



Napa Valley Register On Wine

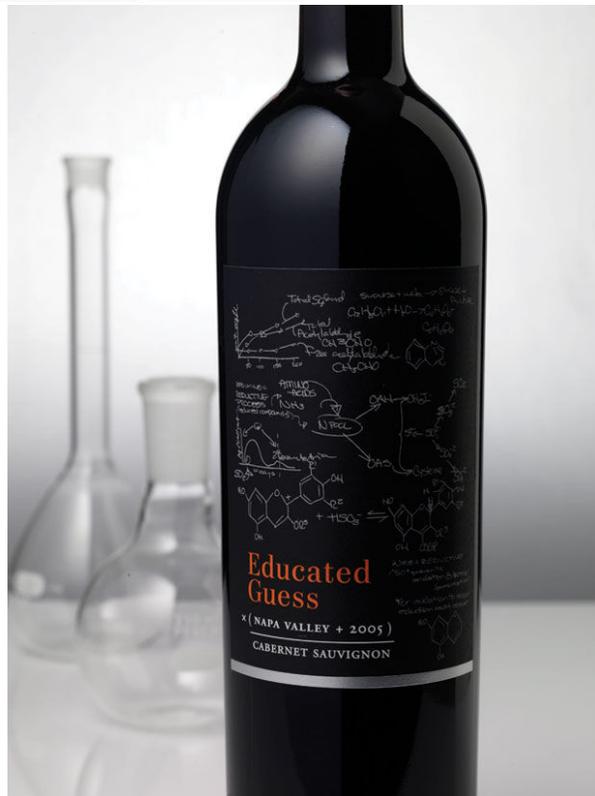
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## Drinking with our eyes



Submitted photo

The Educated Guess wine label was designed “to tell the story of how you can make an educated guess in winemaking, not to give you nightmares about high school chemistry,” according to the winery website.

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When faced with shelf after shelf of bottles, who hasn't selected one, at least in part, because of its attractive label?

“As consumers, we all eat and drink with our eyes,” said David Schuemann, owner and creative director of CF Napa Brand Design. “A wine label is a major factor influencing not only purchase decisions but also our actual enjoyment of the wine.”

To prove it, he has conducted focus groups with consumers. “I had people choose wine based on packaging. If I gave them wine from a package they didn’t like, they didn’t like the wine as much. Some even felt it was undrinkable. They loved the same wine when they thought it came from a package design they liked.”

Such research underlies Schuemann’s design work. Since taking over CF Napa in 2003, he has focused the firm’s business entirely on designing eye-attractive labels and packaging wine, beer and spirits. The firm creates several hundred labels and related materials each year for wineries throughout the U.S. and in nine countries, as well as for many Napa Valley producers.

“A great label tells a story,” he said. “In a crowded marketplace, wineries need to use their label to tell the buyer what makes them unique.”

He has written about some of those stories in a new book, “99 Bottles of Wine: The Making of the Contemporary Wine Label” (Val de Grace Books, \$49.50), which showcases 99 striking designs drawn from the many hundreds CF Napa has created in the past 10 years. For the book, Schuemann and his staff selected their favorite labels — and their favorite stories — to provide insight into the decisions behind the label designs as well as the narratives they convey.

The book highlights not just the label design, but the clients and processes behind the design. In deciding to write the book, “I thought people would find it interesting to see just how much goes into something that they probably never stopped and thought much about,” Schuemann said. “There are so many interesting stories — the people behind the brands, the brands themselves and the challenges they were facing.”

The large, full-color photographs reveal the range and creativity possible within such a limited space, from a classic label depicting a French chateau for a grand cru Bordeaux, to elegant redesigns for well-established brands like Beringer and Charles Krug, to irreverent graphics aimed at attracting younger wine drinkers to upstart brands like Slingshot, Tapeña and Cowgirl Sisterhood.

Other wines relate to the interests and passions of the winery owners, like Clif Family’s the Climber and Lawer Family’s rugby-themed Hooker. The brief narratives that accompany each of the labels create context, giving a sense of how the client and designers worked together to establish a brand image.

One thing the photos can only hint at is the tactile quality of the labels, which are best experienced in person. Labels offer examples of some of the finest high-tech printing processes in use today. Silk screening, embossing, foil stamping, die cuts and paper texture all come into play, along with newly designed typefaces and images derived from calligraphy, hand lettering and lithography. In a way, wine store shelves are a kind of art gallery, featuring rows of miniature, high-quality prints.

Does all that effort and craftsmanship really make a difference? Some of the success stories in the book tell you they do. Redtree’s sales quadrupled after a redesign and product relaunch; Slingshot was picked up by Safeway, selling many thousands of cases.

“The biggest mistake some wineries make is to think of the label as purely decorative. They think that people will buy the wine just because it is amazing,” Schuemann said. Great wine — and even a famous appellation — isn’t enough for smaller wineries trying to break into a crowded market.

Labels are a primary way wineries can reach customers and get them to connect to their product.

Schuemann calls it the 80-20 rule. “When you first start a wine brand, 80 percent of what you are selling is actually the package and only 20 percent is the wine,” he said. “Once people taste it, it gets reviews and people start re-buying it, then hopefully that flips, and they buy it 80 percent for the wine and 20 percent for the packaging.”

For someone working in a creative field, Schuemann is surprisingly business-focused. His first questions for clients are not about the design look or style they are seeking. Rather, he asks about the brand and their business goals. Is the wine selling? Has there been negative feedback on the label from distributors? Who are their consumers? And how and where will the wine be sold?

“If it is going to live on a shelf in Safeway with thousands of other brands, that’s a much different project than if it is sold directly at a winery,” Schuemann noted. Wines competing on a shelf need to draw attention to themselves from 10 feet away, by strong graphics, bright colors (or lack of color), label shape or some other memorable hook. Those sold direct to consumers or primarily in restaurants may have a quieter sensibility, conveying sophistication, elegance or credibility.

These differing requirements — and the stories behind the wines — stoke Schuemann’s creative fire. CF Napa designs a couple of hundred labels a year, along with corks, capsules, boxes, other printed materials and even sometimes the bottles themselves, but Schuemann doesn’t worry about repeating himself or getting locked into a style. The varied stories and personalities of the people behind the wines push the studio in equally varied aesthetic directions, as “99 Bottles of Wine” shows.

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**Tags** [David Schuemann](#), [Cf Napa](#)

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