

Imagery artist Domink Dinnre creates conversation-starting labels.

# Label Maker

Peeling back the fine art of the wine label.

BY DAVINA BAUM

Like most of us, Santa Clara-based artist Sonya Paz buys wine based on the label. "When I go shopping for wine, I look for something that's been recommended," she says, "or I'll scope out the labels and colors."

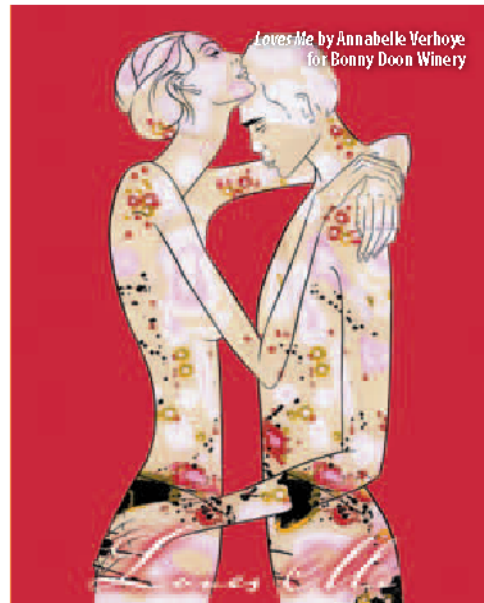
So what's in a label? If you're one of a number of wineries that seek out nontraditional images to grace their bottles—beyond the standard wine-country pastoral or plain-text explanation—what's in a label is all in the imagination.

Chuck House is a noted wine label designer and co-author of *Icon: Art of the Wine Label*, his work for five wineries is included in the exhibit *Beyond the Pour: Pairing Art and Wine Label Design*, at the San Francisco Museum of Craft and Design through January 29. As he says, "With [the] wine [you buy] you're saying something about yourself." And what you're saying apparently goes deep. House says he doesn't just design labels; he designs worlds.

Bonny Doon's creative director John Locke pinpoints the moment that wine labels were transformed into self-sustaining worlds: House's design for Le Cigare Volante. The label, a pastoral French scene, seems innocuous enough. It's the space ship hovering behind the trees that comes as a surprise to the casual quaffer. Says Locke, "Not only was this quite entertaining for those of us displaying traits of both the liberal arts major and the 12-year-old, but it presents a wonderful vehicle to offer to a customer something that is more than a wine, but a complete experience—wine/imagery/narrative/mythology."

The designs that House and many other artists have executed for Bonny Doon illustrate Locke's idea of a "complete experience." For the Caidel Solo series of European varietals, House created a little girl reaching out to her mother—or is she letting go? "[Owner Randall Grahm] wanted a sense of being alone that was partly scary and partly liberating," says House.

How does this relate to wine? Well, that's up for interpretation; it's the "complete experience" that Locke mentioned. Bob Nugent, the curator of *Beyond the Pour* and the manager of the Benziger Family and Imagery Estate Wineries artist labeling programs, says "the label should speak about the wine." But he certainly wouldn't agree that it has to say "this wine tastes like cherries." In fact, Imagery artists don't know what wine their art will be paired with. With many labels, the images don't correlate exactly to what's in the bottle; they speak more to how the bottle fits into your world.



The Imagery Artist Label Collection was designed to accessorize Benziger's small lots of high-end wine. They needed high-end images to fit these special wines, and Nugent has spent years working with established artists, including Sol LeWitt, Robert Arneson, Squeak Carnwath and Nancy Graves.

The only parameter given to the artists, other than government regulations and orientation, is that an image of the Parthenon-like structure that resides at the vineyard has to be included. "When I ask an artist to make a label, I don't tell them what to do," says Nugent. "I say, 'Make a piece.' I get the best work that way."

Sonya Paz got a first-hand insight into the wine-label process when she designed a label for El Sol Vineyards in the Livermore Valley.

Paz sat down with El Sol winemakers Hal and Kathy Liske and talked about what they wanted—something simple, says Paz, but strong. She even took some of the Liske's grapes home with her to study the variations in color. What she came up with is bright and bold, clearly a Sonya Paz original, and sure to catch a shopper's eye.

And if the artist doesn't work in traditional, flat media? Nugent says, "We have an artist working on something with neon in it. I think that will be wonderful. I'll deal with the problem of how to present it once it comes to us."

House notes that a bottle of wine "arrives at the table and sometimes it costs as much as another guest." So, he suggests, you have to think about "what kind of a personality you want [this wine] to have to stimulate a conversation." And, as Paz says of her design, "People always talk about the sense of the wine, how it tastes. I wanted to give a sense of the visual side of the wine." **TW**

See *Beyond the Pour: Pairing Art and Wine Label Design* through January 29 at the San Francisco Museum of Craft and Design, 550 Sutter St., San Francisco (415) 773-0303 [www.sfmcd.com](http://www.sfmcd.com)