

Wine Advice: Wine Labels



What's in a Label? Important information and valuable facts about wine.

Although wine labels may not contain every little detail, such as service temperatures and food pairing, the data they do contain is vital and in many cases essential, required by law. All you need to know is how to decipher it.

The eye-catching label facing you, the label you assume to be the front label, may in fact actually be the back or reverse wine label. Some wine laws dictate not only what is included on the label but also where the information is located. Nowhere is it written that vendors must stock a wine with the front label facing out. With the exception of the odd wine geek – most consumers prefer the “pretty” side facing front and no matter, front or back, the required information is included.

Label requirements depend on the labeling practices and requirements of the country of origin and by the

requirements or laws specified by the importing country. There are five basic label requirements and two manners or “methods” in use that affect wine labeling. In regards to labeling methods, wines considered “Old World” wines (wines originating from Europe where there is a lengthy history of winemaking) bear different labels than “New World” wines (wines produced in countries such as ours). Old world wines are most often labeled according to local tradition.

The basic information required for proper wine labeling includes the wine producer, country of origin, grape variety, varieties or “blend”, vintage date, and a.b.v. (alcohol by volume).

Wine producers names are usually prominent, (although some producers use small rather than large text) and are positioned at the top of the label, although there are exceptions where the outward-facing label has the wine name without stating the producer. An familiar example of this labeling practice are the wines Carnivore and Apothic Red, both produced by the Gallo brand.

The country, region of wine production, or a specific, much smaller winemaking area or single vineyard indicates where the grapes are grown. Generally the smaller the area the better the wine. A wine label may state a broad area such as British Columbia, or narrow the area to the Okanagan Valley or an even smaller area as in the case of the specific vineyard. Each area smaller and more specific than the previous one. In cases where a specific vineyard is noted as a rule it appears directly below the particular region.

The grape variety or varieties used in production may or may not be indicated. Some labels bear terms like “red blend” or “Meritage” leaving the consumer to ponder exactly what grape variety or varieties such a statement refers to. Others reveal all grape varietals included in the wine and may provide the specific percentages of each.

The date listed on the wine bottle is called the vintage date and refers only to the year grapes were harvested. Vintage-dated wine is generally better quality than non-vintage wine. That said, many fortified wines, sparkling wines, and sherry do not bear a vintage date and this is in no way a reflection of an inferior product but is only a reflection in the way the wine is made.

Alcohol levels are indicated as a.b.v. (alcohol by volume). There may be a plus or minus percentage of error allowed

when stating the a.b.v., but as the production area becomes smaller, more precise, this % of error decreases so that estate-bottled wine lists an exact a.b.v. High alcohol levels, 14% a.b.v and higher are often indicative of a full-bodied, ripe, fleshy and fruity wine made from grapes grown in a warm climate where those wines of lower alcohol, under 12%, are light bodied, high in acid and may be slightly sweet. “Old World” wine is often named for its geographic origin – the area it comes from - areas such as Burgundy and Chablis. Producers that label in this way assume the consumer is familiar with the area and the grapes grown there. Labels from areas such as this rarely mention wine style – once again assuming you are familiar with the particular wine. Such is the “Old World” way.

Frequently used labeling terms are Reserve, Estate bottled and old vines. Many of these terms are undefined. It is your responsibility as a consumer to decipher what, if any, meaning they convey. European labels state “Reserve” in reference to additional aging and/or a slightly higher alcohol than non-reserve designated wine, where New World countries use of the term “Reserve” is undefined, often used by a producer to indicate what they perceive to be a superior wine.

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