

# Winemakers uncork new packaging market

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Set the dining table, light some candles and crack open a nice bag of wine.

Serving guests wine from a plastic pouch or box may no longer be a social faux pas, say some in the wine industry — as consumers warm to packaging that is seen as kinder to the environment than glass bottles.

"Boxed wines aren't a new concept, they're just trendy again," said Lisa Cameron, communications manager for the BC Wine Institute.

B.C. liquor stores feature boxed and bagged wines from around the world, but none of the Canadian wines are certified by the Vintner's Quality Alliance, the agency that maintains the integrity of Canadian wines.

The VQA's standards for packaging state that wine must be bottled to meet its quality standards, said Cameron.

"Conventional thinking is that alternative packaging seriously degrades the quality of wine, but that was with previous technologies. Now, there are materials like space-aged polymer for Tetra packs."

While some B.C. wineries like Sawmill Creek and Jackson Triggs offer three-litre to 16-litre boxes of wine, the contents cannot be certified with the VQA logo under current regulations.

"Things are evolving, but new initiatives have been slow to get off the ground," Cameron said, even though boxed wine has many advantages over traditional bottling.

"I go back-country skiing and it's much more convenient to bring a bag of wine; it's not as bulky to pack."

And bagged wines stay fresher longer because the tap allows wine, and oxygen, to flow only one way, so there's less contamination.

Across the pond, WRAP, a British government-funded body, is researching whether the new forms of wine packaging have environmental benefits.

Unlike with most materials, recy-

cling some types of glass can produce slightly more harmful greenhouse gases than if they were thrown away, according to preliminary research commissioned by the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP).

"At the moment, these are seen as a niche packaging format," said Kate Coleman, spokeswoman for Britain's Wine and Spirit Trade Association, commenting on the new types of packing.

"But take screw caps — people have grown used to them and now find them very acceptable."

But some wine companies, perhaps scenting the potential of the 'green' consumer market, are hoping to shake off the image of boxed or bagged wine as poor quality.

Wine company Ehrmanns is working with its South African exporter to launch a plastic wine pouch in mid-August.

The pouches will be filled with two bottles worth of its 'Arniston Bay' brand of white Chardonnay or rose.

"There's so many foodstuffs, like soups, where you get premium products ready in pouches, so the pouch has got a very strong premium element," said Johan Hewitt, brand and business development manager at The Company of Wine People, which is exporting the wine.

Hewitt estimates 200,000 pouches will go on sale for about 9.49 pounds (\$19.28) in Britain's Tesco supermarkets, and will be aimed at beachgoers and barbecue enthusiasts.

Even though the pouches cannot be easily recycled, the company says their carbon footprint is 80-per-cent smaller because the lightweight packs use less energy to produce and transport.

Similarly, Trinchero Family Estates, a California-based wine producer, sells some of its wine in slim purple boxes, which it says are more environmentally friendly to transport.

The total U.K. market for bag-in-box wine stands at 390 million pounds, with a steady annual growth of two per cent, according to Tesco.

In its own stores, Tesco says the bag-in-box category represents the fifth biggest section in wine behind bottles from Australia, France, the U.S. and Italy.

But shoppers outside a supermarket in central London were unsure new 'green' packaging could give wine a premium image.

"Opening a bottle is a social occasion," said Xavier Bonnard, a 35-year-old French banker loading up the top box of his motorbike with shopping.

"Maybe it will be like people driving electric cars — if it looks nice then people will eventually accept it. But not now, no, no."

Statistician Nadine Seeward, 34, was also dubious.

"The connotation is that wine in a box is really poor quality, so you would have to change attitudes," she said.

"I'd have to taste to see if it was of the same quality."

"For those who work with wine, the problem is not the taste of wine in alternative packaging but its persistent negative image."

"The quality of bag-in-box wine has improved tremendously in recent years. But I think the perception of the consumer is very different," said professional wine taster Susan Hulme, from the Association of Wine Educators.

She said wine in the new forms of packaging would compare well to bottles from the cheaper end of the wine market.

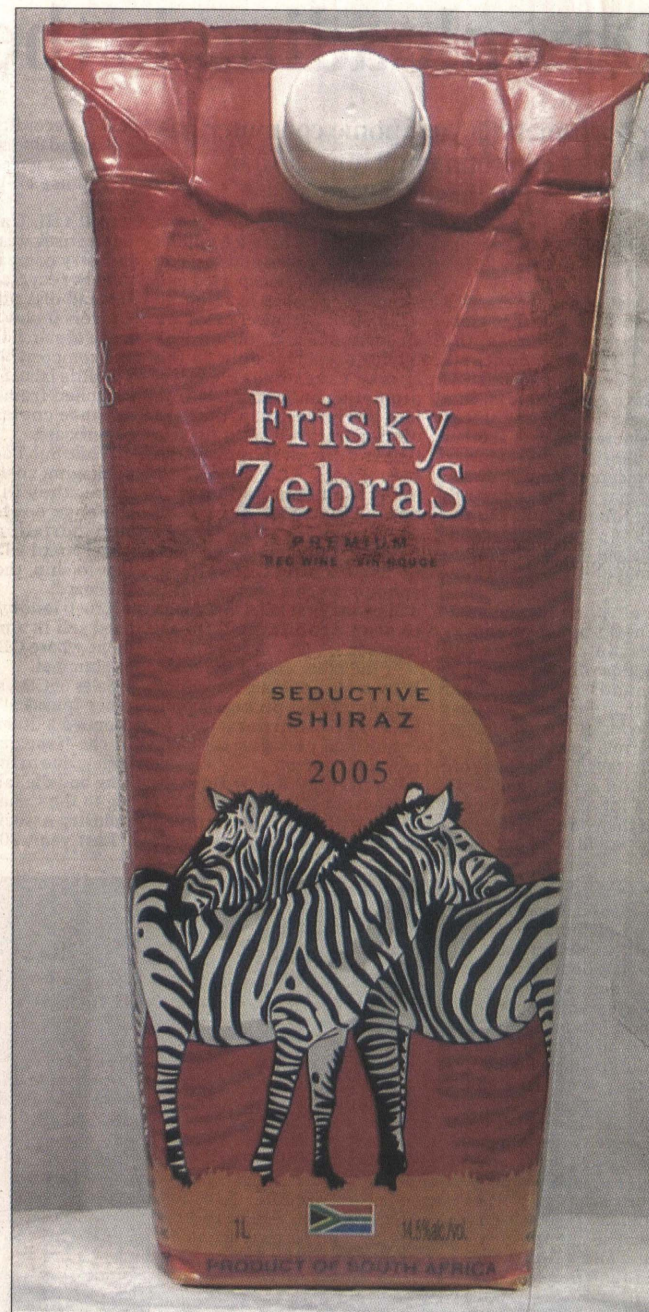
Increased environmental concerns, however, do not signal the end of the glass bottle.

"I can't see some of the very prestigious, very famous wines going into bag-in-box in the near future," she said.

While some wine companies use their packaging to attract environmentally conscious customers, WRAP stresses the country of origin is key to the product's carbon footprint.

"The U.K. market is important as 98-99 per cent of our wine is imported," WRAP said in a statement.

With files from Reuters



Wine in a bag such as South Africa's Frisky Zebra Seductive Shiraz may help to reduce waste.