

Would you like some Chardonnay with your lingerie?

By Courtney Cochran, Wine Consultant and Sommelier

With names like Seduction and Go Girl Red and packaging more reminiscent of Cabaret costuming than traditional wine labeling, the latest debutants on the wine scene are custom tailored to appeal to the female set. Since a major wine consumption survey showed that women now comprise 60% of weekly wine drinkers and buy nearly 80% of all wine, marketers are scrambling to cash in on the female wine drinking demographic. This marks a decided change from traditional wine marketing, which until recently largely ignored female consumers and focused instead on staid product descriptors like a wine's grape variety and geographic origin. Now that women have been singled out as the wine consumers to target, marketers are changing their game, seeking to incorporate packaging and branding tactics commonplace in marketing for other women's products like cosmetics and lingerie but until now rarely seen on the wine scene.

Variations on the female theme can be observed aplenty amongst new releases, and are often apparent in a wine's flavor profile—some wineries have actually hired consumer research teams to discover what women want most from their wine, then instructed their winemakers to concoct wines accordingly—its packaging, or both. Napa Valley's O'Brien Family Vineyards set about to create a wine targeted to women in terms of both its taste and its appearance. The result is Seduction, a proprietary blend of Bordeaux grape varieties including Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot that comes wrapped in a suggestive sheer crimson gift bag. The wine, tricked out in its frothy feminine packaging, reminds me more of the gauzy confections found at Victoria's Secret than its old guard counterparts lining the shelves at most wine stores. But critics and consumers are apparently digging it, racy innuendos and all: venerable vino publication Wine Spectator awarded it 89 out of 100 points, and sales of the wine are reported brisk.

Another adventurous Napa Valley producer, Niebaum-Coppola, has released Sofia, a sparkling wine named after its owner's famous daughter, film director Sofia Coppola. The wine is available in traditional 750mL bottles or the faddish 187 mL can, à la soda pop. The winery's marketers dubbed the can version Mini and each comes replete with female-appropriate words like "effervescent" and "poetic" scrawled across its rose-colored background. The larger version is wrapped in a pink cellophane bag, and is available in a pink bubbly version as well as white. A plug for Sofia Mini on the winery's web site describes the concoction as "a distinctive blend as unconventional as the woman who inspired it, ...for the impromptu, impetuous, live passionately-for-the-moment kind of person".

If Mini's descriptor sounds to you more like a personal ad than a wine plug, it's no accident. Sofia's descriptor is a prime example of those being concocted by

today's wine marketers to appeal to women's unique decision making criteria. Chief among marketers' assumptions when crafting these descriptions is that women are more likely to respond favorably to emotional appeals than to Wine Advocate point scores. They're not far off, if you ask me, but critics feel they may have gone a little too far into the realm of the touchy-feely: some women are actually turned off by the overtly female-oriented messages wineries are sending. One wine-focused female blogger recently bashed Foster's Group, producers of low-calorie female-targeted White Lie wine, as myopic in its perception of the female wine drinking public. "Maybe I'm the rarity," self-dubbed "cultured wino" and blogger Tiffany B. Brown writes, "but I strongly suspect that women who drink wine care less about calories than they do about the experience of drinking wine." However, with wine sales amongst women continuing to grow, it's tough to argue with the rationale of the creators and marketers of chick wines like White Lie.

For those who can't wait until the lingerie-like packaging and come-hither copy on wine labels go the way of Hurricane Katrina, I can offer some solace. It turns out that other products initially focused on the male consumer experienced similar female-frenetic phases in their marketing once it was "discovered" that women actually have purchasing power too. Take cars, for example: whereas car marketing of old all but ignored women, today's car campaigns are replete with messages overtly seeking the buy-in of women. Volvo's YCC, or Your Concept Car, was created by women, for women—but is also supposed to appeal to men, adds its corporate communications rep. Just as auto manufacturers are aiming to target both genders, I anticipate a similar correction amongst wine marketing once a middle ground is discovered that will facilitate appeal to both sexes. At the end of the day, unlike lingerie or cosmetics, the female wine consumer doesn't want to wear her wine, she wants to drink it. Cheers to *that*.