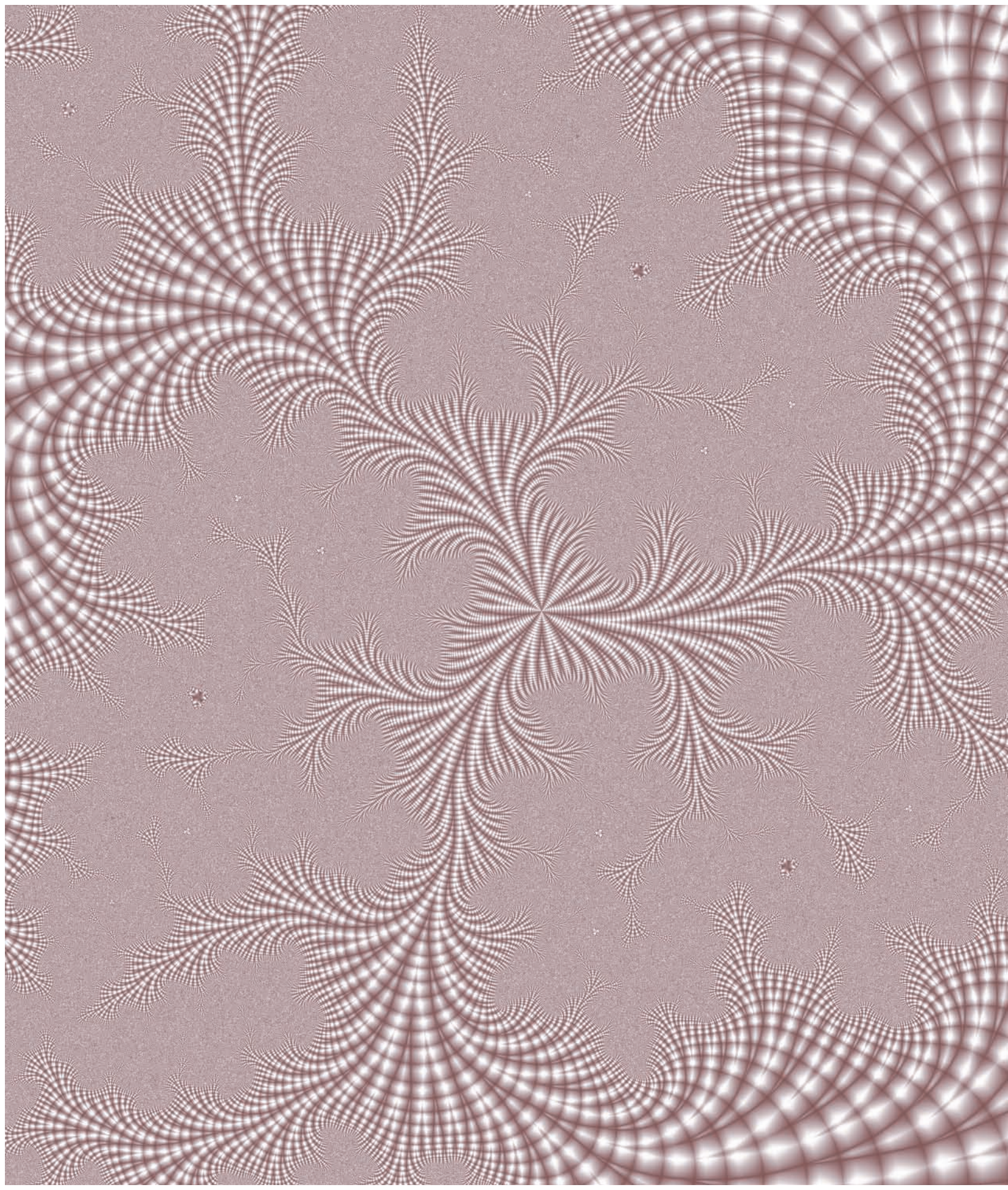


*Q* **HOW TO TELL A BOOK** *Q*  
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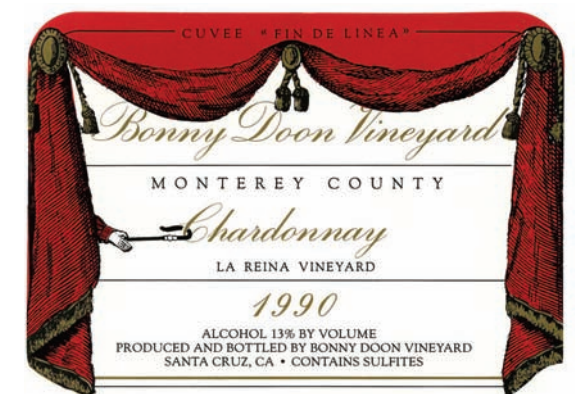
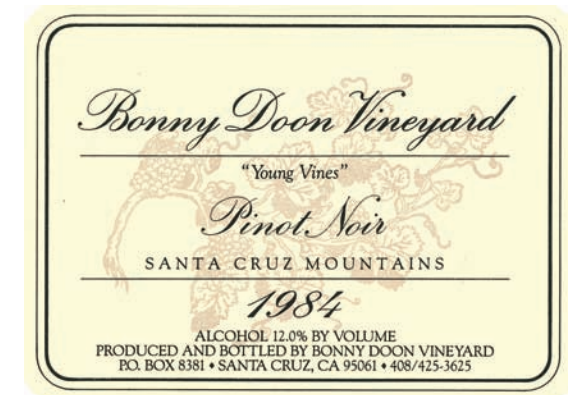
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## The Etiquette (and History) of the Bonny Doon ETIQUETTE

I am going to Wine Hell for what I have wrought in the world of wine labels. (Perhaps like Don Giovanni, I'll find that the exquisite pleasure I derived on earth from my reprehensible behavior will be of some consolation as I endure my eternal torment.) It all began quite innocently. I decided some years ago to become a winemaker: I was going to grow grapes and make great wine. As for a label, I'd just find someone, ideally a friend, who would not charge me much to design something simple and elegant. How hard could that be? An old girlfriend initiated the design of the first Bonny Doon label, with some additional assistance from a local graphic artist. ("Creative differences" did not do much for our relationship.)

It was indeed a simple, elegant label modeled on the classic Burgundian paradigm, as I wanted the world to know how sophisticated were both the wine and its maker. We continued with this template for our Monterey County La Reina and Estate Chardonnay until the last vintage of La Reina in 1990, for which we created a special "end of the line cuvée" label. Even in those early days, the Bonny Doon style exhibited a certain self-dramatizing theatricality; the disappearance of the Chardonnay from our product portfolio was not something I was going to countenance without some sort of ironic metacommentary.

So, the original business plan, if one could call it that, was to produce in bonny Bonny Doon (a lovely remote mountain hamlet) a brilliant Pinot Noir; the world's appetite for it would be so unappeasable that there would be little for me to do but blissfully and meditatively tend my vines, well removed from the wine-swilling rabble. I would periodically visit the bank to deposit the passel of checks and money orders that would clog my mailbox. I hadn't actually planned for the contingency of the wines not being so great, and it didn't take long to realize that the quality of the Pinot Noir wines made from the Bonny Doon Estate Vineyard was not going to make the likes of Henri Jayer and Aubert de Villaine fearful of a brash new competitor.



(We ended up grubbing up the Pinot noir vines and replacing them with Rhône varieties.) I played around a bit with Grenache in 1982 and came up with the idea of blending it with Cabernet Sauvignon. I gave the wine the very simple, unpretentious name of Vin Rouge, assuming that the wine-buying public greatly appreciated laconic understatement.

The wine was not too bad—I had lucked into finding some brilliant old vines—but clearly I had something to learn about marketing. The life of this winemaker was definitely not going according to plan. For one thing, a lot more time interacting with the generally uncomprehending *hoi polloi* seemed to be necessary to sell any wine at all.

By 1984 the idea had entered my brain that calling a wine “Vin Rouge” might not be the most compelling sales proposition, and that if I wanted people to actually buy the wines, I might think about giving them some sort of conceptual hook, or at least a stylistic referent. It’s important to remember that, when I started working with Rhône grapes, they were essentially an unknown commodity in the United States. It was clear that I would have to do something outlandish, even *outré*, with the packaging (a practice that is now commonplace) to draw attention to the wine, because labeling it straight would be equivalent to printing the labels with disappearing ink. When people ask me how I come up with the ideas for labels (what I think they are actually asking is, how do I come up with the ideas for such outlandish labels), I tend to answer facetiously, “Drugs.” But the reality is quite simple. I found, to my surprise, that I enjoyed being a show-off, at least in the labeling department. You learn that you have a particular talent for something, and you go with it; the problem arises when the exercise of the talent becomes an end in itself.

So, perhaps a blended wine that was not such an arrant mongrel would be a more successful sales proposition than a Vin Rouge, *tout court*. Why not contrive to make a California Châteauneuf-du-Pape, or at least an *hommage* to one? I would compose the wine around George Besson’s lovely (still extant) old-vine Grenache in Gilroy,<sup>20</sup> but I would need Syrah and Mourvèdre as well if this was going to be a proper Rhônish blend.<sup>21</sup> Unbelievably, there were only three Syrah vineyards in California in the early 1980s; the Estrella River Vineyard down in Paso Robles, although manifestly not Côte Rôtie, seemed as if it might work for my purposes. Lastly, Darrel Corti, the brilliant polymath Sacramento wine merchant, had clued me in to the fact that Mourvèdre was alive and well on our shores and traveling under the *nom de vigne* of

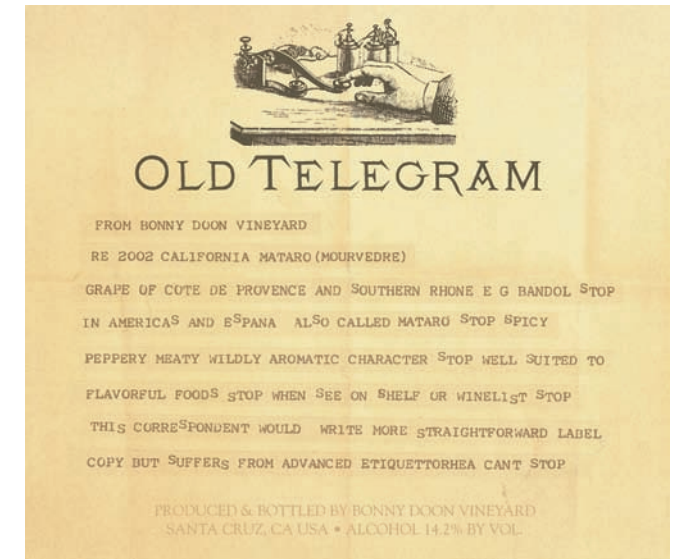
20. David Bruce had in fact made a superb full-bodied varietal Grenache in the early 1970s from a vineyard located not far from this one, and this was a great source of encouragement for my project. The fact that I had been able to find bottles of his wine still on the shelves some twelve years after its release *should* have told me something about the commercial viability of domestic Grenache-centric wines, but I was largely oblivious. 21. There is, for me at least, a bit of awkwardness in determining what to call the category of California wines made from Rhône grapes. *California Rhônes* seems vaguely oxymoronic, if not misleading, and the analogous term for, say, a domestic Sangiovese, *Cal-Ital*, is downright lame. I am a lone voice in the wilderness but would submit that the term *meridional* would fit the bill for sun-loving grapes grown anywhere in the world below the forty-fifth parallel.

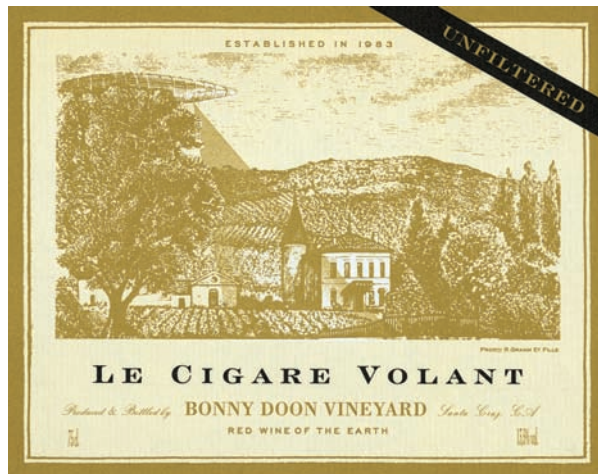
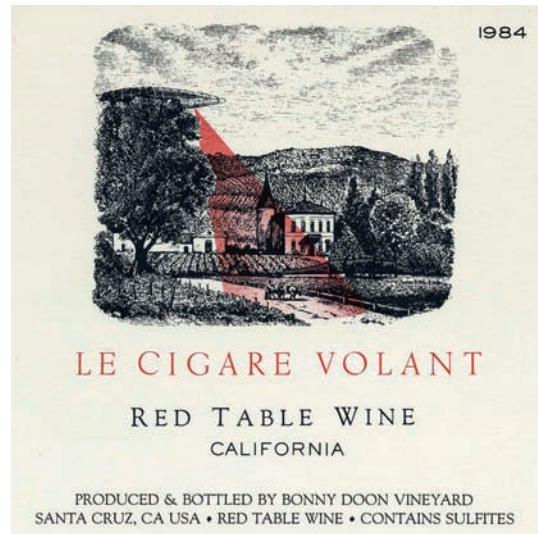
Mataro—I found a small plantation in San Martin and would later find a larger enclave in the sleepy Sacramento Delta town of Oakley. I was in business; it remained only to find a catchy name.

I had been hanging around Kermit Lynch’s tiny wineshop, then located in Albany, near Berkeley, soaking up his enthusiasm for the great wines of the Rhône, and thought: Why not spoof Vieux Télégraphe, a classic Châteauneuf? I imagined a label that looked like an old telegram with strips of paper (the message) seemingly glued to the telegram itself. I wasn’t sure exactly how the copy would read but loved the idea of using the word *STOP* in lieu of a period. (I vaguely recalled a Marx Brothers routine using telegrams to set up a joke.) We had already fermented the grapes in 1984 when I picked up a copy of John Livingstone-Learmouth’s *The Wines of the Rhône* and leafed through the chapter on Châteauneuf. (If I was going to make wine in this style, a little education was in order.) There I learned about the bizarre local French ordinance prohibiting the landing of flying saucers and “flying cigars” in these Rhône vineyards, and I was utterly charmed.

Perhaps a label that treated this goofy ordinance would be a broader, more inclusive joke than a spoof of Vieux Télégraphe, a wine that was then known essentially only to wine geeks, and the aim, of course, was to educate the American public about the virtues of this largely unknown category, the wines of the Rhône. The problem when you try to make a reference to an Old World style using Old World language on a New World product is that you typically come off as being derivative and pretentious, as is evident in all the Châteaux *Quelque-chose* and *Domaines de N’importe-quoi* of Napa Valley. With *Le Cigare Volant*, a certain ironic distance was perfectly established—the wine bears a relationship to the French product but also maintains an appropriate separation. Oh, those wacky French.

My wine broker in Northern California, Alexia Moore, put me in touch with Chuck House, the now world-famous label designer, who had up to that point designed but one wine package, the beautiful, award-winning Frog’s Leap label. I met Chuck at a coffeehouse in Santa Rosa—it seemed that he generally preferred meetings out of his office—and we instantly hit it off. Chuck is shy, and I think he appreciated my unpolished, somewhat socially inept style. In our years of association, we generally followed the same pattern, typically meeting in coffeehouses in Santa Rosa or Petaluma, occasionally in restaurants, and sometimes even on the side of the road. Since neither of us is particularly well organized, we would often forget to bring along the requisite production materials—wine bottles, Scotch tape, and so on—to use





of historical accretion—changes in ownership, redistricting, and so on. Recently we decided to update the Cigare label, giving it a slightly more elegant look and making it decidedly more faux-French.

While “Le Cigare Volant” was a clever name for a Châteauneuf-inspired New World blend, I hate to waste a perfectly good packaging idea, so we pressed “Old Telegram” into service as a label for our varietal Mourvèdre. Strictly speaking, this was not the most analogous translation, as the *encépagement*, or varietal mix, is one found more typically in, say, Bandol, the great Mourvèdre-based wine from Provence. But the label is still wonderful. Chuck created the irregularities in the font by using an antique typewriter, and we embossed the labels to give relief to the telegraphic strips.

A label I greatly miss is the one we did for Clos de Gilroy, a wine made primarily from Grenache. This wine originally was conceived as a default blend incorporating the various lots

of Grenache from vineyards located “close to Gilroy” (get it?), which were good but somehow not quite good enough (Clos but no Cigare) for inclusion in the final Cigare blend. I had initially imagined the label looking like a French *carte de visite*—again, an *hommage* with an ironic twist. (If one knows Gilroy, a rather sleepy agricultural town in the lower Santa Clara Valley, one appreciates the glaring incongruity.) When Chuck brought back the first draft, the label looked a bit austere. I told him, “It needs something, Chuck, but what?” We concluded that what it needed was a picture of a French person, and the most iconic French-looking person we could think of, apart from Charles de Gaulle, was Marcel Proust. This adds a slightly subversive Dada-like quality to the package. “Le gil des rois. Le roi des gils” is a spoof on the inscription that one sometimes sees on a Châteauneuf label. (“Le vin des rois. Le roi des vins.”)

Because I am not gifted with much business sense, especially in such niggling matters as cost containment, Bonny Doon has never been a particularly profitable institution. But I do have an inventive flair, and I have on multiple occasions come up with Rube Goldberg-like strategies for enhancing the company’s profitability—machinations that would not have been necessary in the first place had the company been more efficiently organized. It occurred to me that wineries have a lot of expensive equipment—tanks, presses, pumps, and so on—that is typically used intensively during the fairly short fall grape harvest, but that sits idle for much of the rest of the year. If we didn’t limit ourselves to *grapes*, perhaps we could widen that window. Thus we produced Framboise, an “infusion of raspberry,” for many years, buying raspberries from nearby Watsonville, until I discovered the wondrous raspberries of Washington State, which were much tastier. And we could process the berries in July before the grape harvest or freeze them and process them at our leisure.

The Framboise “infusion” was composed of several varieties of raspberry that seemed to do well in Washington. I couldn’t figure out how to improve it—something I always wished to do with all our products—until I met Patrick Moore, a plant breeder at Washington State University, who allowed me to taste the results of his field trials of hundreds of different sorts of raspberries, some wild, and some new hybrids.

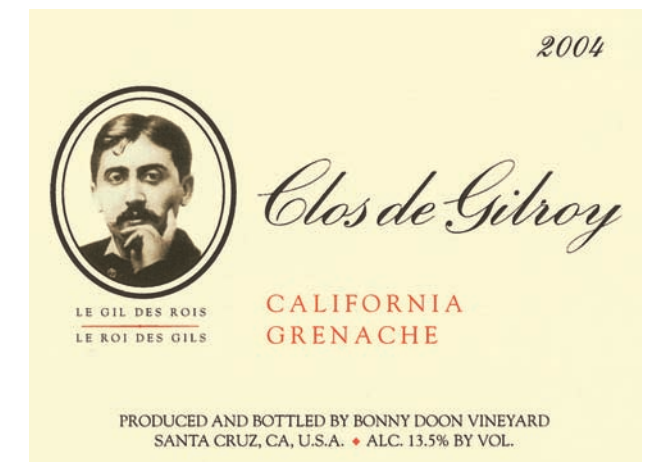
This particular day was arguably—alongside the day of my daughter’s birth—one of the best days of my life. The wild varieties were, not surprisingly, the most intense, but they were all very, very small and, hence, “uncommercial.”

One hybrid I particularly enjoyed had a spicy wild flavor and was reasonably large in size. I persuaded Mike Youngquist, our grower, to consider planting the new variety for us. Now came the business of giving the new raspberry a name, which devolved to the plant breeder. “This is the part that I don’t really like,” said Patrick.

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“This is the part that I don’t really like,” said Patrick.



“I’m just a farmer. I can never think of really clever names for all these raspberries.” “Why don’t you name your raspberries after dead young rock stars, Patrick?” I asked innocently. “You could have the Hendrix, the Joplin, the Cobain . . .” I don’t think he took my advice completely, but in recent years we’ve made Framboise from the intense and flamboyant “Morrison” raspberry.

Following the logic of expanding the window of harvest, it occurred to me back in 1986 that we might consider producing a faux “ice wine” by freezing grapes in a commercial freezer. I thought these frozen grapes might behave a lot like the ones that naturally freeze on the steep hillsides of Germany and other extreme northern climes—that is, they might yield a concentrated nectar when pressed while still partially frozen. (As the temperature of the cluster drops, the liquid freezes within the berry before the sugar syrup freezes, and the ice remains frozen when the sugar syrup has thawed, thus naturally concentrating the sweetness of the expressed juice.) Moreover, picking grapes on a relatively flat surface during the day, when the sun was shining, would be a lot easier than picking them on a steep, slippery slope, sometimes in the middle of the night, when it was bloody cold. At the time, I hadn’t heard of the process called cryoextraction, but I couldn’t imagine why artificially freezing grapes wouldn’t have the same effect as naturally freezing them. In any event, some sort of test was in order, as the grapes I wanted to use for this wine were just days away from harvest. I went to the nearby Safeway, bought ten pounds of Thompson seedless, put them in the freezer, and, after they had frozen, set them in a little press, squeezed, . . . and nothing came out. Well, no matter. Eventually we worked out that the grapes had to thaw a bit for the process to work. There certainly was a steep learning curve in mastering the process. For a while, the wine was made at Wente Vineyard in Livermore, and the first attempt to scale the process up, by putting the grapes in one of their large bladder presses, resulted in the creation of an iceberg the size of a Volkswagen, which wreaked a fair bit of havoc within the press. Over the years we ended up buying the Wentes several new bladders for their presses, replacing the ones we had torn and mangled.

It seemed logical to not compete directly with the Germans or the Sauternais, so I thought to make our “ice wine” from Muscat grapes rather than from Riesling, Sauvignon blanc, or Sémillon, though eventually we tried all those (and more). When we began, I naively called the wine Vin de Glace, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms initially approved the label; then it came to their attention that “vin de glace” actually meant “ice wine.” This was nomenclature exclusively reserved for wines made from grapes that had frozen on the vine rather than in a freezer in Castroville, California. The label approval was officially rescinded with due ceremonial sword-breaking and the stripping of epaulets. We resubmitted the label as Vin de Glacière, or “Wine of the Icebox,” and have experienced no regulatory contretemps—at least regarding frozen grapes—since then.

The original suite of labels for Vin de Glace (or Glacière) was beautiful, stylish, indeed classical; these were the early days, and I hadn’t yet thought to break the rules. But the labels were



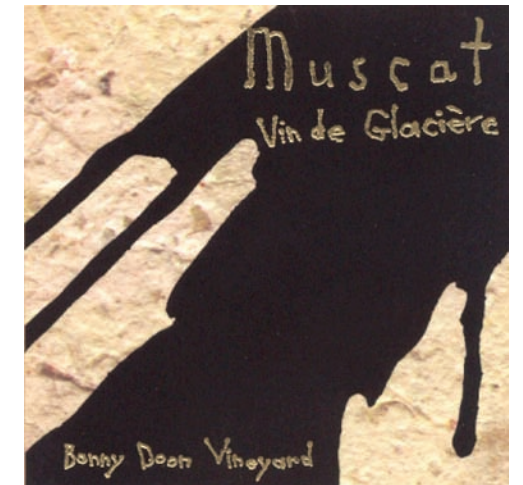
an utter pain to apply to the bottles themselves, as there were three pieces to perfectly align on each tall, skinny, elegant—imagine Audrey Hepburn in stiletto heels—but terribly wobbly 375 milliliter “flute” bottle. We were using an older technology at the time—paper labels applied with glue—and could never work out how to get the labels to line up properly or how to keep them from thoroughly disintegrating when the bottle was placed in an ice bucket. (In retrospect, using a different kind of paper probably

would have helped.) When we changed to a new bottling line, we decided to go with self-adhesive labels, a product of a new technology—you couldn’t get the wonderful range of paper textures, sigh, but the labels were so much easier to apply. Alas, on our new machine we no longer had the option of applying three front labels, so it was time for another meeting with Chuck.

André Ostertag had sent me a few bottles of a *vendange tardive* wine that he had made, with some actual dirt from

his vineyard glued to the bottles. (Don’t ask me how they ever cleared U.S. Customs!) Inspired, I became possessed with the idea of incorporating some element of the wine itself into the package and thought that perhaps we could make our own paper, using the grape skins themselves. Now, handmade paper is enormously expensive to produce, and the technical problems of printing on it and hand applying it to individual bottles would likely have made the company instantly insolvent. Cooler heads prevailed. Chuck made some paper with Muscat skins and took a picture of it, and that became the basis of the label—a fiscally sound compromise, but somehow the truly distinctive element was lost. In the final design stages of the label, one of his children apparently spilled some extremely dark liquid on the House family carpet, giving Chuck the idea to create a Pollock-like counterpoint to the grape paper, and a richer surface on which the gold ink might be laid down. I confess I have never been particularly fond of this iteration of the Vin de Glacière label; it reminds me too much of a crime scene.

Ultimately it came time to redesign the label again, and we sought a way to recapture some of the elegance of the first Vin de Glacière package. I honestly can’t recall whether it was Chuck’s idea or my own—we had become like an old couple whose ideas seemed to flow effortlessly from one to the other—to employ *female undergarments* as part of the label design. Maybe we were overly reliant on a fairly standard advertising ploy, but I imagined it could be done tastefully, almost subliminally, to interesting effect. The mesh pat-





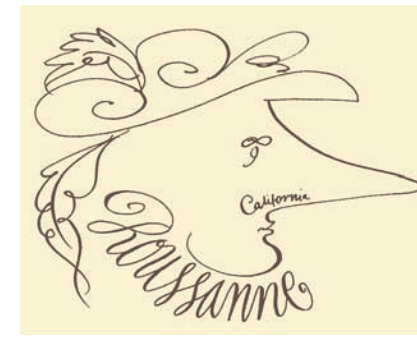
tern of the clear acetate label would offer a tantalizing, peekaboo view of the golden nectar that languorously reposed within. Chuck deputized me to go out and bring back frilly, lacy women’s undergarments so we could construct some prototypes. I ended up visiting a small—*intimate* is the only way to describe it—undergarment boutique in San Francisco owned by Carol Doda, the legendary North Beach stripper. “I want to look at some panties and maybe a mesh brassiere,” I told her. “What size do you take, dear?” Ms. Doda asked me. “It’s, um, not for me, you understand . . .,” I stammered. “It’s for an . . . um, art project, you see.” “That’s all right, dear . . .”

The wine did incredibly well for us for many, many years, and appeared on scores of restaurant wine lists, with labels that came and went. And no one really seemed to worry as much as we did about the outward appearance of the bottle.

Chuck loves European art from the 1920s—Dada and Deco, Picasso and Braque, the Constructivist school—and can brilliantly mimic almost any style. We produced a wine called Le Sophiste, a putative blend of Roussanne and Marsanne, grown at our Estate Vineyard in Bonny Doon. No one, of course, had ever heard of either grape variety, so it seemed necessary to bang the drum a bit louder and do something out-

rageous. Monsieur Sophisto, as we came to call him, does bear a passing and somewhat unfortunate resemblance to Mr. Peanut, but he is, *au fond*, the embodiment of sophistication. The Sophists, just for the record, were a group of philosophers whose name came to be associated with trickery and false reasoning. The word *sophistication* itself has a lovely ambiguity in its application to wine—where it can connote either vinous elegance or a wine that has been “enhanced” in a putatively Barry Bonds–like sense. The bottle came equipped with a plastic top hat in lieu of a foil. This touch was too outlandish for sommeliers with delicate sensibilities and allergies to kitsch. When we sold the wine to Charlie Trotter’s, Larry Stone, the restaurant’s sommelier and wine buyer at the time, primly insisted that the top hats be replaced with conventional foils, and of course we complied.

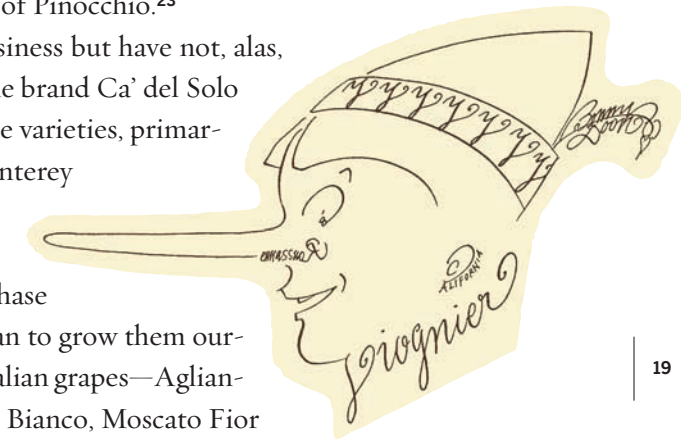
Alas, the wonderful Bonny Doon Estate Vineyard succumbed to Pierce’s disease, but before it did, we took some cuttings from our “Roussanne” vines and had them planted in the vine-



yard of our friend Chris Couture in Paso Robles.<sup>22</sup> The wine eventually made from those vines was quite good, but not as classical as Le Sophiste, so we decided to give the package a different look. I met a wonderful calligrapher, Wendy Cook, who had never designed a wine label before, but who did an extraordinary job drawing Cyrano for us. We produced our “Roussanne” for a couple of years, until we learned that the grape was in fact not Roussanne but rather Viognier. A label

change was indicated, and Cyrano became Pinocchio. If you look very, very carefully, you will see the mirror image of the word *Roussanne* in the nostril of Pinocchio.<sup>23</sup>

I have always sort of felt my way along in the wine business but have not, alas, had a great grasp of business fundamentals. I initiated the brand Ca’ del Solo with the intention of representing a range of Italian grape varieties, primarily sourced from our own vineyard in Soledad in Monterey County. We had terrible luck obtaining consistent quality from the multifarious, historically untested *uvaggi* we grew there; ultimately it was more cost-effective to purchase these Italianate varieties from outside growers rather than to grow them ourselves. We have worked with a fair number of different Italian grapes—Aglanico, Arneis, Barbera, Dolcetto, Erbaluce, Freisa, Moscato Bianco, Moscato Fior d’Arancio, Nebbiolo, Pigato, Pinot Grigio (that’s slightly cheating, of course, but we gave it a shot), Refosco, and of course, Sangiovese. But none of the wines did well for us commercially—I think we pretty much overwhelmed our distributors’ ability to absorb these odd-ball wines—apart from the improbable Malvasia Bianca, which won a considerable cult fol-

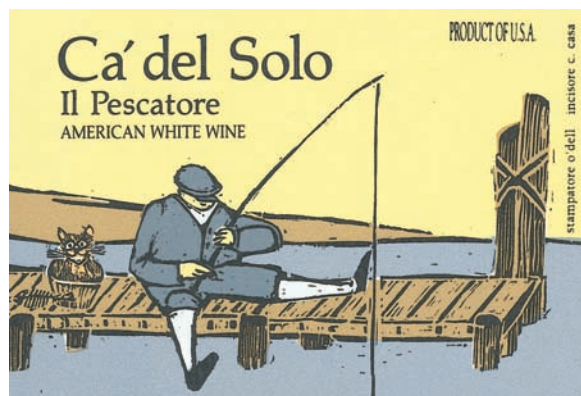


22. Pierce’s disease is a serious, generally fatal bacterial disease that clogs the xylem tissue of grapevines and is transmitted by insects known as sharpshooters, which typically live in a riparian habitat proximal to the infected vineyard. Our vineyard was wiped out by the wimpier of the two identified vectors, the blue-green sharpshooter—the one that doesn’t fly so well or far and is a less voracious feeder than the more aggressive glassy-winged sharpshooter. This revolting development made me give up hope of growing grapes in Bonny Doon at least at that time, and led me to sell the former vineyard property. 23. I must confess to a certain puerile satisfaction in sneaking things past bureaucratic regulatory bodies such as the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. My colleagues in the wine business are somewhat astonished that I have been able to seemingly get away with murder for so long. I honestly don’t know how we have been so fortunate in getting away with what we have, at least as far as packaging, and I am certain that somewhere in Washington, D.C., there is a very thick dossier on Bonny Doon. I once asked our BATF liaison, Ann Morse, to approach the bureau with a particularly outlandish proposal for a highly dicey experimental winemaking protocol, one that would undoubtedly bring down the full weight of the G on the proposer, unless the matter were handled with utmost discretion. “I have a client who wishes to remain nameless, and proposes to do x, y, and z with his wine,” Ann told a representative of the bureau. “Absolutely no way on earth,” she was told, “and say hello to Randall for us, if you would.”

lowing. Malvasia Bianca, the grape, is in fact not a true Malvasia, but is most likely Moscato Greco, a naturally high-acid, relatively simple Muscat from Piemonte. The wine we made was distinctive by California standards, and the label was charming.

Originally it was my intent that all the Ca' del Solo labels would depict individuals more or less acting *al solo*, doing difficult or challenging things that one could only do for oneself, by oneself. This is the first day of school for little Malvasia, and, having just let go of her mother's hand, she is systematically stepping on every crack in the sidewalk. At the time we first released this wine, I was seeing a woman who had a young daughter just beginning first grade, who was the model for little Malvasia, even down to the detail of sidewalk-crack-stepping. People have told me that Malvasia reminds them of both Eloise and Madeline; she appears to me to be a composite of the two, which seems to reinforce her archetypal quality.

It was a passing fantasy that all the Ca' del Solo labels would somehow link to one another in a continuous tableau, but this never quite happened. Maybe we got off-track when we first produced Il Pescatore, a high-concept, premium white blend. I remembered from my experience with Vin Rouge that the public was not quite ready for a totally generic blended wine. Any conceptual hook that one could provide (the Fisherman) would help reel in the potential consumer, who was generally pretty much at sea vis-à-vis the vast ocean of wine labels. Il Pescatore wasn't, in fact, much of a fish wine. We couldn't seem to keep the acidity in the wine; neither was it particularly Italianate—at a certain point, it actually contained a fair bit of Chardonnay. But it was a beautiful, fun package. Gio, the little boy, is fishing (on his own),



and while he doesn't catch a fish, he does manage to catch a boot, Italia, which is a great metaphor for precisely what had happened to me. The "boot" is printed on the back of the back-label, so one observes it from the front as a sort of underwater diorama. We did go through a rather protracted phase of wine labels that were visible through the bottle. Maybe this was a marketing schtick that proclaimed, "Notice me, notice me," but it also more subtly suggested the presence of a deeper layer of meaning to the wines, below the obvious surface.

We produced this Ca' del Solo Nebbiolo label only once, but it is perhaps my favorite in the Ca' del Solo series, and it was our first attempt to give these labels more of a fine art look. Chuck continued to work in the scratchboard cartoon vernacular, but the illustrative reference to commedia dell'arte gives the label true sophistication.

One recurring theme in our story is the unanticipated factors that have driven many of our decisions in developing new products and labels. When you set out to produce varietal wines (or, God forbid, blended wines) that, for whatever reason, fall short of your expectations about quality, unless you are willing to sell off your also-rans in bulk (a particularly bad option when one is dealing with nonstandard grape varieties from viticultural Third World appellations), you definitely need a default "program"—which is a horrible marketing term describing a particular product line and the infrastructure that supports it—to absorb these vinous misfits. What began essentially as a salvage operation ultimately turned into a successful franchise for us—a premium generic blended wine. It was our own highly eclectic vineyard in Soledad, located not far from the California Correctional Training Facility that inspired the name "Big House." The Soledad facility itself is not architecturally interesting, so we looked elsewhere for iconic prison images. The Big House illustration was loosely inspired by the architecture of the prison at Alcatraz, and since I wanted it to look not terribly threatening—more like an Italian villa than a minimum-security prison—we used only a single strand of barbed wire.

I conceived the wine as being primarily an Italianate blend, but there never seemed to be enough good grapes from Italian varieties that we could either grow ourselves or purchase, and ultimately the blend, as we increased our production of it—primarily from purchased grapes—became highly eclectic.



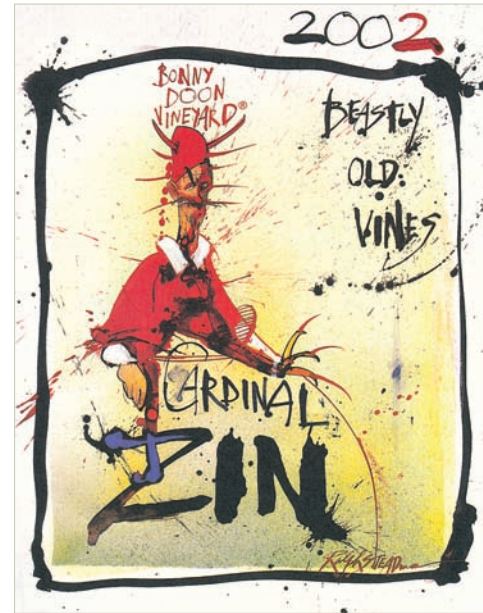
I made a strong effort to insure that the wine never got too close stylistically to the Rhône blends or the varietal wines that we were already producing, but (now it can be told) it was in fact grapes from old-vine Carignane vineyards (generally available for a song) that held the whole thing together.

As I have said, the business decisions that one makes are often the result of factors seemingly beyond one's control. We had defined ourselves as leading producers of Rhône-style wines in California, and obviously, if you wish to make Rhône-style wines, you need Rhône-style grapes. But as the category gained recognition, and demand for these grapes grew, our growers realized that they could compel us to take some of their other, less marketable varieties at the same time. Thus, like it or not, we were suddenly in the Zinfandel business. We had a casual relationship with the artist Ralph Steadman, through Oddbins, an English chain of wineshops for which he did quite a bit of work. The chaps at Oddbins introduced me to Ralph, and somehow I persuaded him to design a label for Cardinal Zin.

Ralph is a genius beyond all reckoning, but he's not particularly adept at taking art direction, so the best strategy was to give him absolutely minimal parameters—the size of the label, the

name and perhaps the color of the wine, the shape and color of the bottle—and then let him have at it. The Cardinal Zin label he drew for us was magnificent, and the wine sold exceptionally well, despite the fact that I had essentially zero interest in the category. To my chagrin, I began to accede to the expectations of my social milieu—actually John Locke, our former creative director, put me up to it—and found myself dressing up as a cardinal at the ZAP tasting. This monumental event is mounted annually in San Francisco by the Zinfandel Advocates and Producers, and its enormity and decibel level are exceeded only by the enormity and decibel level of the wines themselves. These antics only further cemented the perception that I was but a wild and crazy showman. I had merely wanted some first-rate Mourvèdre grapes, but now I had gone and joined the circus.

Ralph produced another marvelous label for us, for a wine we imported for a number of years from the Languedoc, the Domaine des Blageurs Syrah. This was before practically the entire Cen-

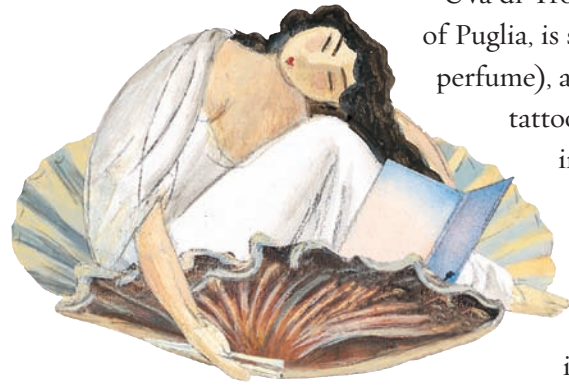


tral Coast of California from Gonzales to Santa Barbara was planted to Syrah, and we were having great difficulty finding first-rate Syrah grapes in the state. I had envisioned the label as a playing card, with the illustration of a new, colorful character, the Sirrah, as a knavish jack-a-napes. I'm not sure how well the illustration reads as a playing card, but if you look carefully, you can see Good Ralph and Knaveish Ralph, twinned aspects of a single heart.

At some point, we decided it was time to revisit the idea of producing Syrah domestically—we had produced a marvelous Estate Syrah for a number of years before our vineyard succumbed to Pierce's disease. I still loved the idea of the "Sirrah," with his sibilant Ssssssss the quintessence of intrigue and dastardy, as a member of a feudal court. But perhaps instead of depicting him on a conventional playing card, we could portray the Sirrah figure on a tarot card. I envisioned some sort of archetypal trickster/mountebank/charlatan/snake oil salesman, clad in a greatcoat from which he plied his nefarious wares. The aromatics of Syrah have always struck me as being exotic and vaguely illicit, almost opiated, a bit like laudanum. I loved the haunting, archetypal figures that Bascombe, the soulful, monomaniacal New York artist, did for the covers of the Robertson Davies novels, and, feeling emboldened, I called her to see if she might do a label for us. To my great pleasure, she agreed to. Syrah "Le Pousseur" is "the Pusher" or "the Dealer," maybe an unfortunate choice for the name of a wine, but we in the wine business do tend to forget that what we produce is somewhat addictive on several levels at least.

It had been so much fun to work with Bascombe that she seemed a natural choice to design the labels for our new Il Circo series—oddball wines from Italy. I have already mentioned that life at Bonny Doon had become somewhat of a circus; a relatively small organization, we were doing so many things that it was truly amazing we could keep everything in the air. One of my pet ambitions was to make the world safe for unusual, eclectic grape varieties, but it was difficult to persuade growers in California to plant them. "What if you were to be hit by a bus, Randall? What would I do then with all that Tocai Friulano?" one grower asked me. (Though it could be argued that, if the site was a righteous location for Tocai Friulano or Timorasso or whatever oddball grape variety it might be, it would matter little in the big scheme whether I personally was around to ferment those nonstandard grapes. They would *belong*, and this is the great genius of *terroir*.) At a certain point, out of frustration, we decided to begin importing wines made from the crazy, indigenous grape varieties of Italy, and these were subsumed under the Il Circo brand, emblematic of the circus that Bonny Doon had become.





*Pacific Rim Dry Riesling*  
BONNY DOON VINEYARD

Uva di Troia (Grape of the Streetwalker), the piquantly named vinous star of Puglia, is said to possess a distinctive aroma of violets (suggestive of cheap perfume), and what better way to represent this than with “La Violetta,” the tattooed lady? I was astonished at how much elegance could be achieved in a wine from a region as brutally warm as Puglia. The mystery of wine is how it utterly confounds our expectations again and again.

One of our great successes in label design was the Pacific Rim Riesling. This wine was always a bit challenging programmatically: it was a Riesling wine made primarily from grapes grown in Washington State, blended with Riesling from the Mosel, assembled and bottled in California. Chuck had originally conceived a sort of international, vaguely Australian-looking label depicting an airplane (maybe this was a bit too literal) streaking across a pastel-washed

sky at dusk. At first we struggled a bit in selling the wine—Riesling was not exactly the hottest category at the time—and I was convinced that we needed to redesign the label so that it referenced the Germanic connection and also highlighted how brilliantly the wine complemented Asian cuisine.

I had the wacky idea of depicting a brainy Asian-looking woman who has fallen asleep over a weighty German philosophy tome (perhaps Schopenhauer or Fichte). One would peer through the wine bottle and observe a dreamlike tableau, presumably inspired by both the contents of the bottle and the reading matter itself. I hoped that the self-reflectiveness of the presentation of the label (especially when viewed through the oneiric lens of the wine), coupled with the inward content of the label itself—life and wine considered as a dream—would open a direct line to the unconscious of the consumer.

The original design had the woman dreaming of a picturesque, gingerbread German village, but the catch was that the village was populated by all sorts of naughty Freudian dream images—a train coming out of a tunnel, a flying zeppelin overhead, a snake devouring its own tail, that sort of thing. I thought the label was pretty cute—I am well amused by childish humor—and Chuck and I scheduled a meeting to finalize the label.

We had agreed to meet at a Mexican restaurant in Santa Rosa for lunch, but when we got there we found it had been temporarily closed by the Health Department, so we decided to have lunch at a nearby Japanese restaurant. The restaurant, like many of its ilk, happened to feature pho-

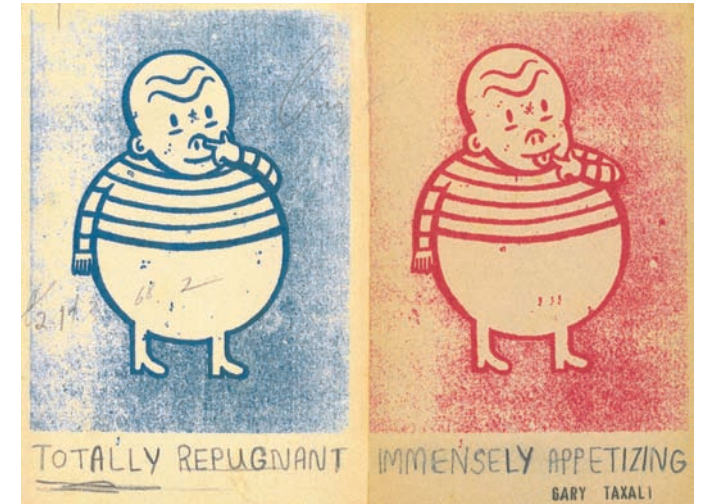


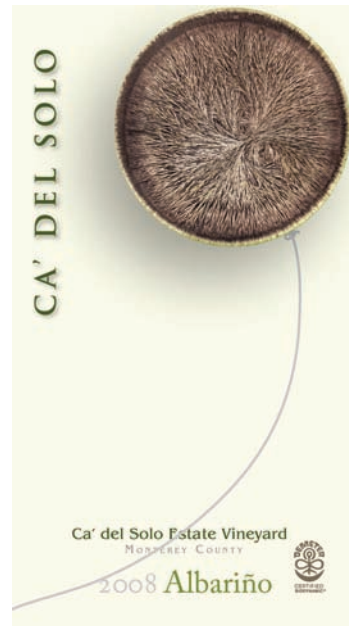
tos of sushi on its menu. I asked Chuck if I might borrow his X-Acto knife to cut up the sushi pictures. We found to our delight that, if you taped the sushi pictures to the back of the bottle and looked at the bottle head-on, as you moved your head it would appear as if the fish were actually swimming. This concept seemed to be slightly broader and more inclusive than the strange Freudian village, so we changed the label design at the very last minute, ultimately to great commercial éclat. Needless to say, the course of wine label history might have been different if a certain health inspector had come to call on a different day.

It was my colleague John Locke who was responsible for the extraordinary series of fine-art D.E.W.N. labels that we produced for many years, using the talents of a number of brilliant artists. D.E.W.N. is the Distinctive Esoteric Wine Network, our wine club, which continues to this day, although we now have a less ambitious program of new-label-art patronage. The name was originally conceived as a spoof on the Distant Early Warning System, a relic of the cold war era (also contemporaneous with a significant incidence of UFO sightings), and was intended to alert the wine-drinking populace to the incipient arrival of unusual wine varieties and experimental wine styles from “not around here.”

The labels are legion and can’t all be represented in this book; the Freisa label included here, produced by artist Gary Taxali, is just a taste of the wonderful eye candy we were able to provide for our adventurous customers. Because the D.E.W.N. wines, unlike our more mainstream (and this is a relative term) wines, are not sold through the three-tier wholesale system, we have enjoyed far greater artistic license with our label content; we can be as obscurantist or edgy as we dare, within relevant governmental labeling guidelines. We grew Freisa, an extremely arcane Piemontese grape variety, in our Soledad vineyard with generally favorable viticultural results, though we could never quite figure out how to introduce it into the mainstream arteries of commerce, so it was a perfect candidate for D.E.W.N. The label is a bit of an inside joke, featuring two differing commentaries on the qualities of the grape itself by perhaps the world’s two most highly regarded wine writers.

Bonny Doon has changed considerably since the heyday of our wild label-art adventurism. The packaging we provided for our wines delighted and nourished our customers and created profound brand loyalty, though it likely suggested to influential critics that we were not as serious about the winemaking as we possibly could have been. I am hoping, through our new labels, to convey a new seriousness and earnestness of purpose. They may lack the fine-art sensibility that was Mr. Locke’s forte, but they are still playful and emblematic of our deep interest





in making wines expressive of place. The image represented on the label is a “sensitive crystallization” of our 2008 Ca’ del Solo Albariño from our Estate Vineyard in Soledad.<sup>24</sup>

For good or bad, Bonny Doon has always been identified with its imaginative labels. In recent years, however, the winery has been accused of being more preoccupied with marketing, promotion, and publicity than with the quality of the wine, and there is certainly enough truth to this assertion to sting. The proliferation of artsy labels has been cited as *prima facie* evidence of a lack of focus on winemaking. But a wine label is not simply a marketing tool. A well-crafted label conveys to the potential purchaser a sense of what he or she might expect on opening the bottle—it communicates, through the carefulness of the packaging, the assurance that equivalent attention to detail was maintained in the winemaking process. On a personal level, growing grapes properly, making wine well, and accurately capturing its fleeting essence in the design of the package all rise from the same creative impulse.

Ultimately, wine offers communion, whether in the shared experience of friends tasting a brooding bottle of Cornas—the Hamlet of red wines—or in the imaginative empathic leap one takes in seeking to translate what is on the inside of the bottle to the outside. You try your best to communicate the wine’s essential nature to an unknown consumer, whom you attempt to conjure, all the while knowing that his first sip will be worth a thousand of your pictures.

I was privileged, at a very tender age, to taste wines that hauntingly whispered to me of their home. I didn’t have the knowledge or experience then to understand that the wines were attempting to tell me about a second, double world—the order that lies behind the phenomenal world of taste. The wine label is the outermost veil of the strange, convoluted mystery of a wine, be it (the wine *or* the label) thoroughly original or relatively banal. When you fully “get” the label, you understand everything and nothing. All the words that follow are my rather jejune attempts to speak in word-pictures some of the strange truth that wine conveys through scent and taste.

<sup>24</sup>. Sensitive crystallization is a methodology developed in the 1930s by Ehrenfried Pfeiffer—as an outgrowth of the biodynamic movement—to create images of various organic and inorganic substances, and it was used at one point as a medical diagnostic tool. A small volume of copper chloride solution is added to a near equivalent volume of the substance being studied, poured into a Petri dish, and evaporated in a vibrationless chamber. The dish is then photographed on a light table to better visualize the relief of the crystals. It is a visualization of the organization, complexity, and life force (among a multitude of other variables) of the substance under study. In the case of our wine, it provides the consumer with a visual preview of what he or she might expect on opening the bottle or, at the very least, a slightly different lens through which to apprehend the wine’s unique fingerprint.

FICCIONES

VITERATURE