

Dan Berger on Wine

New, Improved Wine in a Box

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Leon Adams, one of the wine industry's pioneers, founder of the Wine Institute and a wine author, once said that wine ought to be as cheap as milk.

And thus about \$1 a quart.

Sound a bit farfetched? Well, that's basically what we paid in Spain and Portugal not long ago, and though the wine wasn't all that great, it was relatively palatable and certainly a lot more interesting to our tastes than soda.

U.S. wineries also make wine about that cheap — if you're willing to buy those 3-liter jugs for \$5. But in that category, most wine is sweet and lacks any character.

One of the drawbacks to making a wine that sells for less is in its packaging. Glass bottles and corks cost a good deal of money; there is also the high cost of shipping heavy bottles (think of rising gasoline prices), the fact that you can get only so many cases of glass bottles on a pallet, and the breakability factor.

So it was no surprise that lower-end wine went into cardboard boxes with bladders. The "bag-in-box" concept developed in Australia and has been around for decades, but in general, the wines in such contraptions haven't been very good.

Then came the upscale wines in boxes, but they sold for the equivalent of \$9 to \$12 a bottle. It wasn't a bad idea, and some of the wine was quite good. But it wasn't really bargain priced.

Now, some innovative folks in France and the United States have adopted technology developed some 20 years ago, but only recently perfected with truly inert liners. These are smaller boxes, one liter to be exact, that sell for under \$10. And the key factors: good quality wines at a good price.

Their names are French Rabbit and Three Thieves. The first is from the large producer Boisset, and the wines (which include a Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay) are all quite decent. The best of them is the Cabernet. The nice aspects are that the screw-off cap on the eco-friendly packaging is easy to remove (no need to find scissors), and once you have consumed some of the wine, the box can be squished down to expel air and keep the remainder fresh.

Three Thieves, a product of Trinchero Family Estates in the Napa Valley, offers a Pinot Grigio and a Cabernet that are excellent. Both are \$8 a liter and are being discounted in many locations.

Also, the line was recently expanded. Now being shipped are four-pack boxes, 250-milliliters each, of the same wine for about \$9 for the package, which delivers four unique servings, so when one is opened the others remain fresh until used.

Benefits abound. Not only is the wine inside very good, but the small boxes chill quickly in ice, cost a lot less to ship, have no breakage factor, and, once empty, are disposable and flat, so they take up no landfill space to speak of. The Tetra Prisma pack is made of 70 percent paper and is recyclable in many states.

All this runs counter to the trend in some upscale wines in which some producers of expensive wine use 4-pound bottles that threaten to give the user carpal tunnel syndrome.

Not long ago, I heard a wine maker (who doesn't use heavy bottles) deride them, calling them "runway bottles," arguing that they ought be seen on a New York runway during Fashion Week, wearing the latest creation of Oleg or Calvin or Tommy.

Once upon a time, wine bottles weighed less than three pounds each. Today, you can have a liter of French Rabbit that weighs 2 pounds 4 ounces, and if you drop it, it won't break.

Wine of the Week: 2005 Three Thieves "Bandit" Pinot Grigio, California (\$9/pack of four 250-ml boxes) — Bright, with fresh fruit and hints of lemon and spice; relatively dry, with nice fruit and appealing freshness. Not very complex, but a delightful wine to carry in purse or pocket where wine previously never went. (Use your imagination!)