

## S.F. Importer Toasts Low-Cost French Wine

BY Chris Rauber

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Tableaux, a new French red wine created and imported by a San Francisco startup, wants to run E&J Gallo's Red Bicyclette off the road. Or at least make a big splash nationwide among "everyday" French wine imports.

Tableaux, a cabernet sauvignon-syrah blend priced at \$9.99 nationally, launched last month by appearing exclusively in more than 280 Cost Plus World Market stores in 27 states, including California.

Cost Plus expects to sell up to 5,000 cases of Tableaux in the near term—a small but significant amount for a brand-new wine with virtually no name recognition nationally.

"I was very impressed by the fact that it's a very approachable French wine at an affordable price," said Lisa Schindler, the retail chain's national buyer for imported wines. Cost Plus decided to rush it into its stores in time for the holidays, although she says it also works for every day.

Tableaux uses a bold tableaux-style label and packaging art to make a statement about appreciating everyday life and living in the moment, says Philip Ross, president of San Francisco's Artisan Wine Group Inc. Artisan, a startup, created the brand with help from Philippe Becker Design Inc. and the wine in partnership with Francois Despagne, a sixth-generation French winemaker from the prestigious Saint-Emilion region.

Ross, who incorporated Artisan in January 2006, said he wanted to "take a passion for French wine and give it the attention it deserves in the U.S. market."

The wine's trendy packaging and label helped it launch at Cost Plus without an

advertising budget. French-born David Becker, the design firm's president and a longtime friend of Ross, came up with the concept, as a way of introducing high-quality, low-cost French wine to the U.S. mass market.

Focus-group testing confirmed Becker's hunch that many Americans are confused by the maze of confusing French labels and appellations.

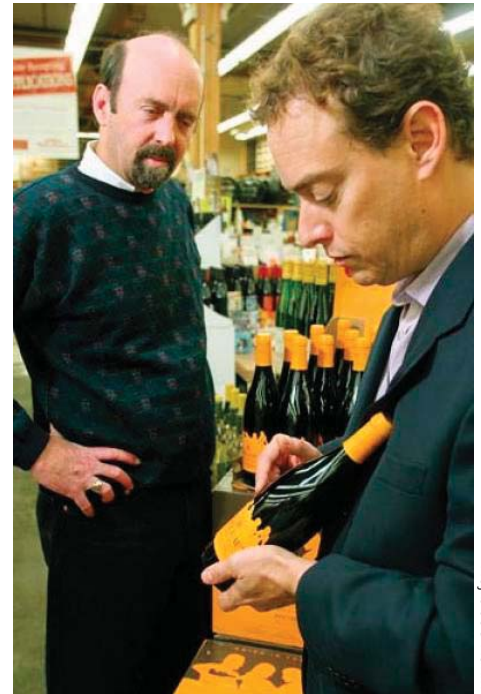
Becker (whose design firm's clients include Safeway, Walt Disney, Whole Foods and T-Mobile) and Ross decided to create a \$10 French wine along the lines of successful imports like Australia's Yellow Tail. The enterprise was bankrolled by Ross, who co-founded Salmon Creek Cellars, a big seller in U.S. restaurants, and was Wine.com's director of business development.

Although Ross has invested less than \$300,000 so far, Artisan was able to line up French distributor Castel Frères SA and its Luneau USA Inc. subsidiary to distribute Tableaux, reportedly the first time Luneau has agreed to distribute a wine in the U.S. that didn't hail from Castel Frères' own stable of wines.

And after first tasting the product in late summer, Cost Plus promptly ordered twice Tableaux's original production run for a national rollout, asking for an exclusive deal and guaranteeing intense in-store promotion, according to Ross.

"We want this to be a major national brand, and down the road that will necessitate getting into other major retail stores," he said. "Cost Plus is a great foundation." ■

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**Philip Ross and David Becker struck a deal with Cost Plus to sell Tableaux.**