

Article published Dec 16, 2006

Label conscious

Sure they taste good, but with these wines, looks are everything

While shopping during this season of holiday parties, your attention is immediately drawn to labels. And we don't mean Marc Jacobs or Manolo Blahnik.

If you're giving gifts of wine, eye candy-enhanced shopping has become the protocol this year. Yet choosing a good wine based on a label can be daunting. It's a bit of a gamble, and we're often left attempting to match the label's significance with the personality of its intended. We can only hope it tastes as good as it looks, right?

Recently, with just a few hours left before a friend's housewarming party, we headed for the House of Wine & Cheese in Leland. We scanned shelf after shelf of miniature art, keeping in mind the hostess' love of felines and excitement for her new "nesting" phase of life.

We settled on a 2004 Fleur de California pinot noir primarily for its romance-tinged label - antique cream background, silver-embossed vintage type beautiful vined flowers - but also because pinots are a safe bet since *Sideways*, and its region, Carneros, sounded cool.

With the help of local wine shop owners and all-around oenophiles, we found a few other bottles - red and white - that are sure to amuse the receiver's palate and aesthetic sensibilities.

WHERE TO SHOP

The Wine Sampler, 4405 Wrightsville Ave., 796-9463

The Wine Seller, 801 S. College Road, 799-5700

The Wilmington Wine Shoppe, 110A S. Front St., 772-2077

Riverboat Landing Restaurant, 2 Market St., 763-7227

Chelsea's Wine Bar and Eatery, 1 S. Front St., 763-8463

Bottega Art & Wine, 208 N. Front St., 763-3737

Working Girl White, White Blend (Washington)

A "saucy little number" you can feel good about bringing to your girls' night out gathering - not only because it is smooth and slightly fruity with hints of pineapple and citrus - but also because buying it supports a national donation network that benefits centers dedicated to the emotional and physical well-being of women. (\$13.99, The Wine Sampler)

The Writers' Block, Cabernet Franc (Lake County, Calif.)

Know a repressed novelist who is constantly sulking about the characters stuck in his head? Help him quell his inner critic and unleash a little Hemingway magic with The Writers' Block, Lake County Cab Franc. NEED DESCRIPTION. (\$18.99, The Wine Sampler)

Marilyn Pose #2, Velvet Collection (Napa Valley)

Adorned with a peel-away, glittering label exposing the famous Playboy photographs of this American icon, this red, primarily a cabernet/merlot blend, deserves its place on the top shelf of the sophisticated bachelor's home bar. Due to a fire at the manufacturer's warehouse, Norma Jean is now a collector's item reserved for a big spender. The Wine Seller has only one available, but it also carries Marilyn Merlot for just under a tenth of the price. (\$349, 1.5 liter magnum, The Wine Seller)

Lo Tengo, Malbec (Mendoza, Argentina)

Legs intertwine on this label's hologram, hinting at the sultry combination of flavors within this trendy grape. For the dance partner you know is eager to stretch her legs, this sensual red is ready to brush knees anywhere from cosmopolitan ballrooms to the saucy back-alley salsa bistros. (\$9.99, The Wilmington Wine Shoppe)

PETS, Petite Sirah (Clarksburg, Calif.)

Like anything, a good-tasting wine remains in the individual tastes of the glass-holder. Nevertheless, we felt it necessary to consult an expert's opinion. Kris Dorough, manager/sommelier of Roy's Riverboat Landing touts this "uncharacteristically smooth yet excellent value" varietal for its similarities to its vintner's dog Tanker - long-legged,

colorful and bold. (\$34, Roy's Riverboat Landing Restaurant)

14 Hands, Cabernet Sauvignon (Horse Heaven Hills, Washington)

Inspired by the wild horses that once made their home on the land where 14 Hands grapes are grown, this wine named for the hand-measuring process that delineates the animal's status as horse or pony. Give it to anyone who appreciates free-spirited animals and the earthy aromas of stone fruit and cherry. (\$26.50, Chelsea's Wine Bar and Eatery).

Meeker, Handprint Merlot, 2003 (Sonoma County)

This splashy merlot complements the recent No Boundaries exhibit at Bottega Art & Wine, in that each bottle bears the paint-soaked handprint of its creator. Its juicy palate is full of spice, with notes of dark fruit and cinnamon, followed by a lingering finish of toasty French oak, leather and vanilla. Available only in select, best-vintage years, this wine is for the inspired. Bottega Art & Wine, \$40.