



THE MAKING OF
MONA

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A BRAND WITH BOTTLE

I spoke to a number of marketers, maybe three or four different groups, before I spoke to Leigh. And he was the first one that said 'pour me a beer. . . this is great beer, we can sell this'. None of the other guys were interested in what the beer tasted like.

DAVID WALSH

ANOTHER, QUITE DIFFERENT TYPE OF LABEL WOULD

have a critical influence on the conception of MONA. In the creation of labels for David's new Moo Brew beers and the relaunch of Moorilla wines, one can glimpse the beginnings of MONA's orientation and aesthetic. It was a story told to me by MONA's Creative Director, Leigh Carmichael, who was drafted in specifically to work on the Moo Brew labels and then went on to work with David to create MONA's brand.

A craft brewery was one of the first things Walsh had added to the winery he'd purchased from Claudio Alcorso. Claudio had planted the vines, established the Moorilla wine brand and set up a dining and function centre at the winery. David had extended and improved these enterprises considerably, with the Moorilla Museum of Antiquities opening in 1999, the guest pavilions opening in 2000 and the Ether function building opening in 2005. Leigh Carmichael impressed on me how Moo Brew beer was David's first stab at significant creativity and the launching of a product of his own.

I can remember supervising a student thesis on the culture of beer in Australia around that time. I'd lived in England before, during and after the revolutionary Campaign for Real Ale (begun in 1971), and had been astonished to find that there were barely any craft beers in Australia when I arrived in 1991, and that the beer market was dominated by a few high-volume commercial breweries. The thesis tried to explain the absence of craft beers in Australia in light of the fact that they had dominated recent beer history in Europe, North America and elsewhere.

There are now over 1000 craft beer-makers in Australia, although they still only produce two per cent of the beer consumed. (The Australian Craft Beer Industry Association is a toddler that only

formed in 2011.) Moo Brew was one of the pioneers in the field, and was launched by an outsider with very little to go on except a gut instinct and a love of good beer. When Carmichael was taken on to do the designs for the labels, a pilsner, a pale ale and a wheat beer had been conceived and trialled and David had chosen the bottle, a somewhat radical miniature champagne shape.

David owned a sculpture of three stacked cows by John Kelly and thought it would make a good artwork for the label, so Kelly was asked for permission. Kelly told David the idea was 'trite' and suggested that he commission some new artworks from him instead, which he did. Leigh picks up the story:

John Kelly was having a war with the Australia Council over the corporatisation and branding of art in Australia. The Australia Council had just spent about two hundred grand on a style guide on how to use their logo, and how better branding will somehow improve the art in

Australia. And Kelly thought they were treating art in Australia like a business, like a corporate thing: you need to do this and you can't do that. So he started making art based on that idea. He 'borrowed' Sidney Nolan's Boy and the Moon, which is a famous abstract work, well before its time, and he got the OzCo logo and he butchered it and connected it to this work to create a series of new works.

The three works that Kelly offered Moo Brew were large abstract pieces that fit well with the Moo Brew project. They had a pop-culture feel to them; they referenced Nolan (who was being collected in depth by David and was going to feature strongly at MONA); and the story of the works' creation was very MONA – cheeky, ballsy, unruly, maverick and value-driven. Leigh explains:

BELOW: The brewery at
MONA





First of all he turned their corporate identity into an artwork. Those artworks were for sale. And then by selling [them] to us, a brewery, and allowing the work to be used on a corporate product in the commercial world, he went full circle. And the Australia Council, you know, wouldn't speak to him!

ABOVE: Controversial labels for the new Moo Brew beers

On the Australia Council website, the 'Logos' page explicitly forbids you to 'rearrange the elements of the logo'.¹ Kelly rearranged them all. If you look on the pilsner label (far left), for example, you can see that *The Boy and the Moon* image has been turned into the rear end of a cow, with the Australia Council circle motif used to give it spots and the ears of its kangaroo used to differentiate the hooves. A similar mash-up happens on the other labels, and comes out very clearly despite the small scale. Which is just as well, because Carmichael had serious doubts about the original stacked cow idea.

The labels offered the very first hints of a MONA 'look'. The works are moodily lit against a dark background, and there's no text, no direct sell. The labels aren't telling you to drink the beer or using words to persuade, they merely show you the artworks. This was the lesson learned by Benson & Hedges when cigarette advertising was banned: you don't need all that advertising verbiage. They used the abstract, indirect and surreal photography of Brian Duffy instead.² It wasn't important to even show the product if you could evoke its structure of feeling; in fact it was more powerful.³ On the front of the Moo Brew bottle, only the name of the beer type is legible: it's all you need, so it's all you get.

NOT SUITABLE FOR BOGANS

What we might now consider a compelling product design wasn't always appreciated. Back in 2008, this Moo Brew branding was very nearly scrapped. The Moorilla business managers had hired some marketing people at around the same time that Leigh came on board, though David had already more or less decided everything – the name of the beer, Moo Brew; the shape of the bottle; and the label artwork. According to Leigh, the new marketing staff steadfastly opposed all three decisions, saying that the name carried the association of milk, not beer; that the bottle shape was associated with champagne, and women rather than men; and the art would appeal to the 'wrong' sort of men ('proper beer-drinkers don't do conceptual art').

To Leigh and David, the entire concept was ironic and cool, and they were aware of a different kind of person who was then drinking new-style beers. However, their advisers envisaged a disaster in the making and wanted to play it safe. They were so confident David would eventually see reason that they arranged for 'normal' bottles to be acquired without his knowledge.

Walsh hadn't imagined himself marketing the beer to the standard Australian bloke – he was looking to sell it as the most expensive beer

brand on the market to people for whom art and a newly designed bottle might have cultural appeal. With this in mind, Leigh came up with the slogan, 'Not suitable for bogans'. To me, this is the first recognisable instance of one of MONA's characteristic voices, but it fell on deaf ears with the marketing people. Leigh recalls:

I came up with that, but once again it caused a shit fight internally. It didn't even get to David. That was one thing that I didn't work on with him, but the marketers stuck it up on their wall and then apparently David walked in about six months later and saw it . . . and said, 'That's fucking perfect, we're doing that.' And they were like, 'Yeah . . .' So they were quite embarrassed. So they came back and said, 'David likes your slogan . . . it looks like we're going on with it.' That's how that one worked. It was that reverse psychology thing: we decided that no one really thinks they're a bogan, so it really wasn't going to offend anyone.

It was silly, but funny and clever, the perfect kind of beer joke for the people they wanted to sell beer to. It played not on who they were or where they came from, but on what they *aspired* to be. Which was to be different. And drink better beer.

In the end, Walsh held his nerve and ignored his marketing advisers. And Moo Brew was a runaway success straight out of the traps (taps?) in 2006, with all three beers winning awards at the 2006 Australian Beer Awards and the wheat beer winning Best Australian Wheat Beer. Leigh Carmichael picked up Best Packaging Award at the Australian International Beer Awards that year, beating over 200 other new beer labels from around the world.

Moo Brew thereafter ran at full capacity, selling out every year. In 2011, it invested in a new plant that would double its output to in excess of 160000 litres a year. It's still sold from champagne bottles (and kegs) and it still costs more than the average beer. It was an important part of the mainstreaming of craft beer, at least for the younger generation.

The commercial success of Moo Brew changed David Walsh too, and prepared him for the bigger task of designing and launching MONA



ABOVE: **Not suitable for bogans.** This was the perfect catchphrase for Moo Brew, and it appeared on t-shirts, ashtrays, bottles and packaging – all of which are now highly collectable

– or at least, the people I spoke to who were close to him thought so. The Moo Brew story is something of a MONA story writ small. David wanted to create something new, and found himself challenging the way things were done, the established social norms and entrenched patterns of taste. Even though he had the financial clout to make things happen, he didn't want to become a laughing-stock, so it *was* a risk.

Moo Brew's success also consolidated Carmichael and Walsh as a partnership that would be significant in the creative genesis of MONA. David had been the source of most of the core cre-

ative ideas and even the structure of his projects, but he needed to be able to communicate them in a particularly winning way *precisely* because he was seeking to distinguish new ideas from all the others on the shelf. Carmichael, and later Elizabeth Pearce, would create that communication.

Soon after the Moo Brew branding, David showed Leigh his plans for MONA and asked if he was interested in working on it. Leigh couldn't wait for the new challenge – after all, his alternative was to continue working in conventional marketing and the world of conventional taste. It was the chance of a lifetime. Their brand objective, as they came to define it, was 'to position MONA at the forefront of contemporary cultural experience, attract visitors nationally and internationally, engender curiosity, be accessible and thought provoking'. It was quite a leap from a beer brand to MONA; but both had integrity, both were heady.