

HIGH PLAINS READER 2010

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Box Wines Don't Always Have to Suck

By Nikki Berglund
Staff Writer

As much as I love the whole pomp and circumstance of uncorking a nice bottle and experiencing that first magnificent whiff of wine, I can't help but feel a twinge of guilt later as I am forced to relive my debauchery while unloading the empties at the recycling center. Okay, to be fair, I also feel guilt because it is really my amazing husband Paul who takes care of most of the hauling and the dumping.

Thankfully, these days I am hearing more and more about environmentally friendly wine packaging and fortunately not just for the crappy wines anymore. A couple of weeks ago I did an article on the Tetra Pak, a great juice-box-style, single-serving or liter container for wine. If you are looking for a little more than a "single serving" (I am personally unfamiliar with this concept), then box wine is another green option. In the past, the only examples of these types of wines were five-liter boxes of brands such as Franzia and Almaden, not the worst but certainly not the best (sorry Mom!). But there is light at the end of the tunnel...

For the past few weeks, the buzz around winetown has been all about the new Octavin Home Wine Bar System. Although they have been over in Minnesota for about a month now, they arrived in our market just last week. The makers of Octavin have decided to take the bag-in-a-box or BIB concept and kick it up a notch. The idea is to offer the consumer "premium artisan wines" in the box. Their target is the over-\$20 box wine market which might seem steep until you figure that there are four bottles of premium wine in each three-liter container. After being opened, they are supposed to stay fresh for up to six weeks due to the patent-pending, vacuum-packed bag which allows no air to touch the wine. Currently there are ten wines from four different countries being tested in the U.S. market. Some are familiar names that are available already in the 750ML glass format and some I had never heard of. Although I have not had a chance to try them all, so far the ones I have sampled are promising.

The Octavin HWB system is a proud member of Better Wines Better World which has a really informative website about the wine industry initiative to create more environmentally friendly wines. Although it did make me feel a bit guiltier about one of my favorite pastimes, I learned a ton from this site and highly suggest you check it out at betterwinesbetterworld.com. I learned that BIB packages reduce waste by 92% and emissions by 55%. Also there is 85% less landfill waste per bottle. Since transportation of wine accounts for a large portion of the waste associated, it makes sense that this format produces less than one half of the carbon footprint than the same amount in a glass bottle produces.

As far as recognizable wine names go, the ones that struck me first were the Big House wines. These guys (and gals—the winemaker is a female) have been doing innovative things with wine for quite some time. Their Big House White and Red blends are popular and high-quality wines for not a whole lot of money. The red is a "fruit bomb," while the white is a lively and refreshing blend, just right for a hot summer day at the lakes.

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From the winemakers of Pinot Evil comes a Pinot Grigio and a Pinot Noir that have also been in the market for a number of years now, and have also done quite well in the less-environmental bottle. Interestingly, these wines come from Hungary. Although he is also the head winemaker for a popular California brand, Concannon, Hungarian-born Julian Halasz, with his partner on this project, Mario Pulido, goes back to his roots by creating these wines with the help of Hungary's microclimates and old-world winemaking processes.

The California contributions to this project, a Central Coast Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon, come from the Monthaven Winery. The winemaker, Jeff Yamamoto, with over 30 years of experience, is known mostly for his work in the over-\$20 per bottle tier. From Boho Vineyards, a well known California winery comes an Old Vine Zinfandel. This wine is food friendly and has fairly high alcohol levels without being too overpowering on the palette.

There is also a Sauvignon Blanc from Marlborough, New Zealand contributed by Silver Birch Vineyards. The tenth wine is the most interesting to me, and one I can see serving at our next barbeque. From Osborne Vineyards comes a red blend from Spain, called Seven, "a fantastic blend of the best of Spain's wine structure, soft tannins and earthy complexity, combined with New World fruit flavors and approachability." Osborne is a Spanish company with generations of winemaking on its side, so this should be a good one.

What is nice about this innovative collaboration is the variety of wines and styles of wine, which offer something to just about everyone. As romantic as it is to uncork and decant a nice bottle of wine, what is not so romantic is the waste. I do not ever want to see wine in a bottle go away, but for those of us who pretty much drink wine on a daily basis, is it so bad to find a box wine of high enough quality that we can drink it without gagging? I think not.