

Wordy wine labels can seem very confusing, but there's a code to crack. Wine label design is used throughout the world to communicate key information about the wine to you, the customer. Some information is a legal requirement, some regional practice and some winemakers preference. Additionally, this varies depending upon the country of origin and the destination country!! For the sake of clarity we will assume that we are talking about wines destined for the U.K. market and looking at information that is consistent in all countries of origin.

Once you know what information to look for, you'll be able to decipher almost any label, no matter how complex and, consequently have a better understanding of the wine inside the bottle.

Brand/producer name

This often features prominently on the label. A recognisable household brand provides a point of familiarity for buyers, while an iconic producer usually demands a higher price point due to their prestige.

Wine name

The wine's name differentiates it from other bottles within the producer's range. Many producers simply use the region of origin or the grape variety. Other producers opt for something more unique to help tell their story. Wines named after local historical figures, specific vineyards or even family members are also common.

Geographical Indication (GI)

Wine labels will very commonly indicate where the grapes used to make the wine have been grown – this is known as a Geographical Indication or a GI. In the European Union, GIs come with regulations which dictate not only where the grapes come from but might also stipulate what varieties can be used and/or how the wine should be made. Factors such as climate in a specific GI will have an effect on how ripe the grapes get, which will, in turn, influence the style of the wine. If you learn a little wine geography, you'll be able to work out what to expect in terms of grape varieties and regional climate – information which will really help you to predict what the wine will taste like.

Grape variety

The grape variety is perhaps the most important factor affecting what the wine will taste like. Each variety lends specific characters to the wine and an increasing number of them are now world famous. Many people actively seek out 'Malbec' on a wine label when they're looking for a full-bodied red with intense dark fruit flavours, or 'Sauvignon Blanc' if they're after a dry and refreshing white wine. Note that the grape variety is not always stated on the label. In many parts of Europe, it is the region rather than the grape that appears. They leave it up to you to learn what varieties are commonly used or permissible in that region.

Vintage

Wines must display a vintage on the label (or be labelled N.V. non-vintage). This is the year when the grapes were harvested. The vintage is important for two reasons:

The age of the wine

Some very good or outstanding quality wines will benefit from bottle ageing, gaining new and interesting flavours over time, but most wines should be drunk when they are young and fresh. The vintage helps you decide whether the wine is too young, too old, or just right for drinking.

The quality of the vintage

In some regions, such as Bordeaux in France, weather is very variable from one year to the next. Weather affects the health and ripeness of the grapes and has an important impact on the style and quality of a wine. Some producers will not make a wine in poor vintages. Some vintages fetch higher prices than others due to the quality or rarity of the resulting wines.

abv %

The wine legally must display its alcohol by volume (abv) somewhere on the bottle – often on the back label rather than the front. Most dry light wines sit between 11-15%. Wines over 15% are usually fortified wines (meaning extra alcohol has been added to them), while wines under 11% are likely to have some sweetness as a result of unfermented sugars.

Classification / quality level

This varies massively from country to country & region to region, also the legal definition varies. It is safe to assume that a wine claiming to be of a higher classification will be of a better quality but not always accurate. For example, in France a *premier cru* (1er cru) is legally classified as of better quality than a *deuxieme cru* (2eme cru). In Spain a wine labelled *gran reserva* means that it was aged at least five years, with a minimum of two years in oak. However in the new world a *grand reserve* has no legal definition but suggests that the winemaker only releases this wine in exceptional vintages.

In many countries (mainly old world) there will be other geographical restrictions which denote more rigid and exclusive sub-regions. These will often be shown as abbreviations, for example *AOC – Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (France)* or *DOCG - Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (Italy)*.

Other terms

There are many other terms that producers may use to tell you a little more about their wine. Some of these have legal definitions while others don't. You can use this information to build up a picture of the type of wine however they are not necessarily accurate!

Mandatory information

For the purpose of this exercise we will assume that the following information is a legal requirement:

- ABV %
- Volume of liquid
- Vintage
- Producer name & address
- Allergen information
- Details of bottling
- Country & region of production

There are other legal requirements (e.g. lot number) however they are not important for us at this stage.

Now you know some of the most common features of a wine label, you can start to make sense of the different styles available. To make this information truly useful, you need to piece together the various clues to predict what the wine will taste like.





**GAZZA
SHIRAZ**

1974

Thackeray's Vineyards

750ML

WILD FERMENT SHIRAZ

very old vintage reserve

WINE OF AUSTRALIA

14.5%ABV

VINTED & BOTTLED BY THACKERAYS, 78 PENFOLD ROAD., MAGILL, SOUTH AUSTRALIA, 5072

bottle number
contains sulphites

ALL-NATURAL

**BEACH
BUM**

**SEA SPRAY VINEYARD WHITE BLEND
1974**



MADE AND BOTTLED BY GAZBRIELSKLOOF
WALKER BAY WESTERN CAPE SOUTH AFRICA
CHENIN BLANC / SEMILLON / VERMENTINO
DOES NOT CONTAIN SULPHITES



750 ML 12.5% ABV



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