

Tableaux: A French Wine Created for the American Consumer

Created by a San Francisco branding agency, "Tableaux" targets the US consumer by seeking to demystify French wine.

From our San Francisco correspondent
[TRANSLATED FROM FRENCH]

Tableaux has turned traditional wine-making on its head. It was created by a San Francisco branding agency as a consumer product for a targeted US audience. The wine is sourced from Southern France's Pays d'Oc, and blended by a Bordeaux wine maker. "For consumers, the brand is paramount," according to David Becker, the Franco-American co-founder of Philippe Becker Design (PBD). His agency is not new to food and beverage branding, PBD having made a name for it self in creating Whole Foods' 365 Organic and Safeway's O Organics brands.

"We employed our standard brand development process, which includes analysis of the target market coupled with qualitative studies to understand consumers' taste preferences in this particular wine segment," says Becker. Tableaux targets the "iPod generation" — 25–40 year olds who have increasingly taken to drinking accessible, affordable wines on a regular basis, but who are more accustomed to wines' varietal description than their pedigree or appellation.



With its classic emblem, the striking orange label evokes a higher-end, estate bottled wine.

"French wines with traditional appellations tend to intimidate the average US wine consumer, who essentially seeks a brand they recognize on the supermarket shelf," explains Philip Ross, Becker's partner and the President of Artisan Wine Group, a company formed in January 2007 to import Tableaux. In recent years several other French producers in the mid-range category (\$6.99 to \$14.99) have also sought to compete with Australian and New World producers who have been successful marketing wines that are approachable, and packaging designed to capture the eye rather than tout appellations. Fat Bastard, The Arrogant Frog, Gala Rouge and Red Bicycleette ("The French Wine that speaks your language") are French wine brands that highlight their origin using humor, references to geography or even tourist icons. Their primary descriptors tend to be red, white or rosé, or the most commonly used convention of grape varietal.

In 2007, imports represented about 30% of the wine sold in the US, the best year ever for foreign wines according to Gomberg, Fredrikson & Associates, a leading wine consulting firm. “The abundance and quality of foreign wines available at less than \$10 a bottle is truly remarkable,” says Eileen Fredrickson, co-founder and partner in the firm. “They may not be extraordinary wines, but they are certainly decent and very pleasant for everyday drinking.” They also tend to be less expensive compared to locally produced wine of similar quality. And unlike the early 90s, the dollar’s current weakness hasn’t affected sales because producers have opted this time to absorb the cost differential.

Distributed in 28 states

At \$9.99 a bottle, Tableaux is positioned at the higher end of the entry to mid-level wine category, which in 2007 accounted for 16% of supermarket wine sales. With its classic emblem, the striking orange label evokes a higher-end, estate bottled wine. But its unique die-cut silhouette of a festive dinner scene clearly communicates that this wine is to be enjoyed without pomp. Its blend of varieties —50% cabernet and 50% syrah— is described on the back label. “This is an intelligent concept, as is the distribution strategy because it essentially targets a captive audience,” comments Fredrikson. Launched in time for the holiday season, Tableaux is being distributed in 28 states by Cost Plus World Market, a retailer specialized in foreign products (including food, beverage and household items), and whose customers enjoy discovering new products —an audience targeted by PBD. With an exclusive agreement for distributing Tableaux, Cost Plus is responsible for advertising the wine to its customers, a major advantage in an increasingly competitive market. “With the dollar’s weakness squeezing margins, it’s increasingly difficult to secure decent advertising budgets,” laments Michel Haury, head of Castel Frères, the fifth largest distributor of French wines in the US. Indeed, in 2008 Castel will also launch its own proprietary product, one that seeks “move beyond estate bottled or even mass market wines” says Haury.

For their part, PBD, Artisan Wine Group and François Despagne are already working on their next product for 2008: Tableaux White.

--Laetitia Mailhes

A Terroir Traditionalist Creates an Accessible French Red

Easy to Drink “I’m a man of terroir, but I also enjoy wines that are easy to drink,” say Francois Despagne, oenologist and wine master who created the Tableaux blend specifically for the American consumer. Hailing from Bordeaux’s prestigious Saint-Emilion region, his family has owned the renowned Chateau Grand Corbin-Despagne there since 1812. Forty year old Despagne believes that “the way to deal with international competition in the wine market is not through protectionism, but by remaining open to change and innovation.” Is this simply opportunism? On the contrary, Despagne argues that “if we are able to attract consumers with a friendly, approachable wine, they’re likely to explore wines further, and eventually move up market to the higher prestige wines.” He believes that this holds true not only in the US market, but in France as well. “Consumers are confused,” he maintains. Noting that in Bordeaux there is fragmentation among the many producers, the region is ill-equipped for production on a large scale and with a consistency that selling in to the enormous US market requires. To wit, Tableaux’s initial production was 30,000 bottles, with 60,000 more behind that in the first year of sales. Given this scale, the rationale for sourcing Languedoc wines becomes clear.