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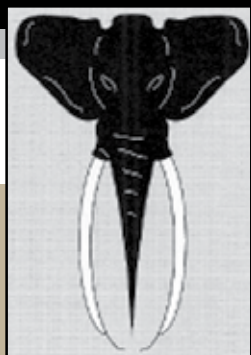
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Straight from the Rack

Un passion por la vin

By Michael Lang and Brian Kofke

Does the shape of a wine bottle matter? Can it influence my selection of wine? Mais oui, mes amis. The size and shape of the bottle can actually help us recognize a great deal about the grapes and the taste of the wine inside.

But first, even the glass bottle has its story. Some three to four thousand years ago, glass vessels were used by the Sumerians, considered the first civilization in human history. Thousands of years later, the idea was put to practical use for the wine industry in Europe. Originally wine was carried around in animal skins or an "amphorae" (large, long jars made by the Greeks).

In 1635 by proclamation of King James I, all glass makers were to use coal instead of wood, which was depleting the forests, for their source of heat. The coal fires produced a much hotter flame and therefore a thicker glass which was better for transporting. Sir Kenelm Digby became "the father of the modern wine bottle" when he began using a blower, like a large bellows, to create a wind tunnel to fuel the coal thus increasing the heat. This process gave the bottles a somewhat consistent shape, especially in neck size, which helped in corking the bottles.

Different sizes and shapes were employed to store and transport wine - the choice being dictated by common sense and practicality. Later the choice indicated the region of origin. Bottles were made with coined seals showing a coat of arms blown into the glass to indicate individual growing regions and the family who produced the wine. Not until the 1800s was the size and shape of the glass bottle standardized by use of the mold.

How can all this help us choose a bottle of wine? Using this historical background, let's consider the shape of the bottle. A high shouldered bottle is characteristic of Bordeaux. These wines tend to have some sediment in the vessel because of the vinification process used in production. The sediment adds to the tannins necessary in the flavor profile and in the aging process. When the contents of a Bordeaux is poured, these sediments will gather in the shoulder of the bottle rather than your glass or decanter. Traditionally, all these wines are in bottles with high shoulders which helps easily identify the wine. The grape varieties indigenous to Bordeaux are Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon wine. Whether the wines made from these grapes originate in California, Argentina, Italy, or France, they are found in your local store in bottles with high shoulders.

Wines from the regions of Burgundy and Rhone are identified by the sloped-shouldered bottle. Once again, the shape of the bottle is characteristic to the wine of the individual region. Burgundy produces Pinot Noir and Chardonnay wines. The Rhone valley is known for their Grenache and Syrah blends. These varieties can be found in slope-shouldered bottles.



The tall, thin and green bottles known as the "Hoch" emanate from Alsace and Germany. This bottle shape must have been common sense in the region for shipping and storage purposes. Now, the tall, thin, green shape allows us to pick out a Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Blanc or Pinot Gris with ease and confidence.

The shape of the Champagne bottle is a different story all together. Champagne bottles are identified by a "punt" or dimple in the bottom of the bottle. The shape and depth of the "punt" indicates the strength of the vessel which is important because it contains a highly pressurized substance. The "punt" also adds stability to the glass. It does not dictate the quality in the bottle. Originally it was employed in the glass blowing process to insure a flat bottom surface so the bottle would not tip over easily.

These concepts of identifying wines by the shape of the bottle are very general. Many of the shapes were initiated early in Europe for marketing purposes. As the wine industry grows and influences change, we find variations throughout the wine world. Outside of Alsace, there are no hard rules to be followed in bottling wine. The point is that you, the consumer, have an idea of what the contents are in each bottle just by looking at the shape. This makes for a more educated selection on your next purchase.

Cheers