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California wine needs to be more like Rosé the Riveter

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Although the US wine market has been setting growth records for years, growers learnt this week that prospects could be even rosier if they adopted a more laid-back attitude – at least in their promotion and labeling.

The Wine Market Council, an industry group, said polling showed the nation's fast-growing population of wine drinkers was more likely to be drawn to brands that represented a relaxed, light-hearted style.

The advice – which follows a recent Gallup survey finding that 56 per cent of US wine drinkers are women, who are also responsible for 55 per cent of all purchases – may explain the recent flowering of off-the-wall brands that stand out on the crowded supermarket wine shelves.

And not all are from California, source of 90 per cent of US wine. Washington State's Olympic Cellars has made a splash with offerings such as Rosé the Riveter and Working Girl White.

In California, a Santa Barbara winery produces White Lie, a "light" chardonnay with 10 per cent alcohol, compared with the standard 14 per cent, while Cleavage Creek Cellars' labels feature abundantly endowed pin-ups. The state is also home to the Two Wives Winery – a potential foil to The Mad Housewife reds and whites from Washington.

The conventions of wine labeling and marketing are crumbling in part because the Wine Market Council's poll of 1,400 consumers also found that the new generation of young adults was downing chardonnay and cabernet with an appetite reminiscent of that shown by baby-boomers in the 1970s.

In the past five years, it said, the US wine drinking population increased more than 30 per cent while the number drinking beer and spirits but not wine fell by a quarter.

It also found that imported wines from Australia and Italy, for example, had the edge over Californian product in terms of price and quality. This finding was presented at a conference this week as a wake-up call for California, which is experiencing a steady erosion of its domestic market share.

According to the latest federal data, California had 67 per cent of the US market in 2002, other states 8 per cent, with foreign wines accounting for 25 per cent. But the Wine Institute, another industry group, said California's share was 64 per cent in 2004.

Merrill Lynch, the Wall Street bank, noted last week that Australia alone last year increased its share, by 0.7 per cent for a 7.7 per cent total. Yellow Tail, an Australian product with a label featuring a wallaby and retailing for about \$7 (€5.70, £3.90) a bottle, is ranked the leading foreign wine in the nation. Introduced less than five years ago it was selling 1m cases a month by late 2005.

That it stands out among the almost 7,000 wine brands on sale in US is all the more remarkable since it was not supported by any advertising until 2004.

Its success was one of the reasons for a Wine Institute study, just distributed to growers, that confirmed that word-of-mouth recommendations were the most powerful influence on buyers, and urged the development of "a more distinctive image" for Californian wine.

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