



feature

Joining the "Critter" Wines Trend: Kendall Jackson Wine Estates Uncorks

Dog House Wines

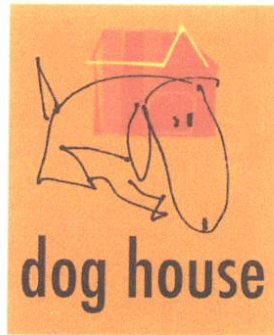
BY BARBARA DENZER

Little did we know when we started our "hunt" for dogs on wine labels several years ago that we would become participants in what is known as the "critter quaffer" marketing trend. Apparently pet lovers who choose their wines by the critters on the label have had a significant impact on today's winemakers. The latest entrant into this chic little niche we have hunted down is California's Kendall Jackson Wine Estates. They have just introduced their newest Select brand, Dog House Wines.

The Dog House wines consists of three varieties, each named after a popular dog name. Max's Merlot is a "wine of good lineage with blueberries, dried herbs and a soft lush texture." Kendall Jackson is known for its award-winning chardonnays so we could expect Charlie's Chard, described as having "bright fruit, perfect balance and a touch of vanilla" to be a pet lover's best friend. Checker's Cab, a cabernet sauvignon, will be known for its "cassis, oak and soft, juicy flavors."

The Dog House label is light orange in color, with a very simple line drawing of a dog in front of a small house, bordered in a darker

orange. The story behind the label begins when Kendall Jackson's marketing group hired IDEO, a well known design firm in Palo Alto, California, to define and develop a new brand of wines. IDEO is known for designing hundreds of innovative products including the kidney transport system, the first production mouse for MacIntosh® and the pump toothpaste container.



Style, design and innovation are their mantra. They did the research and created the product position for the new wines, then they lead a team of Kendall Jackson employees through a rigorous product devel-

opment process in search of innovation and enhanced quality wines with wide appeal.

The research determined the team was creating engaging, playful, whimsical wines with "critter" labels that appeal to a wider audience and eliminate pretension or the "snobbery" factor often associated with the wine industry. In short, the wines should be appealing to a younger audience that is used to being bombarded with fun, fruity alcoholic drinks. The plan included three varieties, chardonnay, merlot and cabernet sauvignon.

The Kendall Jackson team, most having their own pet companions and used to having dogs in the vineyard, quickly decided that the "critter" on their label would be a dog. Everyone involved in the project had a connection with dogs. One of the most important influences for selecting a dog on the label was the Jackson family's daughter Jenny and her husband Don, who had become supporters of Guide Dogs for The Blind. In fact, they had adopted a couple of retired guide dogs for family companions.

The development team, feeling that contributing to a worthy cause is an important part of their "critter"

mission, wanted to support a pet charity with part of the proceeds of their wine sales. Guide Dogs for the Blind immediately came to mind. Jenny and Don contacted Bob Phillips, CEO for Guide Dogs for the Blind to determine how they could help. The team pledged \$35,000, (50 cents per bottle sold) roughly the cost of training and supporting a Guide Dog for his lifetime. Phillips says, "The association with Dog House Wines has already brought increased awareness of what we do. Guide Dogs require extensive training and we commit to taking care of them for their entire life, even after their service is complete. We're very grateful for Dog House's commitment and to Jenny and Don for caring for retired Guide Dogs."

"Young adult consumers," the development team was told, "often choose wines by the emotional appeal of the labels, passing up wines with labels that are confusing or a name that is hard to pronounce." So the development team chose a brand name that is not only playful but there's no doubt about how to pronounce it – dog house. The label graphic also carries out the whimsical theme. Simple line drawings of a quirky dog super-imposed on a stick house is both engaging and symbolic of a dog's house and a real house. "It's not really a dog house, you can see by the window that it's meant to represent the family house. Today's dogs don't really live outside anymore," explains Laura Kirk Lee, brand manager for the Dog House wines, "pets have become part of our families."

Naming each of the three varieties was another research project. The team wanted names that connected with the largest number of pet lovers possible. Research of the most popular dog names uncovered that Max, Checkers and Charlie were the most popular dog names. Thus the new Dog House wines

were named *Max's Merlot*, *Checkers' Cab* and *Charlie's Chard*.

Laura Kirk Lee, says "innovation in packaging was also at the top of the list of goals for the new wines." Screw caps were selected as the best closure to preserve the freshness and the fruity quality of the new wines. They also reduce variation from bottle to bottle and are the most consumer friendly and convenient way to cap wines. While screw caps may not seem like something new to many wine consumers, they are new to the Kendall Jackson business, where corks have been the traditional seals.

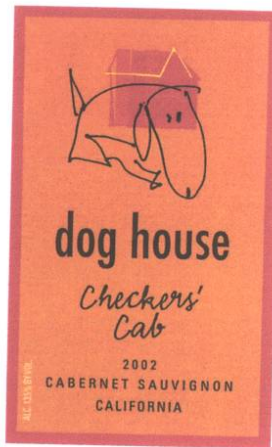
Vintner Mark Theis says that for him, the product position meant creating wines that are soft in tannins, "fruit forward" in concept and don't cover up the basic flavors of the grapes. He uses state-of-the-art fermentation in stainless steel, and has more freedom in the blending process. In Theis's words, "these wines do not have a pedigree, they're 'mutts.'"

Speaking of mutts, Theis is the companion of a friendly 10-year-old mutt named *Rufus* who loves working at Kendall Jackson but prefers patrolling the vineyard to being with Theis in the cellars.

Probably the most important dog around the vineyard is Robbie, a large, friendly yellow Lab who likes to go to work with his companion, Jess Jackson. He loves to hang out with the boss and schmooze with the other employees. At the office he's been given a special title, chief dog officer. His collar carries the initials, C.D.O.

Jess Jackson is the patriarch of Kendall Jackson Wine Estates, one of the most prestigious family owned wineries in California, which became world famous for its Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay in 1983 and has been the fastest growing California winery of the last 20 years.

In 1982 Jess and his then-wife,



Barbara (nee Kendall), both San Francisco attorneys, retired to become "gentlemen farmers" in Sonoma County. They founded the wine business when abundant grape crops sort of forced them into making wine. Bumper crops everywhere in Napa Sonoma meant wineries didn't need to buy their grapes. At first they sold their wines to the bulk market, then they produced special wines they offered for fund-raising events for University of California Berkeley, the California Historical Society, and Stanford University. Gradually, they learned to make consistent formulas that represented the taste consumers wanted and focused on reli-



able, dependable quality. Soon, their award-winning wines were challenging the quality of the entire wine industry.

Starting with a respectable production of 2,000 cases in 1983, by the year 2000 the winery was producing more than 3.65 million cases of wine and was Sonoma County's largest business. Jackson retired as founder and chairman in 2000 to pursue other interests and Barbara took over the position. Success has continued under her guidance and today Kendall-Jackson has 12 brands and produces wines in Chile, Argentina and Italy in addition to its four wineries in Northern California. It's grown to become the twelfth largest winery in the United States.

Jess continues to run his farms and keep tabs on his thoroughbred horses at the Jackson offices, which makes Robbie a happy camper in his capacity as chief dog. Of course being a chief usually means managing a crew and Robbie shares the vineyard with several other dogs, including Jenny and Don's retired guide dog.

Dog House wines retail for \$8.99 and are available nationwide at stores including H.E.B., Albertsons, QFC, Fred Meyers, Harris-Teeter, Publix, and Whole Foods Markets. Dog House Wines — quality wines that help a cause that is near and dear to any pet lover's heart. Go, fetch. Toast their success and enjoy.

BARBARA DENZER is the author of *The Crazy Kids Guide to Cooking For Your Pet* and has been on the hunt for dog on wine labels since first discovering Rosenblum Cellar's Chateau La Paws, and is hard at work on including all the pet labels in a pocket book, *The Pet Lover's Guide to Wine*.

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