



## Drinking Inside the Box

By Tina Caputo

For this year's Super Bowl, my husband and I invited over a few friends and laid out a simple spread of chili, salty snacks and beer (I love wine, but sorry--to me, it's just not a Super Bowl kind of drink.) The beer came in the form of a Heineken "mini-Keg," which dispenses 20 glasses of brew on demand. Somehow, we didn't manage to finish off the keg at the party, so into the fridge it went on Sunday night. During the following week, we happily popped our glasses into the fridge to retrieve perfectly fresh draft brewskis--without having to scrounge for a bottle opener. After a few days of this we had to agree: This was pretty cool.

So why don't people say the same thing about wine-in-a-box? After all, it has the same benefits of the mini keg: Convenience and freshness. Boxed wine stays fresh for up to a month, so you don't have to blast it with argon gas between glasses to keep it from going bad.

It also offers eco-friendly extras, like recyclable packaging and a lower carbon footprint than heavy glass bottles. (According to the website [www.aboutboxedwine.com](http://www.aboutboxedwine.com), boxed wine uses 91% less packaging materials and produces 79% less greenhouse gas emissions than an equal volume of wine packaged in glass bottles.)



The stigma of boxed wine, of course, stems from the jumbo 5-liter boxes o' "blush" wine we all suffered through in the 1980s. No grape-respecting winery would have dared to package the fruits of its labor in a big ol' cardboard box in those days. But remember: The same could also be said about screwcaps. Remember when only crappy jug wine was sealed with a screwcap? Today it's not all that unusual to find twist-off closures on wines that sell for \$30 or more per bottle.



Over the last five years, the quality of wines being put into bag-in-box packaging--especially in the 3-liter size--has increased dramatically. In fact, 3L boxes represent America's fastest-growing wine category, in terms of packaging (sales increased by 31% in 2008, compared to a 4.4% increase in overall table wine sales). And that wouldn't be the case if all the wine was undrinkable swill.

In this tough economic climate, it just might be time to take another look at boxed wines. With layoffs, under-employment and plunging stocks, many Americans are changing their wine-drinking habits. But rather than giving up their nightly glass of vino, they're "trading down" to less expensive selections. The latest Nielsen supermarket/drug store sales data proves it: In 2007, wines in the over-\$15 category showed the strongest sales growth; in 2008, the under-\$6 category took the lead. And the trend shows no sign of reversing in 2009.

The highest-priced premium boxed wines usually sell for around \$20 per 3L box, which translates to \$5 per standard-size bottle (a 3L box holds the equivalent of four bottles.) Sure, you can find decent wines on retail shelves for around \$5, but since bag-in-box packaging typically costs less than glass bottles, wineries should be able to offer better quality wines at the same price-point.

New-generation boxed wines are widely available in grocery stores across the U.S., along with Trader Joe's, Beverages & More, Target and Whole Foods stores. When shopping for boxed wines, smaller is better. The best-quality wines are packaged in 3L and 1.5L sizes, while larger sizes are more about volume than flavor. For vintage-dated wines (they do come in boxes!), choose the most recent vintage on offer; wine is not meant to last in bag-in-box packaging indefinitely! Some boxes will even include a 'best-served-by' date to let you know when it's past its prime.

### Boxed Chardonnay Smackdown

So which brands offer the best box for your buck? I put three premium boxed wines to the test in a blind Chardonnay smackdown--and to make it more interesting, I included a bottled Sonoma County Chardonnay that sells for \$20 per 750ml bottle. Which would be the winning Chard-in-a-box? And could I tell which wine came from a glass bottle?

## The Boxed-Wine Contenders:

**Wine Cube California Chardonnay 2007** (\$17/3L): This Target wine brand is packaged in hip-looking cube-shaped boxes (It's also available in a 1.5L cube and in a 4-pack of 250ml juice-box-style containers.) The wines are made for Target by Napa's Trinchero Family Estates.

**Black Box Monterey County Chardonnay 2007** (\$23/3L): The packaging of this wine is understated and elegant. (Can those words apply to box-o-wine design?) This brand was one of the first to prove that good wines don't always come in glass packages.



**Trove California Chardonnay 2006** (\$22/3L): When this stylishly packaged wine arrived on the scene in 2006, it earned some "Hey, this is actually pretty good!" accolades from major lifestyle magazines.

After tasting through the wines, I quickly identified two of them as obvious candidates for box-hood (they had a somewhat bland flavor). The remaining two Chardonnays, however, were quite nice. In the end, I ranked as my #1 wine (drumroll please) the Target Wine Cube Chardonnay. To my surprise, this was also the wine I guessed had been packaged in a bottle rather than in a box.



The Target Chard displayed a pretty aroma of vanilla and melon, along with crisp fruit flavor and a nice balance. I would happily buy this wine again for everyday drinking (I'd even take the "juice box" version to the movies to pair with popcorn).

I had a hard time picking a favorite between my #1 wine and my #2--which turned out to be the \$20 Chardonnay from a bottle. My #3 wine was the Black Box Chardonnay, which had a promising aroma of tropical fruit (pineapple and banana) and a lean, lemon/citrus flavor that could have used more roundness. My #4 wine was the Trove Chardonnay, which also had a nice tropical fruit aroma. But similar to the previous wine, this one was a bit astringent and lacked fruit flavor.

Though I discovered only one boxed wine among the three that I can heartily recommend for its drinkability and value, I predict that more high-quality boxed wines are on the way--especially in these economically challenged, eco-focused times.

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