993 to 2004.

"I think in this industry, you run into the odd megalomaniac making wine," said Howard, 58, a man known for his love of fine wine and food.

"By the way, I think you run into the odd megalomaniac drinking wine. So I said, so why don't we just call it megalomani-



VINES & WINE

By MONIQUE BEECH

ac? It wasn't meant to be bold. It was just meant for laughs."

Now that he's semi-retired, the former office products executive wants to have a little fun.

It shows in the labels of his new wines, barrelled at his Vineland property, released last month.



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John Howard is the man behind Megalomaniac wines.

STAFF PHOTO BY JULIE JOCSAK

Wine

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With names such as Narcissist Riesling, written backwards and forcing drinkers to use a mirror to read it.

Sonofabitch Pinot Noir, which Howard says is not a profanity, at least according to the dictionary.

Coldhearted icewine. Contrarian Sauvignon Blanc.

It's a line that's grabbed the attention of wine writers and wine lovers more accustomed to staid, sparse, oft-elitist and confusing labels. Recently, the Megalomaniac wines grabbed best of show for its labels at the prestigious San Francisco International Wine Competition.

Niagara is just the latest wine region to pick up the trend.

Brandever, the ingenious Vancouver-based design firm Howard partnered with for Megalomaniac, has already created memorable labels at several British Columbia wineries and around the globe.

The award-winning firm has transformed floundering B.C. wineries with promise and given them new life with new names and creative, splashy labels, such as Blasted Church, Laughing Stock and Dirty Laundry.

After Prpich Hills became Blasted Church, sales jumped from 1,000 cases at \$8.50 a bottle to 10,000 cases per year at prices ranging from \$16 to \$26.

Brandever founder and principal Bernie Hadley-Beauregard said a lot of wine labels are too conservative with too much attitude, and end up looking alike.

"If you take a left-field approach, you increase the memorability of your wine," Hadley-Beauregard said from Vancouver.

"People are looking for something that's fresh and different at all times."

With Howard at the helm, eye-grabbing labels are taking off here.

Niagara College is releasing four hip and colourful Brandever-designed labels next month featuring illustrations of students sporting iPods and backpacks with Niagara-on-the-Lake buildings in the background.

A new Beamsville winery to be called Organized Crime, named after a historic feud between two Jordan Menonite churches in the 1930s that ended with one group stealing the other's church organ, is awaiting approval from the LCBO.

Some insiders say it signals change in Niagara's wine industry. That it's reached a stage where it can lighten up, and have fun — without always trying to emulate old-world wines.

Niagara College's Steve Gill, who oversees the school's teaching winery,



TOP: Megalomaniac wines have grabbed the attention of wine writers and wine lovers more accustomed to staid, sparse, oft-elitist and confusing labels.

RIGHT: The Niagara College Teaching Winery is sprucing up its "tired" labels with colourful, youth-inspired ones designed by Brandever, an award-winning Vancouver-based design firm that's made a splash in the wine world.

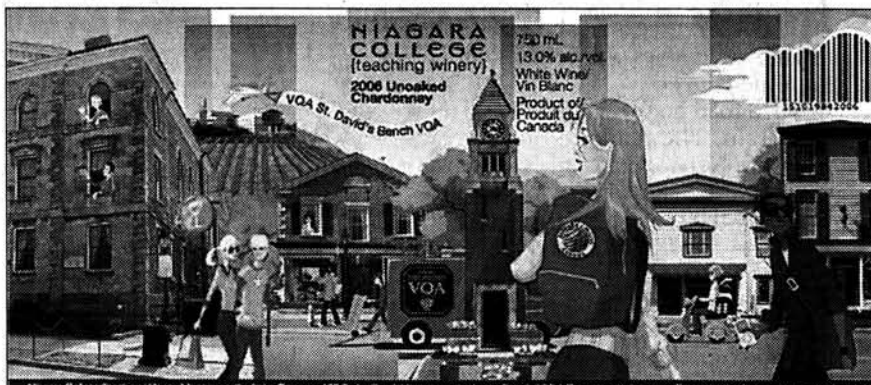
said staff were looking for a fresh approach to update its tired label. Gill knows Brandever's reputation, and hopes the whimsical labels help bring attention to the college's program and "sell a few bottles of wine."

"It's the way of the future," said Gill, manager of wine and viticulture at the college. "In my opinion, I like to look at it like we're a new-world wine region, so let's do some new techniques. Let's do some new things. We don't have to be traditional in everything."

Howard said he was looking for something fresh for his semi-retirement wine project, pulling him back into the business.

He wanted fun wines, most of which are under \$25, to serve to his fishing buddies, whom he spends a third of the year with. The remaining time is divided between his Vineland home and his charity work.

After Howard read an article on Brandever in the Globe and Mail last Thanksgiving, he made the call. Hadley-Beauregard flew out and met with Howard and took a three-day



whirlwind tour of Niagara's exploding wine scene.

Then came the name.

Howard said he knew he didn't want to follow the so-called "critter" label trend that runs rampant in Australia and New Zealand with labels such as Yellow Tail.

During the tour, Howard kept pointing out things and saying, "I'm not a megalomaniac, but..." As a joke, Hadley-Beauregard suggested the name and it stuck.

Even then, Hadley-Beauregard said Howard was thinking beyond himself — very un-megalomaniac-like.

"He was like an ambassador for the Niagara peninsula to Brandever. It was not about him, but the whole region."

With 2,000 cases in production each year, Howard said he plans to keep the winery small. Barrels are kept in his garage.

He's hired former Vineland winemaker Andrzej Lipinski and seasoned grower Duarte Oliveira to manage his 110-acre (45-hectare) vineyard, a slice of land he kept when he sold Vineland Estate.

Howard said he's not looking to be the grandest, biggest winery in the region. If he was, he'd produce 150,000 cases a year, not 2,000.

He just wants to make people smile.

"I think when you sit down at the table and look at a bottle of wine, the first thing you should do is smile," Howard said. "You shouldn't cringe because you can't figure out what varietal it is, where it comes from. It shouldn't be a personal inquisition."

Frankly, Howard said he doesn't care if some people don't understand his label, featuring a headless man wearing a pinstripe suit and bowler's cap. Those who do are kindred spirits.

"I think people either get it or they don't. So hopefully, they get it."

Go to megalomaniacwine.com or 1-888-megal01 for more information.

Do you have an interesting tidbit on the wine and grape industry to share? Contact Monique Beech at mbeech@stcatharinesstandard.ca