

Cask wines are gaining cachet as products improve

Portability is a plus with wine in a box

Aromatic and nicely balanced, this pleasing wine shows wild berry, fresh herb and lightly earthy flavors. All estate-grown, organic grapes. Don't be fooled by the small carton; it holds a third more than a regular glass bottle of wine. (Distributed by Triage and Pacific Rim Wines)

WINE PACKAGING continues to evolve in myriad fascinating directions, and much of it makes good common sense. New closures have fewer taint problems, new nonglass packages often are more environmentally friendly and less expensive. What they have lacked (mostly) is cachet, but that, too, is changing.

These days, it's good to be green, and getting easier. Wines in cartons and boxes have moved up from the jug-wine-in-a-bag phase (mostly 5-liter faux chablis, etc.) to 3-liter varietals, vintage dated, and even smaller, more portable but equally handy 1.5-liter and 1-liter packages.

Australia led the way with these bag-in-box (or cask) wines, which feature a pouring spout and a collapsible plastic bag that keeps the wine fresh for as long as a month. California jumped in next, and now box wines and wines in smaller cartons can be found from around the world, many quite good.

The big plusses, apart from the environmental benefits, are that you get more wine for your money, you can enjoy as little as a glass a day and keep it fresh, you don't have glass to recycle, and the smaller cartons are great for backpacking, boating or any outdoor situation where glass can be dangerous.

These box wines are often stamped with a "packaged on" date, a useful guarantee of freshness. They have explicit instructions (on the bottom of the box) for opening, and very few have any problems with the functionality of the airtight bag or the dripless spout.

There are other advantages. The rectangular boxes are easy to stack and store, and may be kept on a kitchen counter (best for red wines) or in the fridge (for whites). Once chilled, they hold their temperature longer than bottles, a plus on a picnic, a boat trip or a hike. They are surprisingly light considering how much they hold, and they do not require a corkscrew or any special tool to open.

Most of us are well-accustomed to the size of a standard wine bottle — 750 ml — and a carton may not look as if it holds as much wine as it does. Note that a 1-liter package contains a third more wine than a regular bottle. A 1.5-liter package is a magnum; a 3-

liter package a double magnum (four regular bottles). So if you are paying around \$20 for your 3-liter bag-in-box, that's your basic five-buck chuck — only with better wine.

Some reliable brands among these larger packages are the cask wines from Hardys Stamp, Banrock Station, Black Box (\$17), Delicato's Bota Box, Casarsa and **La Vieille Ferme Côtes du Ventoux** (\$20). A new offering (not yet tasted) is a 2008 Cèdre 'Heritage' Malbec from southern France. It will retail for \$20. Washington Hills offers several Washington wines; the best is the riesling.

In the smaller, juice-style cartons, you do not have the advantage of the collapsible bag, so the wine will not last as long. But you can find some good choices, especially in the 1-liter size, that will provide up to eight glasses of wine per carton. Three Thieves Bandit wines come in 500 ml cartons; the pinot grigio is especially nice. A Bandit Washington riesling is also in the works.

Revelry is a homegrown line of cylindrical bag-in-box wines, offering Columbia Valley chardonnay, merlot and cabernet sauvignon at roughly \$20 for a 1.5-liter carton. I preferred the reds, which are simple, hearty and quite toasty.

A new discovery is yellow+blue, in 1-liter cartons that feature wines from Argentina and Spain. Vintage-dated and organically grown, these sell for \$8 to \$10 and are very well made. The Argentine torrontés is soft and fruity, with lime and pineapple; the Spanish rosé, dry and pleasingly tart. The malbec is my Pick of the Week.

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