

top shelf

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feature

> SHRINK-TO-FIT LABELS: **A Client's Perspective**

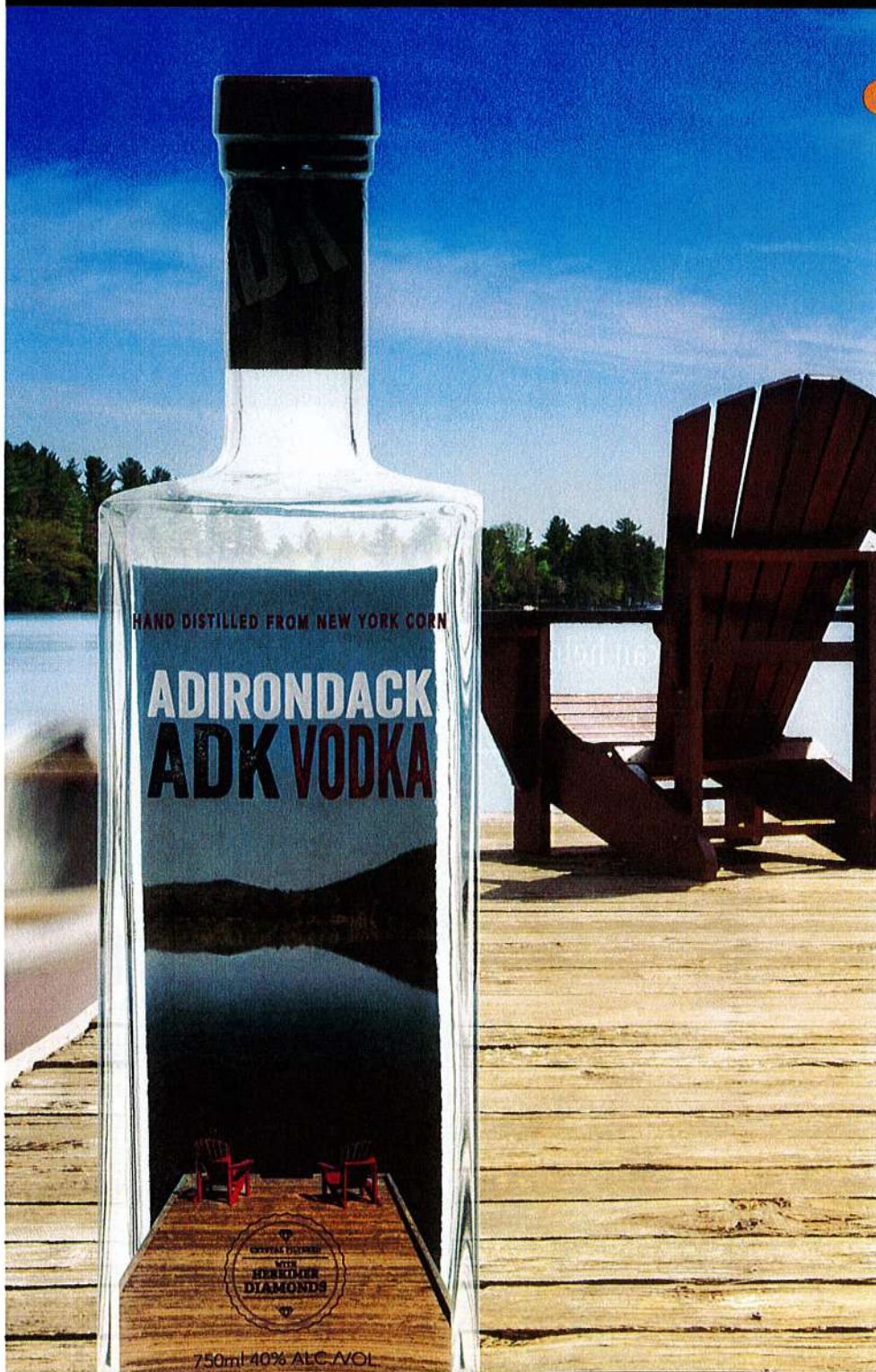
By Antonia Aurelio

Adirondack Distilling in upstate New York has employed shrink sleeves since opening in late 2012. The company produces vodka, gin, bourbon, and whiskey. "For our vodka and gin designs, we wanted something similar to Fiji water," says Jordan Karp, distiller and co-owner. "But painting or screening that type of image onto the bottles was too expensive for our small company. We worked with Syracuse Label & Surround Printing and Waterloo Container to find a solution.

"Shrink sleeves were the answer for us," he continues. "The art is striking and the turnaround was much quicker than we expected. We also like to keep things local, so it's great that the companies we're working with are so close by."

Initial challenges included keeping the image from distorting on the company's odd-shaped bottles. "We had to use reverse-curve text to get it to look right," says Karp. "We also had to take steps to ensure national standards were met. Syracuse really helped with all that." The result? The company's shrink-sleeved products are expected to grow by double digits this year.

To learn more about shrink and wrap labels, read "The Perfect Fit" on page 44.



The Perfect Fit



DRIVEN BY THE CRAFT BEER MARKET, SHRINK SLEEVES ARE ALL THE RAGE WHEN IT COMES TO SMALL RUNS AND 360-DEGREE GRAPHICS.

By Antonia Aurelio

With so many small producers in the wine, beer, spirits, and cider markets, standing out from the crowd is top of mind. One way to do so is with shrink sleeve technology, which offers virtually unlimited creativity regarding graphics, look, and feel. The biggest market for this has been craft beer, but other types of producers are discovering and employing it due to its suitability for small runs. Easiest for canned beverages, shrink sleeves are also suitable for glass bottles of any shape and size.



Shrink labels are popular for small batch and specialty products, because packaging can be created in limited runs. Far left: A selection of wine labels designed by Innovative Labeling Solutions. [Photos courtesy ILS]



WHAT IS A SHRINK SLEEVE?

Shrink sleeves are a type of label that's printed onto flat film, cut to size, then placed into a heat tunnel that shrinks them onto containers. They offer 360-degree, high-resolution graphic capabilities as well as unlimited color combinations and texture styles including foils, matte or spot varnish, and beyond. Within the alcohol beverage industry, they're applied to empty cans or bottles, as heat would adversely affect the product in most cases. They're especially attractive to those producing seasonal offerings or specialty, small-run items, as order minimums are much lower due to digital technology.

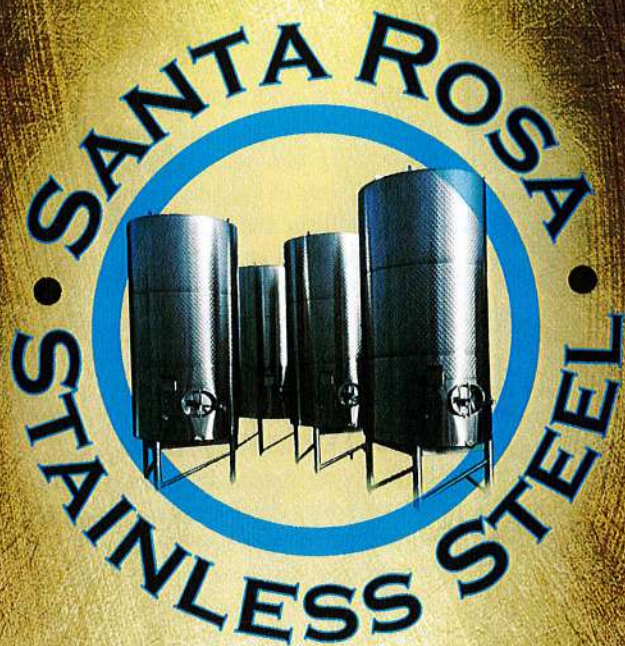
CREATING A SHRINK SLEEVE LABEL

The first step toward a successful shrink sleeve product is selecting a printer who understands its end use (container shape, type, application, contents) and who can guide you through graphic preparation to create a design best suited for your product. "[Sleeves] offer a versatile packaging option, as they can fit almost any container shape," says Kristen Waite, marketing director for Hamilton, Ohio-based Innovative Labeling Solutions (ILS). "They're common for craft breweries, but they're also growing in popularity for wineries, distilleries, and household product markets."

ILS began as a flexographic label printer in 1996, moved into the digital space for labels and flexible packaging in 2005, and began printing shrink sleeves in 2008. "Digital offers the most affordable way to customize packaging, because you can easily change graphics without a high minimum order requirement or up-front tooling costs," says Waite. "It's perfect for limited edition, specialty releases and for combatting inventory obsolescence. With sleeves, in particular, we were inspired by the opportunity to use 360-degree messaging, maximizing real estate at the retail shelf and increasing engagement between the consumer and the product."

She continues, "[Sleeves] have to be designed correctly or the graphics can get distorted after application." ILS clients interested in adopting the process are asked about particular needs, including container type and shape, as well as applicator

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ements. "From there, the timeline
ject-based. The process for standard
like 12- and 16-ounce cans, is typically
streamlined, because we can use ready-
templates," says Waite.

r custom bottle sizes, we ask the client
il us samples so we can determine
material recommendations and
le a turnaround estimate based
ject specifications. Then we print
lm and have it shrunk to the actual
ner. The results are used to develop an
nplate for the client's designer to use."
idea is to enable print customization
cking down barriers to entry,
larly for small and emerging brands.
way to bridge the gap between the
and physical world," says Waite, who
sizes the importance of consulting
printer to ensure specific needs are
todd.

doesn't apply the labels, and most
rands don't have the equipment to do
is, application is often done by mobile
g operators.

Cameron, national sales manager
Label Systems (which has 11
cturing plants nationwide), notes
-digit growth since MPI started
g shrink sleeve services seven
go. "Our decision to offer shrink
services was customer-driven," says
on. "They were looking at uniquely
containers and needed more

flexibility for custom packaging."

MPI's largest customer base for beverage
shrink sleeves is the wine industry, yet
Cameron says the trend is taking off in the
craft beer and cider markets as well. "When
clients approach us, we discuss whether
they're new or established, and if their design
agency can send us artwork to make sure we
can execute the design.

"We also discuss graphic expectations
of various treatments, such as cold foil,
holographic patterns, gloss levels, or perhaps
black-out labels [to cover other graphics
that might already be on the containers].
We guide our customers through the entire
process. One example is wine bottles. We
collaborate during the design process to
ensure design elements don't fall into high
shrink areas, such as the stem of the bottle,
and cause distortion issues."

Finally, he says, "The shape of the
container dictates the design. We ask
everyone where they want to be in two to five
years so we can calculate the lowest possible
price without sacrificing quality. In the end,
it's the appearance that's the most important
aspect regarding quality. It's what makes
consumers pick it up."

Cameron adds if you're considering
purchasing equipment for applying shrink
sleeves to wine bottles or aluminum cans,
MPI recommends steam, because it provides
uniform temperatures and better heat
transfer.

APPLYING TO CANS

David Racino, co-founder and CEO of
Austin-based American Canning, started
his company in 2012 as a mobile canning
operation for beer. Today, it has three
divisions: mobile (Texas only), equipment
sales, and cans and supplies sales. "We focus
on making the process affordable for small
producers," he says.

The company began applying shrink
sleeves to cans about two years ago. "The
client orders sleeved cans and we send a
template to their designer, which includes
requirements and tips for printing on cans,"
says Racino. "Once the design template
returns, it goes to prepress to create a PDF
for approval. The shrink labels are printed
on flat film that gets converted into a tube,
then cut to size and placed on the cans.
The shrink sleeving production line [label
applicator and heat tunnel] can complete
more than 230 shrink-sleeved cans per
minute."

He says the process takes about four to
five weeks once the design is approved, so
it's popular not only for small runs but also
larger ones because the turnaround is faster
than traditional printed labels. Once the
labels are applied, the cans are repacked
and shipped to the beverage producer on
specially protected pallets via a special
partner to protect them from damage.

Racino adds that he's seen a growing
client base surrounding canned spirits such

as premixed cocktails, as well as wine and nonalcoholic beverages. The company also does promotional and seasonal cans as well as a lot of specialty cans for special events and music festivals.

APPLYING TO BOTTLES

Waterloo Container, based in upstate New York, is a family-owned glass bottle supplier with a goal of helping small to mid-sized producers grow their business through customization. The company has employed shrink sleeve technology for more than five years. “We purchased a high-speed applicator last year due to enormous growth,” says Bobbi Stebbins, marketing director. “Clients wanted to differentiate themselves, and we saw shrink sleeves as a way to create packaging that stands out on the shelf.”

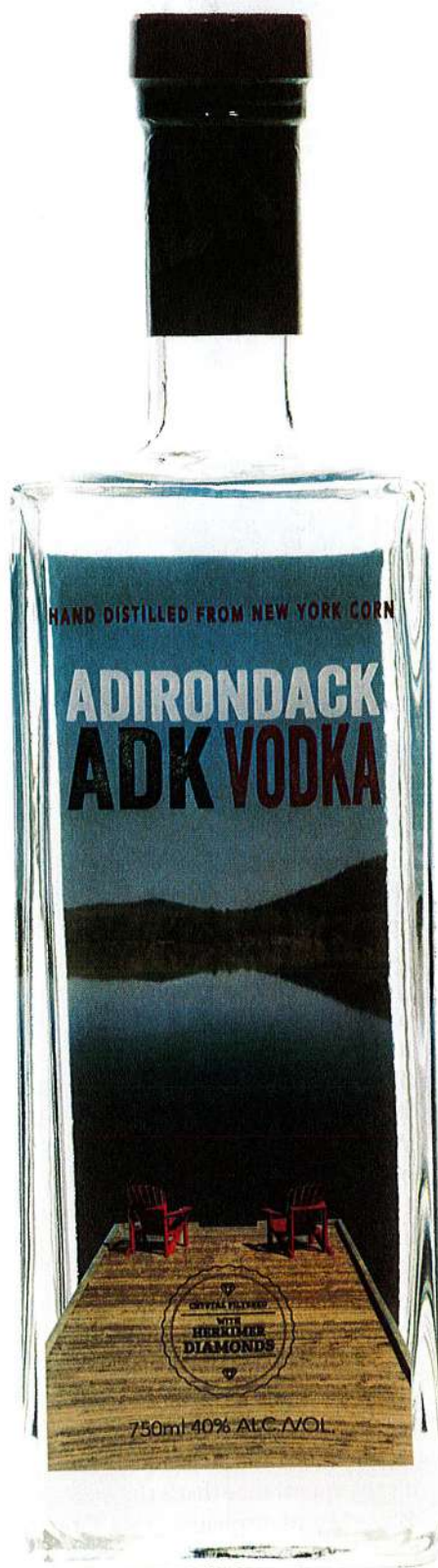
Waterloo supplies the glass and shrink sleeve application, and otherwise works with clients’ designers to facilitate the sleeve process. “Shrink label cost may start out slightly more than paper labels, but the cost is equalized, since you gain valuable design space and remove the labor costs associated with paper labeling,” says Stebbins. “Things like holographic imagery, foil, cut outs, glitter and texture cost more, but those things appeal to the senses—and 85 percent of the time, if customers pick up a bottle, they’ll buy it.”

Because shrink sleeves are so popular now, Waterloo is adding a 37,000-square-foot building to increase production space. “It’s a substantial investment, but we know it’s worth it,” says Stebbins.

And since shrink sleeves work with any bottle shape, the possibilities are endless. “Another unique thing is, you can use a less expensive bottle and put a sleeve on it to make it look more upscale,” she adds.

POSSIBILITIES AND GROWTH

If you’re a new or established producer looking for small or seasonal/promotional runs, the shrink sleeve market is something to consider. It offers a quick way to create eye-catching graphics and multiple textures so products will stand out on the shelves — and its double-digit growth in popularity across the marketplace means the technology is here to stay. 🍷



Above: Adirondack Distilling in upstate New York worked with Syracuse Label & Surround Printing and Waterloo Container to create a label that captured the beauty of its home region. [Photo courtesy Waterloo]; Right: A sampling of wrapped cans from American Canning [Photo courtesy American Canning]

