More Than A Label

Etched and screen-printed bottles add style and staying power

By Jane Firstenfeld

After years of labor in the vineyard and months in the winery, producers of handmade, artisan wines might be tempted to put their vintages in simple bottles with classic labels and closures and call it a day. In an ever more competitive marketplace, however, this could be the most shortsighted decision to make for a long-term business.

While bottle and capsule manufacturers, producers of label stocks and package designers continue to bring striking options to the table and market shelves, influencing consumer decisions to a yet unmeasured degree, the winemaker's art still relies greatly on visual appeal to reach and resonate with buyers.

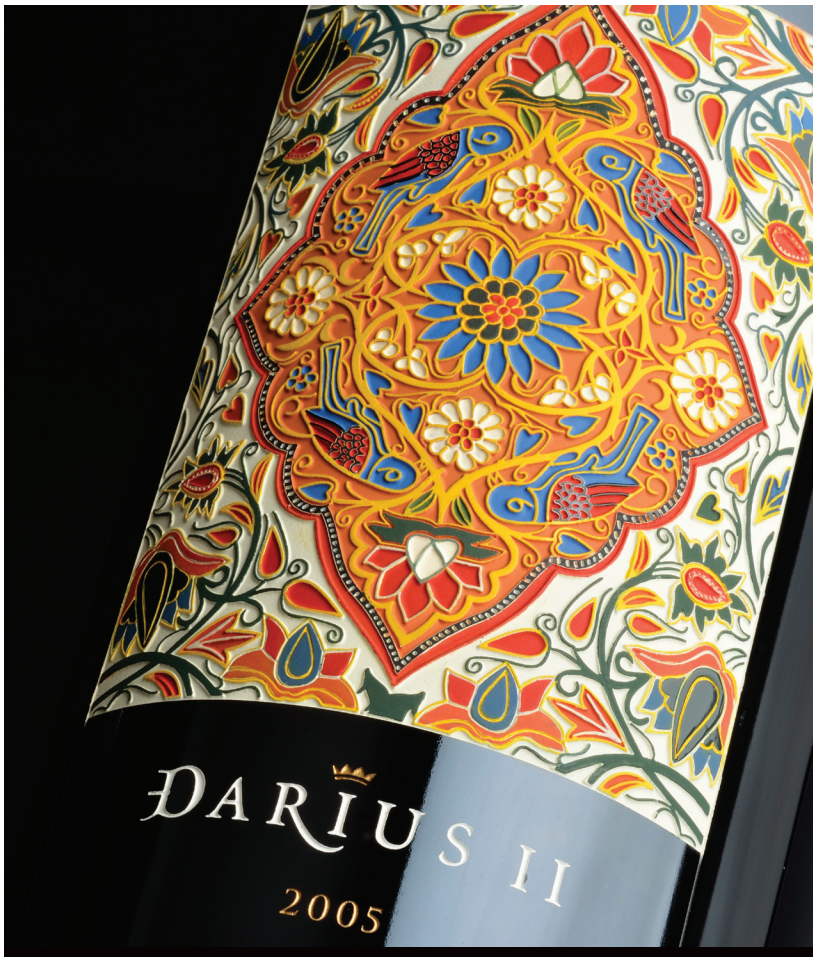
Despite water-resistant paper and inks and self-adhesive labels with barnacle-strong grip, labels are inherently temporary—not a bad thing for recycling or reuse. To permanently brand a special bottle or an entire bottling run, though, consider etched or screen printed bottle décor.

Etched for memory

Etching is a centuries-old process of reproducing original art. The technique may bring to mind intricate 15th century monochromes by Albrecht Dürer, or colorful prints by more contemporary artists such as Andy Warhol. Etching endures, and today it finds a compatible medium on wine bottles and stemware.

Highlights

- Etched bottles are individual works of art most often reserved for special vintages, presentations or display.
- Screen printing is permanent, versatile and competitively priced.
- Both processes allow designers to utilize the entire bottle.
- "Wax" dipping complements the elegant presentation of etched or silk-screened bottles.



The hand-etched and painted bottle for Darius II virtually jumps off the page with color and texture; the presentation bottles Etched Images creates for Napa's Darioush Winery become precious keepsakes.

A recent visit to the Napa headquarters of Etched Images demonstrated the range and versatility afforded by etched bottle décor. The atelier's intimate showroom displays an array of dazzling examples from simple, single-hued elegance through hand-painted, alluringly textured artworks intricate as Fabergé eggs.

Many bottles are outsized, and that is a fair representation of Etched Images' output: Many of its sales are oversized "presentation" bottles ordered by wineries as auction donations or as premiums for top customers and wine club collectors. Many are empty display models with their interiors blackened to look full (and fully showcase the art) at retail or on-premise vendors. Collectors of these works of art may have the blackening done retroactively (after consuming the contents.)

"With rare exception, our labor-intensive process does not lend itself to hand-etching and hand-painting thousands of 750ml bottles," according to an Etched Image sales piece. "Depending on the complexity of the artwork, pricing begins at $16 each for an order that exceeds 289 750ml bottles. That is why it is unlikely that you will see our craftsmanship on grocery store shelves."

"We hand-etch and paint close to 10,000 bottles per year. We work primarily with 3-liter and 6-liter large-format bottles but work on all sizes up to and including 27-liter—the equivalent of three cases of wine," explained Stu McFarland, president and co-founder of the business established in 1992.

The process is hands-on from start to finish, making every single bottle an original work of art. "Wineries email us with their digital label art, and we manipulate it to make it etchable.

We assist our clients in deciding what part of their artwork gets etched into the glass and which parts remain unetched and unpainted. The process can be as long (per bottle) as 20 minutes for the hand-etching and five hours for the hand-painting," McFarland said.

View video in the *Wines & Vines* Digital Edition. See the entire hand-etching process at Napa's Etched Images.

Stencils are created and applied with multiple meticulous steps before each individual bottle is etched in a sandblasting machine. Only then does color application begin: first typically sprayed with a base color, then painstakingly painted with the finest of brushes to build up texture and full color, as ordered. Only a handful of veteran artisans are qualified for this "capping" process. So far, McFarland quipped, none have gone blind.

"The hand-etching and painting is very labor intensive, and not an automated process like screen-printing. We typically have 30-40 orders in-house at any given time and have a two- to eight-week lead time after the artwork has been approved," he said.

Wine on screen

Not so long ago, this process was called "silk screening," a luxurious term for an artsy-craftsy means of printing posters and T-shirts. The silk is long gone (the screens are now made of fine and still-finer weaves of aluminum), but the basic technique remains the same: a practical method of imprinting durable labels on bottles for spirits, wine, olive oil and myriad other products that merit safekeeping.

Screen printing easily wraps an entire bottle in a design, as seen on the 2009 Rosso Corsa package from Monvera.

In recent years, screen printing through technically applied color labeling (ACL) has carved deep inroads into the beverage bottling industry. Mike Bergin, who founded Napa's Bergin Glass Impressions some 20 years ago, paid tribute to the spirits brands that popularized the technique for the most practical of reasons.

*Please stare responsibly.

Screen printing, etching and label design so attractive, it's almost intoxicating.

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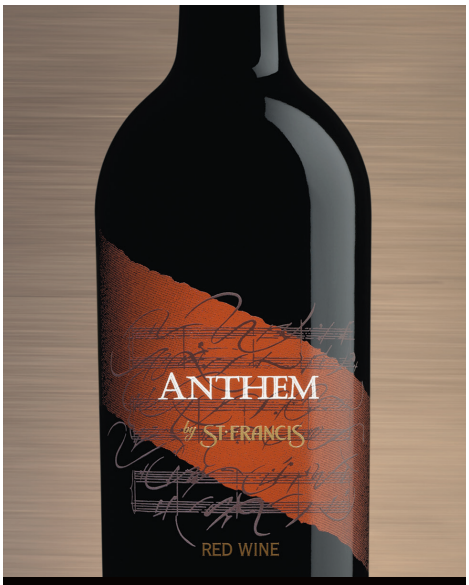
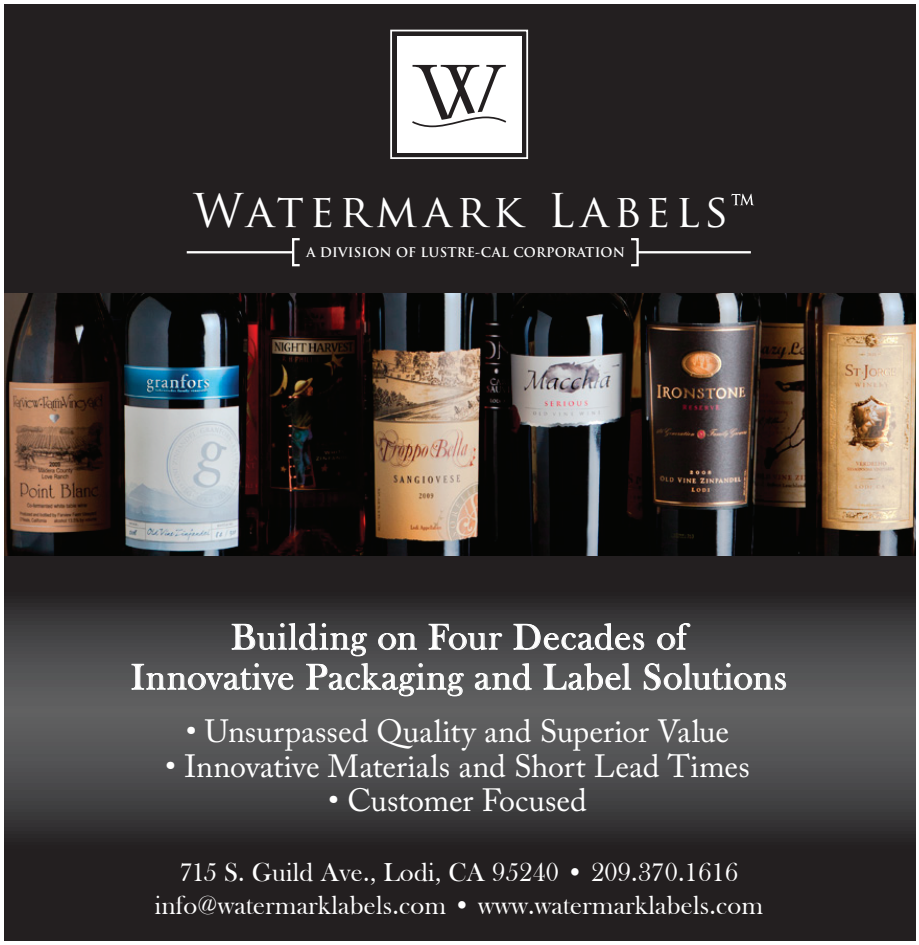
Regiments of screen-printed bottles are conveyed through the massive computer-controlled oven at Monvera Glass Decor. Moving through progressively hotter temperatures followed by slow cooling permanently bonds the decoration to the bottle.



Bergin Glass' bottle for St. Francis' Anthem adroitly adapted the winery's traditional paper label to the screen-printing technique.

Who among us doesn't store vodka in the freezer for weeks or months on end? ACL labels not only withstand cold and condensation, but the tactile adherence of screened labels enhances a bartender's grip. To illustrate, Bergin pulled out a bottle for Castello di Amorosa's popular and pricey Napa rosé. The prominent producer had encountered problems during bottling when condensation from the chilled wine rendered bottles too slippery to label, wreaking havoc on the bottling line. Bergin's ACL package solved that problem.



Paper labels, including self-adhesive, can literally gum up the bottling process, causing waste and delay. Already securely pre-labeled, screen-printed bottles keep the lines running smoothly and demand no expensive change parts for unique or multiple shapes.

Bergin noted that other advantages include: permanent adhesion; no bubbling, wrinkling or torn label corners; scuff proof/waterproof/cellar proof; a 360° design surface and a vertical height surface extending to one-half inch from base and bottle shoulder.

"Our Italian machines can print up to six colors—including precious metals such as 22-carat gold and precious platinum. On print runs from 100 cases to 25,000 cases; direct screen-printing is cost competitive with all other labeling applications."

Bergin estimated that his company produces about 1 million cases of wine bottles per year for clients on the Pacific Coast and in mountain states. Because bottle shipping is notoriously expensive, though, he often recommends that wineries in more distant regions employ trusted colleagues for screen-printing services: Universal Packaging in Vernon, B.C., and Stanpac, Smithville, Ontario in Canada; or Quest Industries of Hillside, N.J. (Quest also has a West Coast plant in Stockton Calif.)

Bergin Glass occupies a 40,000-square-foot site in a Napa industrial park and recently converted some case storage space to accommodate added printing equipment.

At 15 years old, Monvera Glass Décor is a relative newcomer to the field, having recently expanded for the third

time to a massive space in the port of Richmond, Calif. The 40,0000-square-foot plant is a stylishly refurbished factory where Fords were manufactured prior to World War II, when it switched to making tanks for the war effort.

Monvera turns out about 500,000 cases of wine bottles per year (about 80% of its business) in runs from 100 to 40,000 cases. A typical winery client orders some 2,000 cases per year, according to Caitriona Anderson, vice president of sales and marketing. Most of the balance of printed bottles is for allied products such as olive oil and vinegar.

Like Mike Bergin, Anderson emphasized the relative economy of screen printing vs. paper labels, as well as the versatility of the medium. "A lot of people think screen printing is very expensive, but this is because the look of the screen printing conveys such a high-end image," she said.

"Customers can expect to pay somewhere between 40 cents to $1 for the printing. We feel the pricing is competitive when compared to paper for smaller size runs," she said. Monvera does not charge extra for full-wrap labels, eliminating the need for hard-to-place multiple or oversized paper labels.

Take advantage of the medium

Just as elaborate designs, embossing and special label stocks can add to the cost of paper labels, design elements and inks affect the price of screen-printed bottles. Flashy, precious metal inks come at a price. "Most customers only print one to three colors, because that's all you need to create a great screen-printed label," Anderson said. "You can use less colors than on paper labels. In screen printing, the bottle surface is the background, and the art floats on the bottle. Even just one color can look very special with the right art. If you have a good design you don't need a lot of colors," she explained

Mike Bergin pointed out, however, that screen printing is not the same as four-color offset or digital label printing. "It's spot color," he said. So although you can choose simply to replicate your paper label, it may be beneficial to take full advantage of the medium by designing a specialized package. Both Bergin and Monvera have in-house design departments versed in the medium's capabilities.

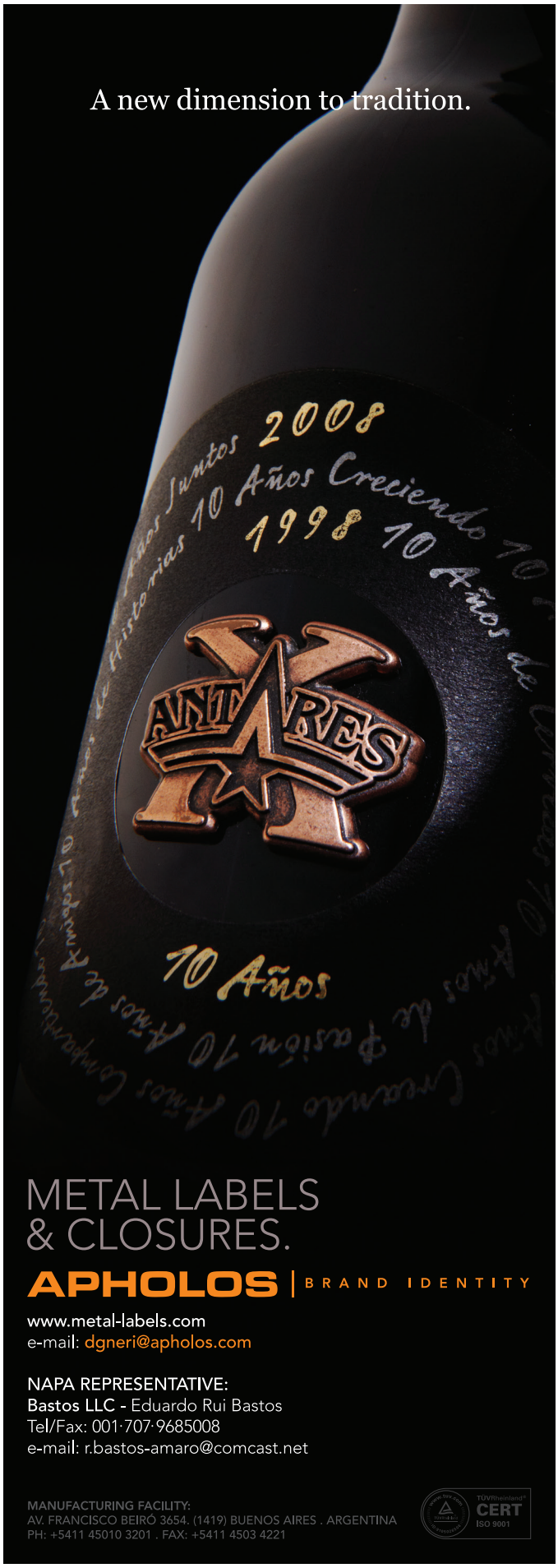
"Some customers already have art designed especially for screen printing. In these cases, it is sometimes the graphic designer that initiates contact," Anderson said. "We weigh in on any adjustments that we think need to be made to the art in order to achieve the best result when screen printing."

Wineries that want to refresh their image without a complete rebranding can, of course, provide existing label art, which can be modified to accommodate screen printing. "Various design techniques that we can use make the art more visually compelling," Anderson said. "The label is different but still retains the elements of the existing branding. We love to do this."

As with any wine packaging, it's essential to have your Certificate(s) of Label Approval (COLA) from the TTB prior to beginning the printing process; since screen printing is permanent, be sure to allow sufficient lead time.

Obviously, bottles must promptly be delivered to the printer, who will replace them in the case shippers prior to winery pickup. Summer is the busiest season for the screen printers and winter the slowest; average lead time with final art and COLA approval is "typically two to three weeks," Anderson said.

Watching a commercial screen-printing operation is not unlike seeing a busy bottler at work: It's highly automated with skilled workers operating complex, precise machinery to apply the ink. The printed bottles are then conveyed to massive, computer-con-



The finishing touch

Etched bottles especially, and high-end bottles in general, call for equally impressive closures, and "wax" dipped "capsules" offer an elegant finish. No longer technically wax but an appealingly tactile plastic, it is available in many colors including metallic to complement the package.

Etched Images, Bergin Glass and Monvera all offer dipping service, and Etched Images also sells the NoChip Dip by the pound. The capsules can include handy tear tabs and top stamping that recalls the sealing wax of old.

Doesn't dipping in molten plastic cook the precious wines inside? No, all three providers asserted. It's a quick dip best done by skilled practitioners—and in the case of supersized bottles, only the strongest, Mike Bergin said. Just as chocolate dipping won't melt your ice cream cone, the plastic cools rapidly, with no harm done.

J.F.

The wax-like dips often used to finish keepsake bottles are available in dozens of eye-catching colors.

trolled ovens, which carry them through an ascending range of heat up to 1,180°F and successively cooler temperatures until room temperature is reached.

With the inks securely annealed on the glass, "You could drag them behind a car: The glass would shatter before the printing came off," said Sadegh Ghorban, co-owner and vice president of operations at Monvera. Ghorban proudly announced the acquisition of a new four-color screen-printing machine, a model FO6-CNC (computer numerical control) from Italy's Fermac, which among other virtues allows printing on a variety of shapes, at a pace of 80 bottles per minute.

In addition to screen printing, Bergin and Monvera also offer etched glass services—albeit on a smaller scale than specialist Etched Images. Bergin concentrates mostly on presentation/display bottles; Monvera is geared more toward etched stemware and glassware, which requires a more delicate process than durable wine bottles.

For vintners who pride themselves on making memorable wines, these gorgeous and enduring design features may add just the touch of luxury their buyers are seeking. W&V