Selling Wine since 1730: the History of the Label

Graham HARDING

ABSTRACT

The history of the wine label goes back some three hundred years. It has evolved from a ‘ticket’ hung around the neck of the bottle to today’s printed adhesive label. Since the 19th century it has played a central role in selling wine to the end customer. Its evolution reflects not only changing technologies (particularly in printing and adhesives) but also the changing focus of government regulation and the increasing marketing and branding sophistication of producers and merchants.

2. Caption: Veuve Clicquot 1835 label. Source: Archives Maison Veuve Clicquot


4. Mercier Champagne des Gymnastes, late 19th century. Targeting specific interest groups was a Mercier marketing strategy to increase sales. Source:
Labels have been used on wine bottles on British tables since around 1730. Silver or enamel ‘tickets’ with names such as ‘Port’, ‘Burgundy’, ‘Champaign’ were hung round the neck of the bottle on silk cords or silver chains. Similar ‘tickets’ made of paper were being advertised in London by 1780 (1). Port, the fortified wine of Portugal, was hugely popular in England throughout the 18th century, after the Methuen Treaty of 1703 stipulated that wines from Portugal were to be subject to a lower tax rate than French wines. The requirement to import all wine to Britain may explain why such labels appear to have come earlier to this market than elsewhere.

Champagne: the pioneers of labelling

The first labels of the type we know today appeared in the late 18th and early 19th century. Alois Senenfelder’s development of lithographic printing around 1800 made it possible for producers or merchants to identify the wine and add other information such as their own name, the location of their winery or vineyard and (rarely) the date of the vintage. A very few merchants – such as Dilthey Sahl of Rudesheim (Germany) also included illustrations.

However, before the mid-19th century, most wine was shipped in barrel rather than in bottle. The exception was champagne where the pressure of secondary fermentation tended to split open the barrels and the major producers such as Moët & Chandon, Ruinart and Veuve Clicquot developed adhesive labels to advertise their name and to promote the grandeur of their ‘house’ with prestigious colours such as silver and gold and symbols of power and status such as crowns, heraldic crests or stars (2). They pioneered the use of the label as a commercial tool.

The colour label as marketing tool

Adhesive labels for other wines did not become common until the second half of the century. This change was driven by the shift from specialist merchants to mass market retailing (e.g. Nicolas in France, W. & A. Gilbey and Victoria Wine in the UK) and by regulation (e.g. the British government’s 1861 legislation requiring all wine bottles sold at retail to carry a label). Other markets such as France were slower to legislate but by the latter part of the 19th century, retailers recognised the value of the label as a means of in-store advertising. To quote the design consultant James Pilditch (1961) it had become a ‘silent salesman’.

That shift changed the style and content of labels. The development of colour printing technologies by George Baxter between 1835 and 1849 made full colour labels commercially viable. Labels increasingly used vineyard scenes, illustrations of châteaux / wineries, portraits of individuals (e.g. Jules Mumm’s 1869 label carried the likeness and signature of the famous operatic ‘diva’ Adelina Patti), (3), medals won at international exhibitions, and the employment of symbolically-relevant colour palates such as Mumm’s famous ‘Cordon Rouge’, which from 1876 has used a red sash on every label to pay tribute to the French Légion d’Honneur. Factual information such as name and place of origin, the style of the wine (e.g. level of effervescence or sweetness in champagne) and the date of the vintage complemented the additional iconography to make the label an important commercial tool. As
one British wine merchant put it in November 1890 in the *London Evening Standard*, ‘undoubtedly the general public rely more upon the fancy label than they do on the intrinsic value of the wine’. European and American producers similarly recognised the value of the label. For example, Eugene Mercier’s ground-breaking range of labels such as ‘Champagne des Familles’ or ‘Champagne des Gymnastes’ exploited the marketing value of targeting specific life events (e.g. engagements or baptisms) or interest groups (4).

**A functional guarantee of quality, a symbolic marker of value**

For consumers, therefore, the label had two roles. Functionally it was an important source of reassurance. The brand on the cork was the primary indicator of authenticity in the early part of the century as an 1828 Moët & Chandon advertisement indicated: ‘the name of the above-mentioned House (which is stamped on the inner part of the cork of every bottle) being a sufficient guarantee that the Wine is the best the country can produce’.

Secondly, as consumers shifted in the late 19th century from decanting wine to serving it from the bottle, the label’s symbolic role increased. A British journalist commented in the *Buckinghamshire Herald* in June 1882 that ‘a hospitable man with due regard for appearances would sooner offer his friend a champagne bottle with a label which has become fashionable than offer him an infinitely superior wine the producer of which was not equally well known’.

Consequently, labels were worth counterfeiting or recycling. The protection of trademarks initiated by France in the 1860s and copied elsewhere in Europe reduced counterfeiting but the lack of waterproof glues (not in commercial use for packaging and labels until the 1950s) enabled fraudsters to soak off the labels and re-use them on bottles of inferior wine. So great was this problem that consumers were recommended to ‘deface’ the bottle label with a penknife or destroy it.

In the 19th century the trademark system focused on protecting the ‘owner’ of the mark; in the 20th century, state intervention focused on the protection of the consumer. In Western Europe, regulations on wine bottle labels were slowly harmonized after the Second World War, starting with the European directive of 18 December 1978 (79/112/EEC). This general directive had the aim of controlling the information on all food labels so as to inform consumers on the ‘characteristics of the foodstuff’, and to protect consumers from false claims as to medicinal or other effects. Legislation further mandated the inclusion of alcohol levels on beverages as well as the name of the producer. The back label has increasingly been used for the required technical information and health warnings and, from 8 December 2023, EU regulations require that these must include all ingredient, allergen, energy and nutrition information (or include a QR code with this information) whilst the front label remains the central point-of-sale consumer communication. Brands have only a few seconds to catch the eye and labels remain vital to the successful sell.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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