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CONSUMED

Animal Pragmatism

By ROB WALKER

Yellow Tail Wine

For a shortcut, clichéd summation of growing consumer sophistication, consider the wine category: Back when we didn't know anything, wine meant Blue Nun, jugs of Gallo, little bottles of Lancers and hokey Aldo Cella commercials. Nowadays we have taste, and even suburban megamarts have huge and varied wine selections for the demanding mass affluent. Of course, real wine connoisseurs have walked the earth for many years — as have nonconnoisseurs who find such people to be annoying snobs and who find today's megamart selection to be a big, bewildering taunt. It's one thing to sense that there's a huge spectrum of quality represented on that shelf, but it's something else to make a decision. Perhaps, in light of this, it's no surprise that a new factor has emerged that apparently helps many of us parse the options: the "critter label."

A critter label is any label that features an animal, from a hippo to a frog to a penguin. According to ACNielsen, the market-research company, 438 viable table-wine brands have been introduced in the past three years, and 18 percent — nearly one in five — feature an animal on the label. "Combined with existing critter labels," the firm said in a summation of its research on this matter, "sales of critter-branded wine have reached more than \$600 million."

It's a bit surprising that a market-research company has decided to define a wine category by its label design. It seems more logical to consider wine by, say, variety or region or vintage. The appearance of the bottle obviously has no effect whatsoever on the quality of the product, and as Danny Brager, who is vice president of ACNielsen's beverage-alcohol unit, explains, there has not traditionally been a "critter" category in his firm's database. But while critter wine may not be an official term in the wine business, it's a notion that has been bandied about in various forms quite a bit in recent years. "The industry is talking about it," Brager says. That's why ACNielsen decided to put some formal research into the critter question.

The alpha critter, it seems, is a kangaroo, the one represented on the label of the Australian wine brand Yellow Tail, which came into the U.S. market several years ago and, in part thanks to a ubiquitous marketing campaign, now moves millions of cases a year. Needless to say, Brager attributes the success of any given critter wine to such traditional factors as quality and price, not just its mascot or label design; consumers see Yellow Tail, at less than \$8 a bottle, as a good value. "We don't want people to think if you slap an animal on it, it'll sell," he says. Still, that brand was "one of the very first ones to depict an animal on the label and almost seemed like it made a connection with the consumers who were looking to have fun with their wine," Brager continues. "People associated the wallaby and the label, and it was easy to ask for when you walked in the store."

The critter craze is in some ways merely a subset of the more widespread growth of clever or outright gimmicky wine packaging and branding strategies (like Sogno Uno, a 2004 vintage featuring a blend of Italian grapes and a picture of a porn star on the label). This speaks to the flip side of increased consumer interest in wine: yes, more of us want better wine, but that doesn't mean we have any newfound interest in reading label descriptions that are hard to pronounce, let alone understand. So perhaps the animal stampede has grown so crowded not just because the critters are memorable but also because there is something approachable, unstuffy, even friendly in a bottle of Goats Do Roam compared with one of Côtes du Rhône.

This brings with it the potential for a reaction against the zooification of the wine aisle. An oenophile is unlikely to skip the "best Bordeaux wines" roundup in favor of the "best mammalian-representation wines." In fact it seems inevitable that at some point, wine snobs — who derive prestige not just from making their own well-informed choices but also from trashing your foolish ones — are going to start sneering at the adorable creature depicted on the bottle you bring to their dinner parties. And maybe someday, critter labels will go the way of Aldo Cella, and mainstream wine drinkers will have to find a new way of reconciling sophistication and fun.

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