

# BOTTLES & LABELS

Shedding Light on Dark Labels, page 36

Bottle and Label Suppliers, page 40

Wines & Vines

Packaging Conference, page 42

Wines & Vines Packaging

Design Awards, page 46

Product Focus:

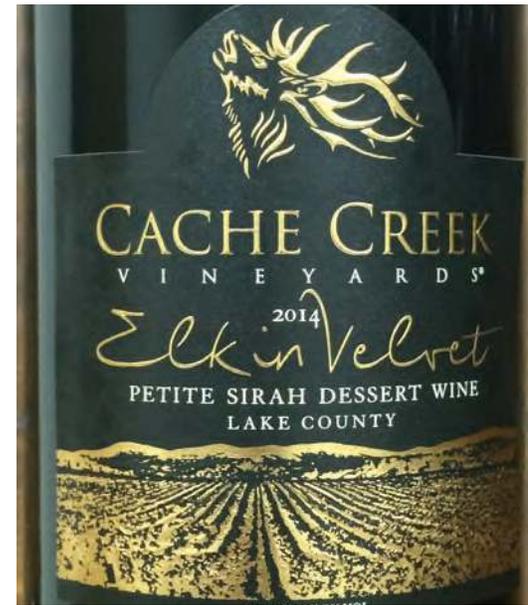
Wet-Strength Labels,  
page 52



## Shedding Light on Dark Labels

Want to get trendy? Go deep

By Jane Firstenfeld



Remember “critter” labels, the hot trend of the early 2000s? To the relief of many in the wine industry, these are long past their peak. What looks hottest now, according to package designers, suppliers and their clients, are black or deep-colored labels.

For the fourth annual Bottles & Labels Issue, *Wines & Vines* examined the art and the science behind this chic new trend.

## KEY POINTS

**Critters be gone:** High-end, highly trendy dark labels are what’s happening on retail shelves.

**Savvy packaging designers agree that handled properly, very dark labels stand out and provide visual cues of elegance.**

**Experienced printers employ varied techniques for best results.**

**Paper suppliers also have jumped on the darker bandwagon.**

Always ahead of the design curve, David Schuemann of CF Napa Brand Design published a blog post in December 2014 that accurately predicted the coming fashion. “Black labels were once assumed to be recessive and ominous, but today black is one of the hottest new colors in alcohol packaging,” the designer wrote. He called the tone a key communicator of chic luxury.

Schuemann attributed this trend to recession recovery, noting that wary consumers might still be price conscious but willing to pay slightly more for products they perceive as more premium. “Nothing says luxury like black.”

A black limousine evokes more gravitas than a long white vehicle; a black tuxedo has more class than baby blue. The timeless little black dress has been and will forever be a staple in women’s closets. Black label Johnny Walker Scotch is more expensive than the red label, and Jack Daniel’s whiskey has long been identified by its black label.

“Black has also become a way to effectively target men in a way that is neither distastefully overt, nor polarizing to women,” Schuemann wrote. In the wine industry, Constellation’s Black Box became the first brand to make bag-in-box packaging an acceptable alternative.

Paper suppliers and printers have responded with new label stocks, inks and techniques, while observant package designers are promoting the style with their winery clients.

The latest trend in wine labels is a dark background that showcases foil accents and texture.

## Designer notes

Sara Nelson, whose Kennewick, Wash., design firm won the prize for Best Overall Package in the 2015 Wines & Vines Packaging Design Awards, considers herself a student of color who reads everything she finds about human reaction to colors and color combinations.

“Black is amazingly flexible,” she said. Whether used to create low-contrast, luxury labels for premium-priced products or dialed up with high-contrast pops of whites, brights or metallic for more eye-catching designs on grocery shelves, black labels compete nicely in a retail environment, Nelson believes.

Combined with heavy glass bottles, custom capsules or other pricey details, lower contrast black labels communicate high perceived values, she said. “This is best used for wines to be hand-sold from tasting rooms, as they do not inherently stand out in a crowded visual field such as a retail shelf or section,” she has observed.

To compete in a crowded retail environment, more contrast is required. “Black plus yellow is the highest contrast—one that can easily scream ‘cheap,’” in Nelson’s opinion. She said that a black background with white type is a close second in visibility, but without the negative psychological impact.

Many eyes find “reverse” type—white on black—difficult to read, especially with small type fonts. Nelson cautioned, “Designers need to be very careful with reverse type. A porous, uncoated paper behaves like a sponge, causing reversed type to fill in with ink. Thus, we typically choose a bolder version of the font. Then if it fills in a bit, it’s still nicely legible.”

Mill Valley, Calif., designer Jim Moon said he’s been fond of black since his earliest days in advertising. To his practiced eye, black accentuates color: Bright colors pop on a black background. Black focuses the eye on color. “White backgrounds do not provide the contrast. Black wins that contest every time,” he said.

Moon then cited psychological aspects: Black is dramatic, contributing mystery and sophistication. Red wines bottled in dark glass provide a natural canvas, but he thinks black labels also work well for white wines, providing a visual break with the see-through contents to make the live design area within the label visually pop.

Moon is a fan of screen-print applications. “Nothing works better than a handsome Bordeaux bottle and a minimal, well-designed silk-screened package. Designs that work best are clean, elegant understated,” he said.

Moon thinks that U.S. vintners are becoming less risk averse and therefore are stepping away from conventional white labels with illustrated chateaux. “Risk is good. After all we live in California, not in France, where tradition is entrenched,” he commented.

Affinity Creative Group on Mare Island in Solano County, Calif., is a team of veteran brand makers. Director of strategy Ed Rice stated flatly that reverse copy/type is about 15% more visible and legible. When the type is “reversed out,” it creates a visual stop sign, with more contrast than dark print on a light label.

Rice traced the current trend to the growth in popularity of red wine blends, including Gallo’s Apothic, which he called a “huge seller,” as is Trinchero Family Estates’ Ménéage à Trois Midnight, which was designed by Affinity. As these labels gained traction in the imagination of consumers, they spawned more dark labels in search of market differentiation.

Marketers noticed and were intrigued by this different look, Rice said. An additional layer is that darker labels are congruent with the taste profile of darker wines, underpinning that profile. But, he noted, the pale and hugely popular Italian import Ecco Domani Pinot Grigio also is labeled in black.

Like Schuemann, Rice said “In general, black has always been a quality cue,” conveying class and style. Of course, if a whole shelf is full of black labels, they won’t stand out as much. This is where deep, saturated dark colors may step in with another nuance. Affinity just created a label for Washington state’s Ste. Michelle Seven Falls.

“It’s not black, but in that world,” he noted.

Whether or not a winery wants to use similar labels for its entire line, Rice said, depends on the “connective brand tissue.” Winery clients must work with their designers and talk about their brand strategy.

The goal is to give consumers the right degree of price and quality cues, while maintaining a cohesive identity. “You want to persuade consumers at the shelf,” to pick up and try your product.

Even traditionalist French producers are beginning to turn to dark labels, especially if California designers and printers are called into the mix. 4Parts Design in Sausalito recently produced a striking new label for a French Bordeaux called 59 Prime. The two elements combine in a classic label using geometric design to emphasize the mathematical aspect, according to managing partner David Hanson-Jerrard. A silver foil and a red foil stamp on a dark label create an intense relationship of these two dramatic, mathematic wonders. The label



59 Prime is designed to retail for less than \$20 and is available in retail and on-premise exclusive formats.

is printed by Paragon Label in Petaluma, Calif., and the wine will retail for \$20 per bottle.

### On the press

In the past two years, printers also observed an increase in black labels or solid black ink wash. Winery clients and designers started with black labels on red wine to help the logo and branding blend into the bottle for a no-label look, said Brian Lloyd, director of sales

and customer service at Vintage 99 Label Mfg. in Livermore, Calif. He doesn't agree that black works well on white wines.

"This is why you don't see black labels on white wines: The see-through nature of the glass and contents distracts and ruins the sleek look," he said. Labels must be purpose-designed to achieve more contrast and legibility, utilizing the most effective inks, varnishes and UV white inks.

Vintage 99 has an in-house design staff to help clients select optimal stock and inks. It has designed and printed dark labels for Lake County, Calif.'s Cache Creek Vineyards, which wanted an upscale label for its Port-style wine. An uncoated white labelstock was flooded with rich black inks, then embellished with embossed details and gold foil.

Presented with a design challenge—making a "cattle brand" logo to pop for Los Pinos Ranch Vineyards in Pittsburg, Texas—Vintage 99 used a matte black background and a selective gloss varnish to achieve a rustic texture and higher contrast.

Secret Ravine Vineyard & Winery, Loomis, Calif., wanted a label designed to emphasize its SR logo. "We chose a dark gray background on an uncoated paper with gold foil and embossing details highlighted with a spot gloss varnish," Lloyd said. This created a strong focal point for the brand logo, and the spot gloss added a two-toned texture.

Specialized techniques can contribute greatly to ease of reading a label. Herzog Wine Cellars, an Oxnard, Calif.-based brand of New Jersey's Royal Wine Corp., provided a house-designed label with a fine text on a black background; the text was difficult to read, so Vintage 99 used a high-build varnish to add dimension and legibility. Sculpted embossing and foil

stamping provide a rich feel against the matte black background. For this label, Vintage 99 recently won a Grand Award for Digital Label Printing from the Visual Media Alliance.

Similar techniques were employed to print a label for The Rock, a brand of Vinifera Wine Co. in King City, Calif., designed by an outside firm. A large block of high-build varnish helps the eye to focus on black and white images, creating the look of a raised, glossy photo. Against a solid black bottle, the contrast of gloss and matte finishes makes the label stand out.

### Get it on paper

As the North American wine industry has grown, so has the label-stock industry, with a plethora of options. Designers and printers may be more familiar with the distinct capabilities of paper labels than their winery clients.

We asked a leading purveyor, Neenah Paper based in Neenah, Wis., to learn how it is responding to—or leading—the demand for black labels. As earlier sources detailed, black labels don't necessarily start with black label paper.

"We have seen more interest in black labels lately, especially for red wines and dark spirits. Many printers are creating that look by flood coating one of our white or cream label papers with black ink," according to Ellen Bliske, Neenah senior brand manager.

Sara Nelson said her team achieved a beautiful, cost-effective label starting with a metallic silver stock. "We apply opaque white ink to most of the label and allow the silver to show through where we'd like a metallic (foil-like) effect."

Dedicated printers know that when flooding white paper with dark ink, the ink must be protected with a coating to avoid scuffing by case dividers, Nelson said. These coatings typically offer UV protection as well.



As dark labels such as Trinchero Family Estates' Ménage à Trois Midnight gained traction, they spawned more dark labels in search of market differentiation.

The print solution can work well, but flooding with dark ink can leave the label edge uncovered, sometimes allowing the back of the label to display its original pale color. Black label paper, like Neenah Packaging's Estate Label No. 25 "adds elegance with the solid black and no white edges," Bliske said.

Stock like this works well with foil stamping and embossing, debossing or die-cutting, as well as traditional print processes. "The decoration trend I see most frequently on black labels is foil, often in metallic shades or

an opaque white lending a sophistication to the label design," Bliske noted.

On the other hand, Nelson said she doesn't start with black paper because, "Getting white ink to be opaque enough is nearly impossible, and foiling the entire label is not practical."

Whichever route you choose, going dark is not a fade to black. With the help of in-tune designers, printers and suppliers, wineries considering darker labels for all or part of their product line can avoid potential pitfalls and attain the exciting, on-trend new labels they desire to make their bottles shine. 🍷

# GET IT DONE

From a single specialty bottle to truckloads of your favorite go-to bottle, All American Containers gets it done for you. Our stocking locations throughout the west and the U.S. get the job of ordering bottles off your plate and in your hands in no time. Our business is to handle your bottle and packaging needs so you can get back to your business and **GET IT DONE.**



Windsor, CA; San Leandro, CA; Kalama, WA; Simi Valley, CA; Plano, TX; Belle Vernon, PA; Miami, FL; Tampa, FL; Atlanta, GA; Branchburg, NJ

a a c w i n e . c o m