

ACROSS THE DITCH WITH MISHA WILKINSON



THE FACE OF
**NEW
ZEALAND
WINE**

Bottling line at Wine First,
a bottling hall in New Zealand.

New Zealand's aspirations are "to be internationally recognised as the leading producer and marketer of highly distinctive premium quality wines", so says the national organisation, New Zealand Winegrowers. So wine quality aside, how well does NZ measure up in terms of the marketing – specifically in the packaging stakes?

There is a perception that Kiwis don't spend money on marketing, especially in the wine business, but the reality is 90% of NZ vineyards fall in the category of small producers (defined as annual sales not exceeding 200,000 litres). At that size, it's hard to justify those extra dollars for brand development when you can just as easily sketch out a label design on the kitchen table.

However, while it's fundamentally important as to what's in the bottle, the reality is it's hard to get people to agree to take pallets (distributors), then to take cases (retailers) and finally to buy that single bottle (consumers) unless there's some likeability with the brand and/or label, or at least some semblance of quality and professionalism in how that brand is presented. For example, while you may not choose to buy your premium Pinot Noir with rabbits hopping all over the bottle, Rabbit Ranch is a good example of strong brand execution around a theme for a second label Central Otago wine that makes for a highly memorable NZ encounter! They even do a great job on their website which is often not an area of strength for New Zealand wineries (www.rabbitranch.co.nz).

But ingenuity and innovation are characteristics that Kiwis are generally renowned for – we all know that Number 8 wire has often been used inventively and practically for a multitude of applications other than fencing. However you may not know that NZ invented the flax stripper which led to the development of a flax milling industry – a distinctive feature of the NZ economy from the 1860s to the 1970s (the fibre from flax is used for making rope and twine); then there was the development of the eggbeater in 1900 by Ernest Godward; Ernest Rutherford split the atom in 1917; Maurice Wilkins was awarded the Nobel Prize for discovering the structure of DNA in 1962; and of course there was the invention of the pavlova in 1926 (no doubt aided by the earlier invention of the eggbeater).

In fact NZ has so much to be proud of in terms of creativity and innovation, and in more recent times this creativity has been especially evident on screen. Just think about *Lord of the Rings* and those great Toyota 'Bugger' ads which, according to Kevin Roberts, worldwide CEO for Saatchi & Saatchi, "won a fistful of local and global awards, sold truckloads of Toyota Hi-Luxs and spawned dozens of front page stories as well as letters of outrage from mild-mannered citizens". In fact the impact of that idea was so powerful, Saatchi & Saatchi tried to trademark the word 'buggar', but according to Roberts they had to concede it. "It has been claimed that 'bugger' has been associated with Windows far more deeply than with Toyota's utes. Windows users throughout the world apparently use the word at least once a day," he said.

So does NZ's innovation carry through to wine packaging? One could certainly argue that overall, Kiwis have been pretty innovative in terms of screwcaps – in fact the move to screwcaps was nothing short of a revolution in wine packaging and extremely controversial with an estimated 90% of NZ wines now sealed with this closure.

That in-built ingenuity has also led to some degree of home-



Packaging designs by The Creative Method.

spun brand creation activity or been passed to the nearest relative with an inkling of talent. Tony Ibbotson was a perfect family choice for one winery – he was doing a design course just as his parents were starting their own wine label in 1994. Now, with some 15 years of wine label design under his belt, Ibbotson has done very well and is creative director for The Creative Method based in Sydney, which designs and produces wine labels for wineries in Australia, NZ, USA, UK and Germany. His parents did well using his designs, too – their winery brand is Saint Clair.

But if you don't have a son, cousin or brother-in-law who's a specialist in packaging design, it's probably best to Google some professional design agencies. Ibbotson says with the internet you can work with a designer based anywhere, but still thinks there is no replacing a face-to-face relationship when it comes to great design. He travels home three to four times a year and says "a discussion about wine and labels is never far away at the dinner table".

When asked if Saint Clair's labels had won any awards, Ibbotson was quick to respond with, "First and foremost we judge our packaging on effectiveness in relation to sales and not awards." Good answer! He gives an example of the Pioneer Block range where sales went from 1,000 cases in the first year to 20,000 cases in the second year. Both the wine and packaging did actually win numerous awards including the label being runner-up for Europe's label of the year where more than 12,000 labels were entered. Ibbotson says Saint Clair is just as focused on producing the best labels as producing the best wines. Although all the design work is done in Australia, all the packaging elements are produced in NZ.

Helen Milner is another creative type and known in NZ as one of the few wine branding specialists. As creative director (and co-owner) of Tardis Design, she primarily works with NZ wineries but has also added a few overseas wineries to her portfolio. While she feels it's important to understand the industry and its special requirements, she doesn't dismiss that a creative company with a passion for what their clients do can be successful in wine branding. Milner's big thing is ensuring she's enthusiastic about the company or brand she is working with as she believes that if you're not, then ethically you shouldn't engage in the project as "the lack of enthusiasm seeps through and reflects in the work".

"As New Zealand is small we really do have a real lack of choice here – everything is limited. There are only so many bottle suppliers, label printers, capsule and box suppliers and there are only a few that do an excellent job," Milner said.



The Creative Method team.



A bottling line at Wiine First, a bottling hall in New Zealand
(Photo: Tim Hawkins).

Working with an impressive list of more than 25 winery clients including Craggy Range, Peregrine, Escarpment, Mud House, Allan Scott and Alpha Domus, Milner says she has sourced suppliers from outside NZ and in some cases had great results, especially in capsule production, but with label printing there have been mixed results, partly because of not being present for press checks. But from an ethical and environmental perspective, she feels that looking beyond NZ's shores is not so sustainable, "and as the wine industry seeks to become more and more sustainable it is important to find great solutions closer to home" which means working closely with local suppliers to find better ways of doing things.

A company with a strong ethic in sustainability is carton supplier Charta Packaging based in Wellington, which supplies a large percentage of the wine market including some form of packaging to the top 10 wine companies in NZ. Nearly 70% of the cases that Charta produces are recycled, which helps their customers gain accreditation for sustainability. They also have a commitment to manufacturing 100% recyclable products and only using water-based biodegradable inks.

Across the range of products produced, Steven Crilly, national sales manager, believes it's their high graphic presentation packs where they really push the boundaries in flexographic printing. "A key driver for Charta investing in their six-colour UV machine

was because our customers were telling us they were being left behind internationally," he said.

Although Charta competes with Amcor and Carter Holt Harvey in carton production in NZ, Crilly says that it's the quality that keeps customers going back there even though he admits, "you will pay more for your wine packaging from Charta, but you will get a consistently good product". Given Charta estimates it supplies to 70-75% of the wine market in NZ, perhaps NZ wine producers are prepared to pay for better quality packaging.

In terms of how NZ fares internationally, Crilly thinks that overall the quality of a printed case from NZ of up to three colours with simple graphics, is similar to what you'd expect internationally, but still believes the quality of what Charta delivers is at the top end of what is available around the world – and they have international gold awards to prove it. They even supply some Australian wineries requiring high quality graphics.

But all this focus on sustainable packaging doesn't work for everyone. Jayson Bryant, who owns the Wine Vault retail store in Auckland (and also does Vaynerchuk-style videos on Wine Vault TV) believes NZ has tried to push the envelope when it comes to wine packaging, although he longs for the past! "Long gone are the days of wooden boxes as we have now entered the era of cardboard boxes. In my opinion this has devalued our wine," Bryant says. He says customers loved the wooden wine box as it was an extension of the romance of wine. "The loss of the wooden box coupled with the advent of screwtops has really demystified wine, but has also lost a large part of the romance and is in danger of making NZ wine just another commodity rather than seen as a luxury item," Bryant says.

He is also vocal on labels and thinks design has suffered as people always feel the need to reinvent things rather than looking at what actually sells and for what reasons. "Packaging is the most underrated aspect of modern wine production," Bryant says. "The smaller producers put so much time and energy into what goes into the bottle and often neglect to consider how the wine is going to sell." Bryant's view is that the more modern the label, the less likely that it will be picked up off the shelf – regardless of the quality inside the bottle. "More traditional, regal labels exude an air of trustworthiness and often sell themselves when retail staff are too busy to offer any assistance," he says. He also advises that back labels should include whether the vineyard is organic or biodynamic, and less about what the consumer will taste and experience. "Consumers are not dumb and do not need to be told what to taste, but need a story about the wine," Bryant says.

When it comes to labels the best company to talk to is Collotype Labels, who were established in Adelaide in 1903 and are now the world's largest wine and spirit label printer, producing labels for eight of the top 15 global wine brands. Peter White, international sales director at Collotype, recounts stories of various NZ brands, from small to large, which have moved their printing to Collotype in Australia to get a consistent quality delivery or to find some innovative print solutions to overcome various label issues.

On a recent trip to the Marlborough wine region White found that the feedback from the 10 wineries he visited confirmed Milner's lament about the lack of choice available in NZ.

He found the lack of diversity in paper stocks, embellishments and innovative finishes were an issue for wineries and he just needed to prove that Australian-produced labels could be delivered at the same cost as local suppliers. Although White is confident in his company's ability to consistently win business on innovation and quality, he says he still keeps on eye both on NZ and Australian competitors.

Another Adelaide-based company is Tucker Creative, run by Jody Tucker these days but established back in 1973 by Barrie Tucker. Although Tucker Creative doesn't exclusively work on wine assignments, their experience in the wine sector is substantial with clients in Australia, USA, France, China, India and NZ. Tucker shares similar thoughts to Milner in terms of the 'generalist' design agencies being capable of designing an aesthetically pleasing label that may meet the client's brief, however he feels that without a good understanding about the pressures on brands in the market and knowledge of the consumer, the success of the design is doubtful. "Many designers design to decorate or be different and miss the mark," Tucker says. Something Bryant wholeheartedly agrees with!

According to Tucker, the quality of labels, capsules and boxes are all of reasonable quality in NZ and he is impressed with the quality of flexographic carton printing. "I do think the domestic glass in NZ is also of good quality – it's just the selection of shapes that is limited," he says. He's another one that says label print embellishments are also limited by comparison to Australian labels, but feels perhaps some of this is due to cost impact decisions rather than just a lack of choice. But then NZ's volumes are somewhat different to Australia's and decisions to add fancy touches to a label aren't as significant from a cost standpoint on large runs as they are on NZ's more boutique-sized volumes.

"Generally I think that New Zealand wine label packaging is quite generic and does not always present a quality image. There are many exceptions where boundaries are pushed and applause is given by me to the designer – well, in my head anyway!" says Tucker, but concedes the same could be said when reviewing Australian retail shelves. "With the growing acceptance of NZ Sauvignon Blanc in the global market, the visibility of NZ brands and labels has grown many-fold. I do wonder if the varietal and the reduction in wine price is more interesting to the consumer than what the label looks like," he adds.

It's a good point, but things are changing in the NZ market with Pinot Noir now the second most exported variety and the great red hope for exporters. Producers need to ensure they can justify the NZ \$45+ retail price tag for their premium Pinot Noirs with packaging that is well thought-through and flawlessly executed – rather than something that's thrown together but scrubs up okay. There are plenty of people who believe there is some correlation between someone who cares about the packaging and how much they care about the contents.

All I can say is thank goodness NZ's native Kiwi doesn't have a yellow tail, however the bottles of a NZ Sauvignon Blanc called King Shag spotted in the grocery chain Trader Joe's on a recent trip to the US, were only slightly above their Australian counterpart – they were perched on the second-bottom shelf!

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