

Tacky No More: Making Boxed Wine Look Chic

By SHARON KAPNICK Saturday, Jun. 12, 2010



From left: Monthaven Winery Chardonnay; Wineberry Bordeaux
From left: Octavin Home Wine Bar; Joseph Lin



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Mass-produced wine bottles were a great innovation in the 1600s — the heavy glass was easier to cork and easier to ship than clay or stone jugs. But it wasn't until four centuries later that winemakers started experimenting with eco-friendlier packaging, in the form of boxed wine. These rectangular juice-boxes-on-steroids not only cost less to ship but also use vacuum-sealed bags to keep vino tasting fresh for up to six weeks after opening. The main drawback to boxed wine? It looks tacky.

Not tacky enough, mind you, to keep the frugally minded and environmentally conscious from buying it. According to market researcher Nielsen, sales of 3-liter box table wine increased 19.9% during the year ending April 3, while sales of overall table wine edged up just 3.5%. But savvy producers are trying to widen their appeal with a second generation of boxes that look a whole lot nicer sitting on a counter or in a fridge for a month and a half. **(See reviews of 50 American wines.)**

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Another cleverly designed boxed-wine innovation is using wood to replace the cardboard boxes. Wineberry America's Berry Boxes are crafted with wood from sustainable forests and, after the wine is finished, can be turned into bird feeders or lunch boxes. These \$33-\$49 boxes of Bordeaux, Burgundy, Beaujolais and Rhone wines started hitting boutique shops last July, and immediate strong sales surprised just about everyone. As with conventional boxed wine, these 3-liter wooden cases come with a collapsible plastic bladder inside. The bag deflates as wine is dispensed, preventing oxygen, which spoils wine, from reaching it.

And last but not least comes California's popular Red Truck, which last year started selling its Chardonnay and its highly regarded red blend in mini-barrels that are made of recyclable plastic that looks like wood. In their first nine months, more than 300,000 of these 3-liter barrels, at a suggested retail price of \$29.99 a pop, were sold. The patent-pending Opti-Flow bottom of the barrel slopes from back to front, creating an incline that delivers wine to the spout with no tipping necessary — even for the last few glasses.

(Read a story on whether French colleges should give kids wine classes.)

In addition to being creatively designed, most of these wines capture a sense of place — some are from prestigious regions in France that are rarely found in cask in the U.S.

"The packaging attracts people, but it's really about the wine," says Adam Richardson, director of international winemaking for Underdog Wines. "The effort and focus we put into \$15 bottles is the same as the effort and focus we put into the Octavin wines." Indeed, what distinguishes his portfolio — and Red Truck's and Wineberry's — from other boxed wine is the grapes. For example, blending expert Georgetta Dane has used up to 24 different grape varieties in the Big House Red she puts into Octavin cylinders, and many of the grapes in the Boho Zinfandel hail from 100-year-old vines. In the end, quality, not aesthetics, is the reason why Richardson calls the new crop of boxed wine "the alternative to the alternative."