

HOLIDAY DRINKS

With Rude Names, Wine Stops Minding Its Manners



Dan Neville/The New York Times

In a competitive market, irreverently named wines have found a niche in a certain kind of consumer.

By WILLIAM GRIMES

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IT'S peppery and full of fight. The tannins have grip. The nose takes no prisoners. This shiraz is a bitch.

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Dan Neville/The New York Times

Bitch and Fat Bastard are two wine brands that have taken up risqué names to help their lines stand out.

It says so on the label. Royal Bitch is the name of the wine, one of a teeming sisterhood of cabernets and chardonnays from a variety of producers with labels like Sassy Bitch, Jealous Bitch, Tasty Bitch and Sweet Bitch. They're reinforcements for a growing army of rude, budget-priced wines that have shoved their way into

wine stores and supermarkets in the past few years — most recently Happy Bitch, a Hudson Valley rosé that made its debut last month.

The [Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau](#), an agency of the Treasury Department, approves about 120,000 applications for wine labels every year. Most names are traditional, often genteel, especially at the lower price points. It's natural for a [chardonnay](#) or cabernet priced below \$15 or even \$10 to buff the image a bit. Woodbridge, Coastal Estates and Turning Leaf could be suburban subdivisions.

Then there are the others. Wines like the Ball Buster, a beefy shiraz-cabernet-[merlot](#) blend from the Barossa Valley in Australia. Or BigAss Red, from [Milano Family Winery](#) in California. Or Stench, an Australian sparkler from R Winery, the company that collaborated with the American importer Dan Philips of the Grateful Palate in 2004 to get the postfeminist ball rolling with a grenache named, simply, Bitch.

Like a slap across the face, Bitch grabbed the attention of a certain type of consumer, primarily young women en route to a bachelorette or divorce party, or looking for a special way to say, "I love you" on Mother's Day.

"They can buy it and say, 'Here, bitch, I bought you a present,'" said John F. Umbach, the owner of [Joseph Victori Wines](#), which distributes Royal Bitch and Sweet Bitch.

[Chatham Imports](#) sensed the appeal of an irreverent women's drink in 2005 when one of

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its distributors developed a promotional rum cocktail called Jealous Bitch and shopped it around, diffidently, to bars and nightclubs. The sales representatives were a little nervous about how the name might go over. But young women loved it, and the company developed a wine to match the name.

“The thing is, if you come out with a conservative label, it’s hard to separate yourself from the herd on the shelf,” Mr. Umbach said. “The competition is just brutal.”

The competition is especially keen at the lower end of the market, where winemakers clamor for the attention of consumers looking for a drinkable chardonnay or cabernet for under \$20.

For years, winemakers and marketers have been frantically popularizing their products, shedding the chateau image and embracing a blue-collar beer aesthetic. Last year, the top-selling wine brand in the United States was [Barefoot](#). The label shows not a stately mansion among the vines, but the footprint of one of the winery’s former owners.

That irreverence reflects an evolution in the cultural presentation of wine that the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art mapped in the recent exhibition “[How Wine Became Modern: Design and Wine 1976 to Now](#).” Traditionally, wine labels were purely informational. “Around 1980, however — earlier in the New World, somewhat later in Europe — labels became surfaces for communication, projecting a brand identity for the wine and trying to reach a target audience,” said Henry Urbach, an architectural curator who organized the exhibition with the architects Diller Scofidio & Renfro.

Casual became cheeky. Now, cheeky has given way to saucy. In 2005, [Brandever Strategy](#), a Vancouver brand consultancy, was hired by Scherzinger Estates, a sleepy winery in British Columbia, to create a new image and name. It came up with [Dirty Laundry Vineyard](#) — an allusion to a Chinese laundry and bordello that flourished nearby during the gold rush era.

“Your immediate reaction is, this is not a good name for a wine, but that’s why it is a good name,” said Bernie Hadley-Beauregard, a principal in Brandever. “It has a scratchy hook to it.”

Highway workers posted a new sign along the local wine route. Traffic into the winery increased tenfold. “The owner called me and said, ‘We haven’t done any advertising, but suddenly we’re the toast of the Okanagan Valley.’”

The newer, racier-sounding wines are unlikely to displace Barefoot, but they all chase the same dream. On the golden horizon, they see [Fat Bastard](#), a line of wines from the Languedoc-Roussillon region that was introduced in the United States in 1998.

Imported by Peter Click of Click Wine Group, the line sold just over 2,000 cases at \$10 a bottle in its first year. By 2004, Fat Bastard was selling 425,000 cases, making it one of the most popular French wines in the United States.

The other wines do not come close to those numbers, but they have their little niche. Jim Knight, a salesman and buyer at the Wine House in Los Angeles, which stocks about 7,000 labels, says he sells about five cases of Bitch and the Ball Buster every month. “We carry them because people ask for them,” he said. “They’re good wines that people can give with a smile on their face.”

John Gorman, the vice president of sales and marketing at [Southern Starz](#), which imports the Ball Buster, said, “The wine makes its way to a lot of lawyers from their clients.”

Under the rules of the federal alcohol bureau, labels cannot contain incorrect or misleading information, disparage a competitor’s product, or have a statement or image that is obscene or indecent. But the agency routinely gives the go-ahead for tasteless or risqué labels, which was not always the case.

“It’s actually a good place to see the cultural fault lines shift,” said Robert C. Lehrman,

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whose company, [Lehrman Beverage Law](#), advises clients on government regulations.

“Because of a series of commercial speech decisions, not many things are off limits anymore.”

Winemakers have some way to go before equaling the shock value of Jersey’s Toxic Waste, a specialty spirit. But the bitch category may yield dividends. Take Rae-Jean Beach, a blended white wine. (The name needs to be said aloud.) She’s got a husband, a zinfandel. Sorry, but the name is not printable here.

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