

# FOOD ARTS

## Drinking Outside the Box

**WINE REPORT** HAVING FINALLY CONVINCED DINERS THAT THE ANTIHELMETIC TWIST OF A SCREW CAP CAN BE THE OVERTURE TO A FABULOUS BOTTLE OF WINE, SOME RESTAURANTS ARE TACKLING THE NEXT PACKAGING PUBLIC RELATIONS CHALLENGE: QUALITY WINE TAPPED FROM A GIANTIC JUICE BOX. JEFFERY LINDENSMITH REPORTS.

Bag-in-box packaging is a marvel of postwar American invention, created in Chicago in 1947 by William R. Scholle as a solution to packaging sulfuric acid for dry charge batteries. With a bit of Yankee ingenuity, Scholle's bag-in-box became commonplace in professional kitchens as a package for foods ranging from liquid eggs to ketchup. It was adopted for dairy products in the 1950s, soda fountain syrup in the 1970s, and bulk orange juice in the 1980s. The first wine was packaged in 1971, but for all its faults the cork and bottle have proven a tough adversary.

Sadly, most Americans still associate the cardboard cubes with cheap pink wine and ready-made sangria, not the sort of stuff they'd prefer to be seen sipping in a fine restaurant. Bag-in-box wine sales in the U.S. have grown by 6 percent over the past 10 years but still account for only about 18 percent of total wine sales by volume. In contrast, the package currently accounts for about 50 percent of wine sales by volume in Australia (where the container goes by the more romantic moniker "cask") and holds similar market share in several European nations. In France, you can spot boxes of wine stacked high in Paris supermarkets and small town *markets* alike.

A conceptually similar package created in Sweden in 1951 by Tetra Pak holds many of the same advantages of bag-in-box and according to **Jean-Charles Boisset**, president of Boisset America, suits his environmental bent perfectly. Boisset chose one-liter Tetra Prisma Aseptic Cartons, a kind of packaging he dubbed the "epod," for the introduction of his French Rabbit varietal wines from Languedoc-Roussillon. The wines, which wholesale for less than \$7 per one-liter box, were initially launched in Canada when Bob Peter, president and chief operating officer of the Liquor Control Board of Ontario, challenged winemakers to use more environmentally friendly packaging; they have since gone global.

Boisset, who also uses bag-in-box, chose Tetra Pak for French Rabbit on the basis of its superior recyclability, its convenient, one-liter size, and its resealability, with a screw cap instead of a plastic tap. "The bottom line is that both have huge advantages over glass," says Boisset. "We've been putting wine in glass bottles since the 17th century and have done very little to improve that package. I think the new generation is ready for this."

While so far only about 20 percent of French Rabbit sales are on-premise, Boisset sees an opportunity to boost that figure. Among the epod's advantages and attractions, he points out, is that it can be chilled in the refrigerator in just 10 minutes (compared with 30 minutes for a bottle), takes up 33 percent less space than a bottle, and, perhaps the most alluring, offers restaurateurs quality wine at a cost of less than \$1 per glass. Besides, he says, just one empty glass bottle occupies the same space as 70 flattened empty epods.

Boisset hopes that restaurants that have been ardent supporters of organic and sustainable farming will similarly embrace the commitment to a reduction in the kind of waste associated with creating, shipping, and recycling glass. "It's one thing to say you use organic farms and organic ingredients, but it's another to have the



guts to persuade consumers to take the next step," he says. "The solution to the service aspect may be to bring back the carafe, but at the same time why not show the package the same way we list organic ingredients on a menu? Let people know they've done something positive for the environment."

French Rabbit will soon be joined by French Rabbit Reserve wines bearing the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée designations for the Rhône Valley and Beaujolais (about \$15 retail) as well as a California cousin under the name Pop Star.

**John Mautone**, co-owner of **Dylan Prime** in New York City, sees all the advantages of box wine for his restaurant. If only his customers were as easily convinced. "We sold a boxed Pinot Noir, but the visual made it a tough sell. We wanted to be very upfront, and we were pouring it at the bar. The idea is phenomenal, and certain people are very into it. But then you have people who are paying \$100 per person for dinner, and they're not buying it," he says.

Even Boisset says he won't be putting his De Loach Vineyards wine into anything remotely resembling a milk carton, but he remains hopeful that consumers will ultimately set aside their packaging prejudices when it comes to wines like French Rabbit. "Winemakers, chefs, all of us, live for Mother Nature. We want to make a high-quality product while respecting the earth, and this is one way to do it. I'm hoping for a day when many more people will take this step."