

DESIGNER LABELS

A monthly critique of wine packaging
by Jonathan Bain

Tamboerskloof Syrah 2006: R92.30



Kinetic artist Justin Fiske and I are sitting on the ramparts of the Castle of Good Hope staring out at The Mountain. He pours me another sake cup of Tamboerskloof Syrah 2006, and we both lean contentedly against centuries-old stone.

As spectacular as the setting is, however, this isn't our first choice of venue. Somewhat confusingly, the manager of the Castle's restaurant has decided that, today, lunch will last from 13:00 to 13:20. It seems he has other things to do.

"But...but...2010...international service levels...hordes of German tourists...Euros bulging out of their Lederhosen..."

I even use the word "outrageous" at least three times. The manager's having none of it, though. The closing time has been written on the blackboard, and that's that.

Fiske is, however, indefatigable. A quick rummage through his on-site studio yields a bottle opener and the sake cups – booty from his exhibition in Japan last year. In less than ten minutes, we're toasting our triumph over inexplicable bureaucracies. Then Fiske turns quite serious, as he inspects the bottle at hand.

"I know this label seems very simple, but it couldn't have been done any other way. Someone who really understands typography has produced this; someone who understands the limitations of a computer; someone, I think, who's prepared to fight to maintain their design integrity."

A sip.

"There are an infinite number of wrong places to position the text, but it's been centred perfectly. You can tell a machine to do that for you, and it will measure it out, but

it won't feel right in the space. Not like this. This is very nerdy indeed. Respect!"

I ask which typeface it is, but we can't pin it down. It looks like a classic – Times Roman or Garamond – but it's been subtly individualised. The colour is also not quite black but rather a soft, chocolate brown. It's almost as if it's been soaked up by the humble, uncoated paper stock.

"The whole thing has been crafted to look accidental. It's a nod from the past, and I bet it stands out on the shelf next to all the frilliness. It reminds me a bit of Muji, the brandless brand." (I had to look it up, too).

Fiske points out the few "modern" concessions: the barcode ("the death of the aesthetic"), the reference to sulphites, and the warning label. These minor blemishes, however, serve only to reinforce an overall sense of medieval elegance.

Fiske: "It makes me think that what's inside is really worth something."

We talk all too briefly about his latest work, and it becomes clear why he's so enjoying the label. "It's all about distillation. I pare my sculptures down, not so much to reject technology, but to rail against compromise...and unnecessary consumerism. I mean, there are things I regret before I even buy them, like airtime and petrol and Christmas presents."

A wry smile, and a nod to Tamboerskloof: "But I wouldn't regret a bottle of this." ■

Justin Fiske is a kinetic sculptor and winner of the People's Choice Award at the most recent Spier Contemporary Biennale. Jonathan Bain is a copywriter.

Label verdict: Sparse. Impeccable. 5/5