

THE INANITY OF COOL

THERE'S MORE TO WINE CHOICES
THAN FIRST MEETS THE EYE

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If you've got eyes and are in the wine world, or at least that effete tastemaking subset of wine, you can't have missed the wines of Gut Oggau. Certainly, you can't have missed its labels. Each wine is adorned with a different line drawing of a family member (a fictional one, a fact that often gets lost in translation) meant to represent its personality. The mature vines used for the white wine known as 'Timotheus', one of the elder siblings, evoke a character who is "self-confident, a man of substance and even refined," according to the back label, while the fruitier Grüner and Welschriesling used in 'Theodora' – the club kid of the family, with a bob evoking Mia Wallace in *Pulp Fiction* – translate into "a pert but likeable young lady."

The Oggau wines have been around since 2007, when the husband-and-wife team of Stephanie and Eduard Tscheppe-Eselböck took over an abandoned vineyard and began making wine in the eastern Austrian region of Burgenland, where Stephanie's family runs the famed Taubenkobel restaurant. But in the mid 2010s, something catalysed. The labels fulfilled their memey destiny, and were suddenly everywhere, even on display at a 2011 exhibit in SFMOMA. The appeal is obvious. Oggau's labels take the usually metaphorical anthropomorphism of wine – great legs! really muscular! – and make it literal. It's a perfect in-joke, and when it comes to the world of natural wine, that matters a lot. After all, many natural-ish wines haven't found acclaim on taste alone. Their values and aesthetics are also major talking points. These are the new benchmarks. And so, labels matter. Which is why, when it comes to the Oggau labels, it's worth filling in a few holes in the story.

When those cunning labels are credited at all, they're attributed to Jung von Matt, described not only by writers but also by some of Gut Oggau's importers as an 'artist'. In fact Jung von Matt is one of the largest advertising agencies in Germany, with offices in Stockholm, Zürich and Beijing, as well as Vienna. That it produced the Gut Oggau labels isn't a secret; the agency proudly says so on its website. The illustrator, Anje Jager, is reasonably proud of her work too, and displays it in her portfolio. Without much trouble, I could suss out the entire team responsible for the project, down to the account manager. Nothing wrong with that, of course. Most wineries hire outside designers to create their labels, although not all hire major ad agencies. But this part of the tale is almost always elided when the Tscheppes are quoted about their marvellous labels. And, with no offence to my friends in advertising, calling Jung von Matt an 'artist' is like calling *Le Pain Quotidien* a 'boulangerie'. Surely, when it comes to truth in advertising, credit could be given where it's due?

I'm not sure why this detail has been scrubbed from Oggau's much-told story. But I can speculate. Might it be dissonant with the winery's larger story – of two earnest and fresh-faced young winemakers, working in minimal mode and getting back to the land? Probably. And when you traffic in a world – the natural-wine world – where authenticity can often end up superseding taste, perhaps it doesn't look great for an icon of movement to admit that its viral charm was engineered in such a deliberate, corporate way. In case it's not obvious: I've never found the same charm in Gut Oggau's wines that others do – not just the labels, the wines themselves. They're decent natural-leaning expressions of eastern Austria, but hardly transformative. When I've tasted them next to bottles from naturalist neighbours, including Andreas Tscheppe and Christian Tschida, those wines had ample shade to throw.

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But I've come to take away a larger lesson from the Oggau labels. We may think we've shifted into a new paradigm for wine, leaving behind *crus classés* and scores, and diving into virtue-signalling and punk. But some facets of human behaviour simply don't change. Not only have we always drunk the labels, but most wine lovers have always telegraphed their values by them. (Why else would American businessmen of a certain age populate their steakhouse tables with Caymus?) And today, probably more than ever, our perception of the values a label embodies directly impacts how good we think the wine is. The cooler the label, the better the contents of the bottle.

There's a term for this behaviour: affiliation bias, although it tends to be applied more frequently to things such as arbitration and expert courtroom testimony. In simple terms, we like the things we want to be associated with more. If it's not Gut Oggau, it's the latest Rachel Comey jumpsuit or Tove Lo album. And it's not just about us seeing these things in a more positive light. We also want the reward of how our admiration of them reflects back on us – how they catalyse our sense of good taste. Everyone wants to drink the right thing, to be seen as both avant-garde and popular. It's been this way since we were the first ones in school to get the new Architecture in Helsinki album, and what, you haven't heard it yet? Affiliation bias is a nice way of stating the obvious: that we want to be seen with the cool things. And it has the side benefit of pissing on those nagging critical voices, such as mine, talking smack about how quality and fashion aren't the same. In other words, it's a nice way of saying we're all a bunch of label-fuckers. Buy hey, fuck me, I'm just the old guy drinking sulphured wine.

The reason that affiliation bias, or label-fucking, even warrants a second thought today is that wine's aesthetics seem to be in a confused place. Not that there isn't astonishingly good wine in nearly every corner; you can drink better today than at any time in history, no matter what the pre-*phylloxera* fetishists say. But wine is one of those consumer goods that breeds deep insecurity, and in recent years the exploitation of that insecurity has shifted – from the corporate overlords of shitty wine, who've known for decades that insecurity is the easiest wedge to sell a mediocre product, to the

artisan and small scale. Of course, winemakers who were out of fashion have always known this, and endeavoured to sell out their cellar doors while ranting about stupid ratings. But their vision of the world now dominates.

In other words, personality has triumphed, almost to the exclusion of anything else. The snoozy fight over whether cloudy or pungent or cider-like or whatever wines are really good and misunderstood, or just plain weird, has nothing to do with whether they are or not. It has to do with whether the new tastemakers can convince their cohort that those qualities are not only acceptable, but preferable. Maybe you drink it because Action Bronson told you to. Maybe you drink it because Goop told you natural wine would clean your chakras. That itself doesn't trouble me, because shitty wine always ends up being outed as shitty wine. But where natural wine, especially, has twisted this is by often allowing shittiness to be veiled if you hold the right virtue points: farming the right way, not putting crap in your wine. And to some extent those virtue points have been held up to be as important as taste itself – with the added twist that those who adopt them in less radical form (he's biodynamic, but I mean, *he doesn't do carbonic*) aren't welcome at the party. Mix in label-fucking and you have a mess that quickly descends into a grim sort of fetishism.

When you step back to consider this sort of fanboying in perspective, it's hard to differentiate it from the cult-wine broism of 20 years ago (save, possibly, for the economic scale, although cult natural wines ain't cheap any more). Yes, the Oggau labels vibrate at a certain frequency for a certain sort of drinker, as does the iconoclasm of Frank Cornelissen, or the inky dank of Partida Creus. But it's ultimately the human base response we're talking about. And honestly, there's no reason to feel bad about that. We are creatures of affiliation bias, and always have been, whether it's Sine Qua Non and Screaming Eagle (the 1990s), or Bordeaux First Growths (the British Empire since, oh, Queen Victoria).

All that said, I do still think we're entering a new and tricky phase in wine, one that bears the downside of drinking the label. This became clear one evening not long ago when I was having a drink in a Paris wine bar with a winemaker friend, who struck up a conversation with a couple nearby – visiting journalists from London, as it turned out, and newly minted 'naturalistas'. As a winemaker who makes (very good) wines that are sometimes considered natural and sometimes not, depending on who's judging – and who'd perhaps had a half-glass of Prieuré-Roch too many – he couldn't resist querying them about their newfound love of natural wines. "Because you don't need to be an expert to enjoy them," one replied, going on to explain that he and his girlfriend had finally found wines that felt comfortable to them – that offered aesthetics without judgment. They had discovered the benefits of this new label-first, virtue-signalling world, of the Wines of Right Now, which exist as *sui generis* creations. And there's a deep appeal in this to the inexpert drinker. You can throw back naturalist Burgundy without having to quote chapter and verse on *climats*, because the wines don't have to taste like traditional Burgundy. In fact, the less they do, the more comforting they are. It's not just drinking the label. It's drinking the label, and the label alone.

And that even extends to wines that don't quite taste right, whatever that means any more. Because today flaws – can we even still call them flaws? – are no longer a liability, but an asset. And this isn't just about natural wine. New research from Yale business

professor Taly Reich studied how 'mistakes' (inadvertent flaws, essentially) can even increase consumer preference for a product. She and her colleagues examined artwork and hip-hop recordings, and found that imperfections enhanced the bond that consumers felt with the work. It's an easy leap to apply those notions to wine. That brett in your glass? It's not a flaw. It's a mark of authenticity, worthy of your devotion. Also, hey, look at that spiffy label.

Of course, I only say this because I, too, am a label-fucker, and proud of it. I won't deny that seeing the label on a bottle of, say, Richard Leroy or Matthiasson makes me glad to be drinking it, because I know the producers and appreciate their values, and that gives me a deeper emotional connection. But I also don't delude myself into thinking that my behaviour is different from that of my parents, or that of any of the label bros, or proper gentlemen choosing a certain growth for their evening claret. But I believe I usually balance my label fetishism with some self-reflection about whether the wine itself is innately good, and worth my money, and culturally resonant in any useful way beyond the inanity of cool. And I worry that today's label-fucking, with its resultant virtue-signalling and wry aesthetics, has subordinated the rest. Taste itself has devolved into a minor consideration.

That leads to my second worry: that label-drinking has become easy to exploit – not just because of scenarios such as the one with Gut Oggau, but because it's now hard to find a bright line between personal expression and manufactured cool. In the past, the usual answer has been, well, just blind taste the damn stuff. After all, the fix for affiliation bias is 'objectivity'. Except, even if I believed that – and I haven't for a long time – the idea of wine without context simply doesn't fly with most of today's wine lovers. Affiliation bias has become a major part of why we drink wine. And if we're being honest, it probably always has been. In other words, we've always been label-fuckers. Today it's just okay to admit it.

And that's why it's worth being wary. Consider the recent case of Liber Pater, now the most expensive current-vintage Bordeaux wine ever released at €30,000 per bottle. Liber Pater's owner, Loïc Pasquet, has pulled off perhaps the biggest ever trolling of the Bordelais, arguably the world champions of label-fucking. Pasquet's wine exuded all the contemporaneous cool things: a tiny production of around 500 bottles; the use of ungrafted vines and archaic varieties such as Castets (although it's mostly 'Petite Vidure', ie Cabernet Sauvignon); a rebel *vin de France* designation instead of an appellation, because the kids do that these days. Meanwhile, its label adds a whole new level of trollish brilliance: commissioned by the artist (an actual artist) Gérard Puvis, it depicts the numbers 1855 collapsing, thus dragging both Bordeaux's hallowed classification, which Pasquet loathes, and Mouton's tradition of artist labels. And of course, the price itself is meant to shock and awe. Pasquet, in his outspoken way, has found the apotheosis of this label-obsessed era. Quality? Irrelevant, probably, because Liber Pater's values are so irresistibly anti-authoritarian and access to it is so rare. And this is where the label-fucker has a duty to be vigilant. Because if our barometers are now based more on values and aesthetics than taste, we rely on winemakers not to exploit them. And we have a responsibility to call them out when they do.

