

The Tale of the Dubonnet Cat

The Story Behind the Cats on Wine Labels

By Barbara Denzer

When I moved to California from the Midwest a few years ago, I noticed that Californians liked to drink wine with their evening meal. Anxious to embrace the California "good life," I began tasting wines, and learning which wines go with certain foods. The friends I cultivated were knowledgeable about wines. I indulged in weekends of visiting California wineries in Napa, Sonoma, Paso Robles, the Central Coast, and Temecula. Unfortunately, it didn't take more than a few months to realize that the tannins in almost all the red wines regularly swelled my sinuses until I couldn't breathe, and that if white wine didn't taste like my favorite sweet, bubbly Aste Spumanti I wasn't going to enjoy it.

My love affair with wine sizzled quickly. It degenerated to the point that, to the horror of my connoisseur friends, I generally stick to one of the sweeter blush wines or white zinfandels. Occasionally I would try a Johannisburg Reisling or a Gewurztraminer that my wine-loving friends recommended, but there was no way I'd even bother to try to hold up one end of a conversation that turned to the joys of wine. Instead, I focused on the architecture and the gardens of the wineries, and contributed to the conver-

sation in a related but different direction.

A magazine article about wine caught my attention on a late night shuttle flight from Oakland, California, to Burbank, California, and rekindled my interest in wine. This time I focused on wine labels and found an obsession that has brought hours of fun, interesting friends, and more than a few evenings shared with other pet lovers.

It started with a wine from Rosenblum Cellars called *Chateau La Paws*. The label had paw prints all over it. I had no idea if they were cat or dog prints, but I couldn't rest until I had visited the winery, talked to the owner, and learned the story behind the paw prints on the wine label.

The Rosenblum prints were dog paws. Kent Rosenblum is a practicing veterinarian who also makes award-winning wine. He and his staff at the Cellars are all connected to dogs in some way. Their story inspired me to track down other wine labels with animals on them and learn their story.

I am a cat lover who shares my home with more cat fur than I care to admit. I was surprised how difficult it was to find a cat on a wine label. I've spent hours visiting wineries, surfing the Internet, and browsing wine store shelves searching

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for wine labels with cats. On my travels, I visit wineries, bottle shops, and I question local concierges, waiters, waitresses, sommeliers, and bartenders. The hunt has turned up a few "tales" that were well worth the search.

The first story takes us back to 1846. In the United States, Iowa had just been admitted as the 29th state. President Polk declared war on Mexico and General Zachary Taylor led our troops to battle. Britain was ruled by Queen Victoria. The potato famine raged in Ireland. Edgar Allen Poe published "The Cask of the Amontillado," and in France people were reading Alexander Dumas' "The Count of Monte Cristo." It was two years before gold was discovered in California, and two years before the second French Revolution began.

Unfortunately 1846 was almost 40 years before Ronald Ross received the Nobel Prize for identifying the mosquito as the carrier of malaria, which was a very bad thing for King Louis Philippe of France. France maintained a large military force in North Africa to protect its interests there. The French army was being decimated by malaria with symptoms of fatigue, chills, headaches, high fevers, vomiting, diarrhea and joint pain. The disease led to bouts of fever and anemia, clogged blood vessels and damaged vital organs, all of which could cause death if not treated quickly. France's troops dwindled day by day.

Quinine, a white, bitter-tasting powdery substance, was the only drug known to relieve the malaria symptoms. It was so bitter that the majority of French soldiers refused to take it. The French government offered a monetary reward to anyone who could find a delivery method acceptable to the soldiers and mask the taste of the quinine.

In Paris, Joseph Dubonnet, a chemist as well as a wine merchant, concocted a mixture of herbs, spices and botanicals indigenous to the Pyrenees Mountains that would successfully hide the bitter

taste when mixed with wine. He named his secret mixture *Quinquina Dubonnet*, a very refreshing new beverage that was a perfect aperitif, a before-dinner drink.

In addition to Dubonnet winning the prize from the government, and giving thousands of soldiers relief from their symptoms, his cocktail became an extremely popular aperitif in France and throughout the world. Before long Dubonnet was bottling more than three million bottles of his secret formula every year.

Dubonnet advertised his product on large posters distributed throughout the country and tacked on walls and sides of buildings. The posters were often illustrated by some of France's best-known artists of the time, such as Toulouse-Lautrec.

The first Dubonnet advertisement was a poster that featured one of Madame Dubonnet's precious cats. The next year the famed French poster artist, Jules Cheret, continued the cat theme in his first Quinquina Dubonnet poster. He posed a professional model in a striped green dress holding another of Madame's white cats wearing a bell on a red collar. The poster became so famous that the model, Miss Fleuron, began calling herself "The Girl with the Dubonnet Cat." The image has continued to be popular with poster collectors and is still one of the most sought after pieces of antique advertising. Although the advertisement depicted a bottle of Dubonnet in the model's left hand and a glass of the drink in her right, the cat received much more attention than the wine.

The white cat, minus the red collar, was used again on the next poster. This time the model wore a yellow dress and the bottle of Dubonnet in her hand almost hid the cat. Used in every Dubonnet advertisement, eventually the cat became so synonymous with the Dubonnet product that it was pictured on the label, where it remains to this day, on both the European and U.S. products.

Generally served on ice as a refreshing complement to meals, Dubonnet developed several recipes to further the popularity of his product, and increase the use and enjoyment of the aperitif by more people. Combined with club soda and a citrus twist, it becomes a cosmopolitan. When orange or cranberry juice is added to Dubonnet and ice, it is called a St. Tropez.

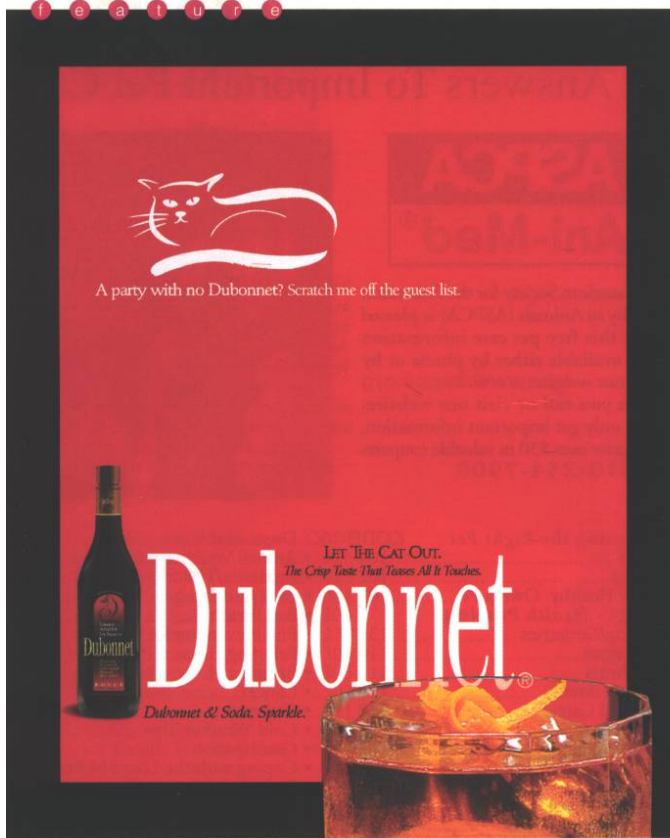
When the French colonized Indo-China, they introduced Dubonnet to the Vietnamese, and it became an integral part of their culture. Both the cat and the color red are traditional icons of fertility in Vietnamese society. Dubonnet is still served to Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American women as a restorative after childbirth.

Since 1993 Dubonnet has been exclusively imported, bottled and distributed in the United States by Heaven-Hill Distillery in Bardstown, Kentucky, by special agreement with Dubonnet France. Haven-Hill produces Dubonnet Rouge and Dubonnet Blanc under a strict secrecy agreement that maintains the integrity of the original potion developed by Dubonnet in 1846. The famous white cat still appears prominently under the Dubonnet banner.

Although we don't have to worry about drinking quinine to combat malaria (it's usually dispensed in capsule form these days), Dubonnet still contains quinine and is considered helpful for relieving foot and leg cramps.

According to Larry Kass, director of corporate communications, Haven-Hill is currently in the final process of releasing a new redesigned label for Dubonnet that more prominently displays the cat. "The cat on the current label is a stylized version of the cat on the old European label, which was itself based on the Dubonnet poster cat. The cat on the new label we are about to release is an even more stylized, liberally interpreted version," says Kass.

Kass also just announced a new ad




campaign debuting in September for Dubonnet America that focuses once again on the cat. The series of ads featuring the cat as the main creative element will run in magazines such as *Redbook*, *Bon Appetit*, and *Oprah*. The tag line will be "Let the Cat Out."

One clever advertisement features a stylized drawing of the cat with the headline "No Dubonnet? Scratch me off the guest list." Kass says, "It's the first time we've made the cat the focus of ads in America." Cat lovers will no doubt become reacquainted with Dubonnet.

Max L. Shapira, president of Heaven Hill Distilleries, sums up the incredible job that the little white cats have done in building their brand. "Dubonnet is the number one selling aperitif in the United States, and enjoys a history and tradition as rich and varied as its proprietary

blend of ingredients. It is a brand that is almost universally recognized and which has found a new following among today's consumers looking for lighter, more healthful spirits with a storied and classic heritage."

Well done little kitty cats.

Next Issue: The One-eyed Cat 

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Dubonnet = "Du-bone-a"

Heaven Hill Distilleries:
www.heaven-hill.com

Posters by Jules Cheret:
www.internationalposter.com/adetail.cfm?ArtistNumber=862