



Boxed wine stepping up a notch with '07 varieties

By Mary Ross | Good Wine

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Don't turn up your nose at a new generation of boxed wines. The best are well-made, tasty and perfectly suited to carefree occasions, especially at picnics and pools where glass bottles are often verboten.

I'd choose a carton of French Rabbit, for instance, over many bottled wines any day. French Rabbit Chardonnay is crisp and clean; the pinot noir has bright berry flavors and silky texture; cabernet sauvignon offers savory plum, berry and cherry flavors and firm tannin. Unencumbered by excess oak and alcohol, all acquaint the drinker with flavors of their south-of-France growing region.

As a bonus, the Tetra Prism carton has an easy-to-open twist cap, weighs much less than a standard bottle and reduces packaging waste by 90 percent. This "savor the wine and save the planet" stance is nothing new for French Rabbit importers, the Boisset family, who have married fine winemaking with social causes for decades.

A French Rabbit liter costs about \$9.99. French Rabbit Petit, with four 250 ml cartons retailing for about \$10.99, will debut this holiday season.

International travelers will recognize the Tetra Prism as a popular container for beverages around the world, but most of us used a lunch ticket -- not a passport -- to experience another boxed-wine technology.

"Bag-in-box," pioneered by Chicago-based Scholle Corp. has provided sanitary, air-tight containers for milk and juice served from cafeteria dispensers to countless school kids since 1955. The savings over glass bottles in packaging and transportation originally attracted bulk wine producers with generic "California Chablis"-type labels. Recently, producers began bagging premium varieties, such as pinot grigio and chardonnay. In 2004, three-liter bag-in-box wines became the fastest-growing segment in the U.S. wine industry, according to ACNielsen data.

Now, 1.5-liter boxes, oblongs and cubes (equivalent to two standard bottles) are the fashion. Wine Cube, produced by Napa Valley's Trinchero family, offers varietal whites (including a full-bodied chardonnay and an award-winning pinot grigio with sweet pear and peach flavors), and reds (a velvety merlot, an oak-aged cabernet and a spicy cab-shiraz blend). They're sold exclusively at Target for \$9.99; three-liter boxes are \$15.99.

Washington State's Powers Winery has boxed up a single-vineyard, barrel-aged cabernet sporting rich fruit accented by wood spice (three liters, about \$20), along with their organic and sulfite-free Badger Mountain "Pure Red" and "Pure White" (three liters, about \$12.99.)

Bag-in-box has an advantage over other alternative wine packages. While twist-caps on Tetra Prism packages are convenient, once they're open, they're open. Bag-in-box, with its air-tight spigot, is never really opened at all. Wine lovers can pour a little or a lot, leaving the balance undamaged by oxygen.

As boxed wine continues its high-quality trend, watch for it to move into the super-premium category, with wine lovers collecting boxes for at-home wine bars.

For now, while you needn't use fine crystal or bury your nose deep in your stadium glass, you can expect pleasing, convenient refreshment in the new generation of boxed wines.

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