

# Back Up Your Brand

## Are you getting the best from your back label?

Jane Firstenfeld

**W**hat's on your wine's back label? Is it a mere afterthought? A repository for all the required verbiage that you don't want cluttering the front of your bottle? Do you even need a back label? Technically, you don't: As long as your package includes all required data and government-mandated warnings, you can leave your backside bare. (See *what's required for label approval at [ttb.gov/regulations](http://ttb.gov/regulations)—the example shown includes everything on a single label.*)

Given that a second label can add from 3-50% to your labeling costs, maybe you could do without. But even though this might be the least of your concerns when creating your wine's package, consider the back label's unique ability to reinforce your brand's message, something like the leather patch on the rear of Levi's jeans. It may be a small billboard, but most wineries seem to put it to good use, as we learned when we asked boutique wineries across the United States.

"The back label is a forum for the winemaker to communicate personal-

ity to the wine buyer," according to Paula Sugarman, who owns Sugarman Design Group ([sugarmandesigngroup.com](http://sugarmandesigngroup.com)) in Fair Oaks, Calif., near Sacramento. Among the clients of the award-winning firm are numerous wineries.

"So much goes into the making of each wine; nuances that aren't expressed on the label front find a voice through the back label," Sugarman says. "A back label is an extension of the front label as a marketing message, and it has functional requirements as well."

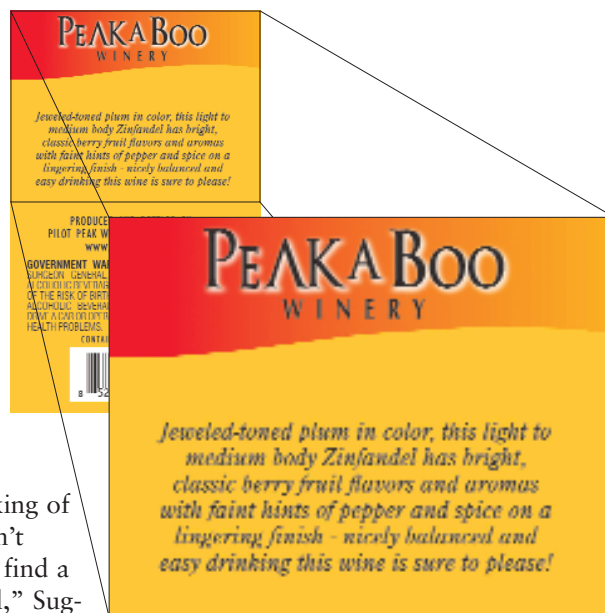
Although the TTB doesn't mandate a back label per se, the agency does, in its label approval process, adjudicate the language on every label. "We've seen TTB get involved in the 'romance text' beyond functional requirements," Sugarman recalls. "Examples we've seen are in a still wine, the word 'lively' was disqualified, because it alluded to effervescence. For another wine, 'power' had to be struck, because it indicates distilled spirits."

Sugarman recommends a compliance review before your label is submitted to TTB. "Timing the release of a wine is critical in many cases. This review saves time by catching noncompliance issues before TTB submission."

### What Winemakers Say

Interestingly, even those boutique winery owners who had sought professional help from designers and artists reported that the concept and copy on their back labels were created strictly in-house.

One of Sugarman's clients is Jacque Wilson, co-owner of Pilot Peak Vine-



Pilot Peak Vineyards' co-owner Jacque Wilson is proud of the back label copy he writes for his second label, Peak A Boo. He hopes his message will help his buyers relive the Pilot Peak experience at home.

yard & Winery in California's Sierra Foothills. He produces a total of 1,400 cases of his two brands, Pilot Peak Wines (\$19-24) and Peak A Boo Wines (\$14-18). The design for Pilot Peak's labels represent "rustic elegance," Wilson says, while Peak a Boo is "definitely whimsical."

His first release sold out 100% through the tasting room, which opened just a year ago, but Wilson plans to place some of his output in restaurants and wine shops when the new vintage is released this month. He feels his back labels help to support each brand's image, and this year has added his web address ([pilot-peak.com](http://pilot-peak.com)) and descriptive information about each wine.

"We use the bottle as a reinforcement tool while pouring," Wilson says. "We hope the information helps (buyers) relive their experience when they open the bottle at home." He sees the Pilot Peak "experience" as an important aspect of marketing his wines: His back labels conclude with

### HIGHLIGHTS

- A back label is not required by the TTB if you can cram all the mandated information on the front of your bottle or elsewhere; but using a second label gives winemakers an additional billboard to tell their marketing story.
- Even wineries that use professional designers or artists for their packaging tend to create the concept and copy for the back labels themselves.
- Back labels can be as varied as the wines inside the bottle; boutique winemakers differ on what makes a back label effective.



Back labels from Texas' Times Ten Cellars invite customers to relax with the wine. Front labels depict comfortable chairs from which to do so.

a tagline "Experience Pilot Peak Winery—It's the Wine! The People! The Place!" Wilson wrote the copy, and doesn't exaggerate when he calls it "romance language," including as it does such provocative phrasing as "ecstasy in a glass."

"This is a very small billboard that we are working with, and space is very dear," he says. He estimates that the back labels on the Pilot Peak line represent 29% of total label cost (the front label is embossed, foiled and die-cut). For Peak A Boo, it's a hefty 50%. "I don't want it to say the same old thing that is on every label: 'family run, passion for making wine, handcrafted'—blah blah blah blah. I'm asleep already."

Times Ten Cellars (timestencellars.com) is an urban winery in Dallas, Texas, which sources its grapes both from premium California vineyards and its own vineyards in Alpine, Texas. Although a portion of its 6,000 case annual production is sold through local restaurants and retailers, 75% is sold direct-to-consumer, through the cellar door and in the "wine lounge," inspiration for Times Ten's labels, which feature photographs of chairs, and the rear label tagline: "Sit down, relax and have a glass," along with a brief description of the wine. The labels won a first place award in the Tag & Label Manufacturers Institute's annual competition.

According to founding partner Kert Platner, the layout is done by his business partner's wife. "I think it needs to be there," Platner says of the back label, "But I don't think it drives new or repeat sales. We do that personally."

Amy Hoffman, co-owner and general manager of Rooster Hill Vineyards (roosterhill.com), in the Finger Lakes appella-

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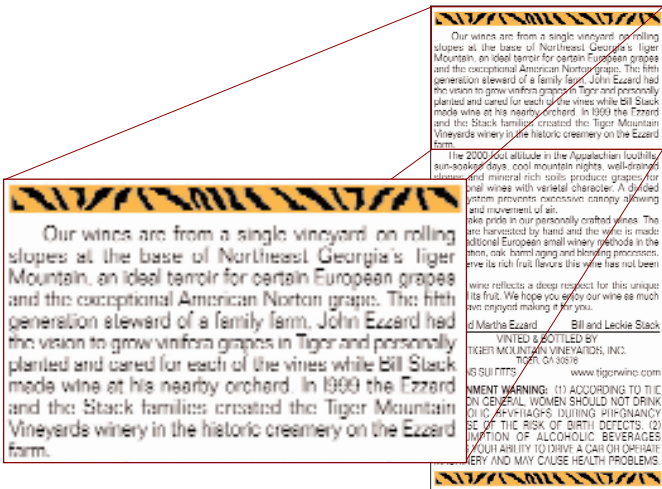
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Tiger Mountain's back labels tell the history of the Georgia vineyard and its transformation into a traditional European-style winery.

tion at Penn Yann, N.Y., is more positive about the power of the back label. Meant to evoke "sophistication and class," the labels are custom die-cut, and contain descriptions of the wine's aromas, flavors, food pairings and vineyard designation when applicable.

Rooster Hill produces 4,500 cases per year, retailing at \$8.99-24.95 per bottle; 80% is sold at the tasting room; 5% through the web and wine club and the remaining 15% is sold through distributors. Designing the back label, "We decided based on where we wanted to position the brand," Hoffman says. "We

learned from what other wineries did, too. The retailers and restaurants love it, because it helps the consumer select the wine. They read the description and decide if that interests them."

Since we contacted boutique wineries with production under 7,000 cases per year, we weren't expecting any fancy marketing surveys from our respondents, but their observations are valuable, nonetheless. "We have

no definitive information about how front or back labels affect sales, but plenty of anecdotes that folks tried our wines because they fell in love with the label," report Martha and John Ezzard, who co-own Tiger Mountain Vineyards in Tiger, Ga., with Bill and Leckie Stack. They produce 2,500 to 2,800 cases annually; nine *vinifera* varieties plus the native American Norton, retailing from \$15-25 per bottle.

Tiger Mountain ([tigerwine.com](http://tigerwine.com)) has a wholesale license, and distributes directly to vendors throughout Georgia, including top wine shops and restaurants like the Ritz Carlton dining room in Buckhead. It also has distributors in North Carolina and Alabama and a 2,000-member wine club. Still, about 75% of the wine is sold at the tasting room. The packaging, designed by the Ezzards' daughter, Shelly Ezzard Smith, has won awards for its depiction of the historic landmark Tiger Mountain, where the grapes are grown.

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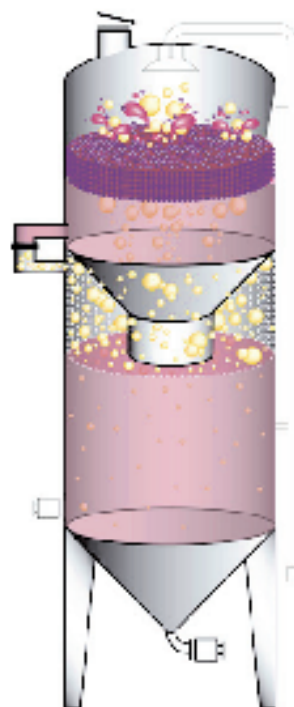
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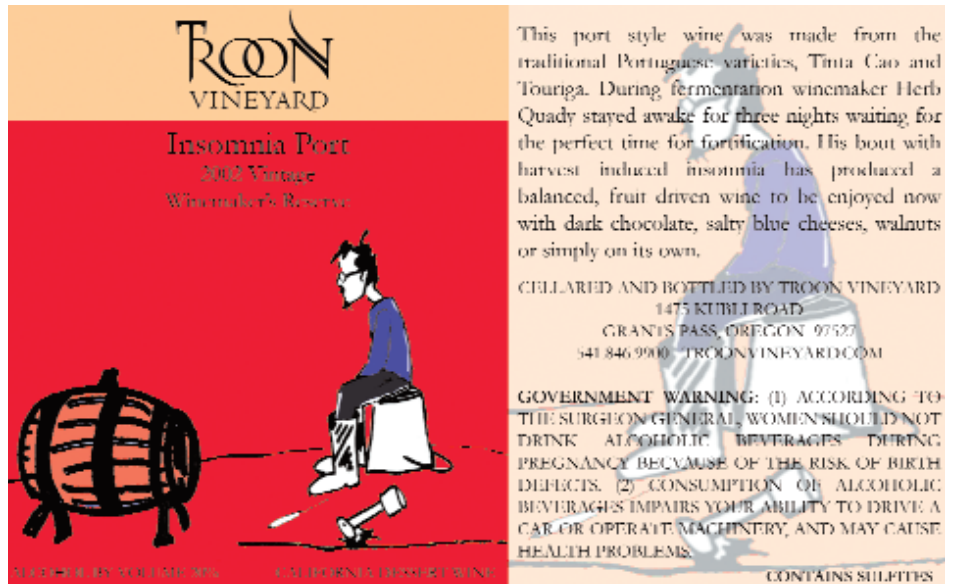


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The back label tells the story of saving the Ezzards' five-generation-old farm by planting its acreage to grapes in 1995. "It expresses our pride in the handcrafted nature of our winegrowing and winemaking. We four owners are hands-on in every facet of both, and we know our vines personally," the Ezzards explain. And, perhaps unlike Pilot Peak's Jacque Wilson, "Our customers like reading the story on our back label."

Kinkead Ridge Estate Winery ([kinkeadridge.com](http://kinkeadridge.com)) in Ripley, Ohio, produces 1,500 cases per year of *vinifera* wines retailing at \$11.95-19.95. Because the tasting room is only open on summer Saturdays, just 25% is sold out the cellar door; the rest is wholesaled. The back label, which represents 50% of label costs, carries a varietal description, production methods, food pairing recommendations, the winery mission statement and harvest dates. Managing partner/owner Nancy Bentley, who with her partner Ron Barrett formerly



The team at Oregon's Troon Vineyard considers each wine one of its offspring, and uses the back labels to ease its acceptance into the marketplace.

owned Chehalem Valley Vineyards in Yamhill, Ore., says they spent weeks discussing the contents, but that "It's very difficult to say" whether the label is doing an effective job.

The label did recently change: "This year for the first time we are adding UPC codes. Larger wine outlets require UPC codes so they can vet buyers under 21," Bentley says.

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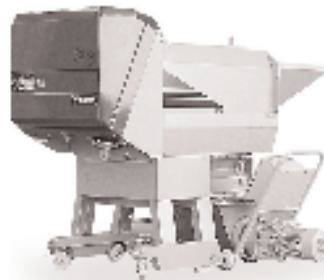
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## Another Dimension for Back Labels



A French designer wants to make back labels even more useful. Christophe Verna's concept, the Cellar Label, adds two peel-off, self-adhesive stickers to the back label, which on-premise buyers or home consumers can apply to the bottle top and bottom prior to cellaring.

These additional labels would contain essential information: brand, varietal, vintage, for example, allowing purchasers to choose which wine to remove from the rack without having to pull each bottle.

The labels can be custom-configured to suit individual packaging requirements, and are priced from 28-47 euros (1 euro = US\$1.33) per thousand, depending on quantities. Learn more at [cellar-label.com](http://cellar-label.com).



J.F.

The offerings of Troon Vineyard in Grants Pass, Ore., range in price from \$12 for 2005 Jeanie in the Bottle Cabernet Sauvignon Rosé to \$60 for 2004 Reserve Zinfandel. Troon ([troonvineyard.com](http://troonvineyard.com)) produces about 6,500 cases annually, 50% sold direct to consumers, the rest self-distributed to local on-premise vendors, and through distributors in Portland and Medford, Ore.

"We view each bottling as one of our children that we are preparing for the world," says Liz Wan, director of wine clubs and special events. Hence, each back label is as individual as the bottle contents. "We think of all the things that the world needs to know. How can we prepare the child for the world, and how can we prepare the world for this child? Does she have special needs, like decanting? Should she be enjoyed with food, and if so, what kind? But most of all, what is she all about?"

"Team Troon" decides together what information to distill onto the back label to herald its "off-spring's" arrival.

"The hope is that the quality of the wine will drive our repeat business," Wan says, "In creating that first sale, however, we feel that labeling is very important. In many cases, the label and what is printed on it will end up being a large part of the deciding factor."

Squire Fridell makes just 500 cases of estate Syrah, Syrah Rosé, Syrah Port and Hog Wilde Chardonnay annually at his GlenLyon Vineyards & Winery ([glenlyonwinery.com](http://glenlyonwinery.com)) in Sonoma County's Glen Ellen, selling 80% through his wine club and the rest in California, New York and Arizona. He and his wife designed the silk-screened package, including the back label, which he considers effective, and "very important." It bears only the minimal information; a neck tag supplies supplemental data. Even though the silk-screened process is pricey, "We feel the additional cost is justified," Fridell says.

Optima Winery, Healdsburg, Sonoma County ([optimawinery.com](http://optimawinery.com)) distributes its 5,000 case production in 27 states; 25% is sold direct to

consumer. The package was designed to convey elegance, says owner Nicol Duffy—fittingly, as the wines retail from \$24-35 per bottle. Duffy writes the label copy, which describes the varietal and the production methods used.

Von Strasser Winery, in Napa's tony Diamond Mountain subappellation, recently downsized its back label, to further refine the image of its single vineyard red wines, which retail for \$50-100 per bottle. Owner/winemaker Rudy von Strasser produces 5,000 cases annually, selling about one quarter of them direct to consumer. The back label formerly included information about the vineyard; now it's limited to contact information, web address and wine name.

Von Strasser explains the downsizing: "I do not want to give too much information, because I want the quality of the wine to be the focus."

Our final respondent, James Eddins, is president of Perdido Vineyards of Georgia, Inc., perhaps not-so-paradoxically located in Perdido, Ala. (Perdido, in Spanish, means "lost.") Perdido sells 50% of its 2,500 annual production direct to consumer, the rest through Alabama and Florida distributors. Eddins has also "lost" his back label. More precisely, he uses a wrap-around label to serve the function of both front and back label, not for esthetic reasons, but because "Our bottling equipment does not handle back labels."

Wording that might traditionally appear on the back label instead is found on the available "side-bar" spaces. If and when he buys new bottling equipment, he'll consider changing the package. Until then, Eddins has found a creative way to deal with a practical problem.

It's obvious that back labels vary as much—even more—than the other elements of wine packaging, and the philosophies that shape them are as individual as those who make the wines. But even though your customers may not read it first, the back label's too important to be an afterthought. ■