

For everyday wine, it's finally OK to think inside the box

by Braiden Rex-Johnson

When I told my professional wine colleagues that I was writing about boxed wines and asked for their favorites, almost to a person they looked at me in horror and assured me they didn't drink *those* kinds.

Only one slightly more charitable person, the communications director of a large Washington winery, explained that although her company didn't make them, she had heard there were some good ones out there.

I'm happy to report, she was right.

Boxed wines, which their manufacturers prefer we refer to as "cask wines" or "premium casks," are one of the fastest-growing segments in the wine trade. Ryan Sproule, a California vintner and founder of Black Box Wines, believed in the concept so strongly, he sold his house to finance the startup of his company.

"When we launched in 2003, my pie-in-the-sky goal for the first year was to do 8,000 cases, and we ended up selling 40,000," Sproule says. "This year we are on target to sell about 1 million cases."

Like many Americans, Sproule first encountered boxed wines while traveling in Europe, where consumers have long been amenable to trading bottle for box. Australia is also bonkers for boxes, with a reported 50 percent of the wines sold there in casks. In Scandinavia, the numbers stack up to 60 percent.

It's easy to see why:

- Quality is up. Not the plonk we remember from college frat parties, today's premium cask wines offer a tasty alternative for everyday drinking.
- Reasonable prices. Cask wines most often come in 3-liter boxes with prices ranging from \$16 to \$25. This translates to \$4 to \$6.25 per 750-milliliter bottle.
- Shatterproof, easy-to-transport packaging. For hikers, bikers or backpackers, boxed beauties offer unbreakable, relatively lightweight packing. For those in cramped quarters — boaters, campers, RVers — boxed wines are easy to stack. They're perfect around the pool, at picnics and for tailgating, too.
- The solution for one-glass-a-day drinkers. Once opened, the anaerobic (oxygen-free) environment of the vacuum-sealed plastic bag keeps the wine fresh for about a month.
- Great for cooks. A box of wine in the pantry means good-quality cooking wine is always at hand.
- Good with food. Because they are simply made, boxed wines pair well with everyday eats such as pizza, pasta and grilled foods.
- Easy to open. No corkscrew to deal with or cork to break off.
- Good for the environment. No glass to manufacture or recycle, a totally recyclable box and a collapsible plastic bag mean less to recycle. The lighter weight saves on shipping and storage costs, too.

A couple of caveats I discovered while tasting a wide variety of cask wines:

You're not gonna find Quilceda Creek or Screaming Eagle in a box, and lots of insipid wines are still out there. Generally, the higher-quality boxed wines are vintage-dated and made from a specific varietal (or blend of specific varietals) from a particular grape-growing region. The 1.5-liter and 3-liter wines are usually better quality than the old 4-liter boxes. And, I preferred the red wines to the whites.

Drink it now. These wines are best consumed within one year of production. Some sport a "Drink By" date or date of production on the bottom of the box.

Also, give your glass a couple of good, deep swirls to oxygenate the wine. Better still, pour several glasses' worth into a wide-mouthed decanter and surprise family and friends when they discover that the sassy shiraz they're raving about is actually one of *those* wines!

For wine lovers concerned about value and the environment, it's nice to know it's finally hip to be square.

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KEN LAMBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

For convenience, value and their lower impact on the environment, the better boxed wines stack up.

Six to try

Wine Cube 2006 Pinot Grigio (California, \$16, 3 liters, available only at Target stores). This award-winning wine boasts flavors of sweet citrus and stone fruit and a smooth, juicy mouth feel. Pair with Alaskan spot prawns in citrus beurre blanc.

Black Box 2007 Chardonnay (Monterey County, \$22, 3 liters). One of Black Box's best-selling wines, this crowd-pleasing chard is rife with aromas and flavors of banana, pineapple and spice. Pair with simply grilled chicken breast and tropical-fruit salsa.

Revelry Vintners 2006 Merlot (Columbia Valley, \$20, 1.5 liters). Packaged in a beautifully designed slanted-top tube, this award-winning merlot displays aromas and flavors of blueberry and black cherry, oak and spice. Pair with sautéed duck breast in bing-cherry sauce.

Wine Cube 2007 Shiraz (South Australia, \$16, 3 liters, available exclusively at Target stores). This all-around pleasing wine boasts a boatload of fruit, exotic hints of black pepper and smoke, and a lush mouth feel. Pair with tomato-based barbecue or a Kobe beef burger with blue-chèvre crumbles.

English Estate Winery 6-Pak Wine Samples (Washington state, \$50, equivalent to about two 750-milliliter bottles). Try before-you-buy is the concept behind this Vancouver-based winery's six-pack, which offers 8-ounce samples of four pin

noirs, a syrah and a red blend. Powers Winery 2006 Cabernet Sauvignon (Washington state, \$22, 3 liters). You'll love the marriage of luscious ripe berries and chocolate with sweet spices in this big, bold "Everyday Cabernet." Pair with lamb tagine and cinnamon-scented couscous.