

Can Wine in a Sippy Box Lure Back French Drinkers?

By MAX COLCHESTER
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PARIS -- Cordier Mestrezat Grands Crus has been selling fine Bordeaux wine for more than a century. Its latest enological breakthrough: wine through a straw.

As popular wines from countries such as Australia and Chile eat into French wine sales, and as young French people increasingly turn away from wine in favor of spirits and beer, some of France's vintners are tossing tradition aside and innovating.



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In North America and Europe, wine sold in cartons has been around for some years, but usually the quality and price are relatively low. Cordier, whose top-end wines can sell for about \$3,300 a bottle, is the first high-end wine producer from Bordeaux -- the region best known for its prestigious and pricey red wines -- to put wine in a box. Last month it announced plans to sell wine, dubbed Tandem, in an 8.5 ounce carton that comes with a special straw with four holes, designed to spray the wine into the mouth. The company says it gives a similar sensation to drinking from a glass. The red, white and rosé versions come in shiny red, green and pink boxes made by Swiss packaging company Tetra Pak SA.

Before rolling it out in France next year, the winemaker is testing Tandem in 600 Belgian supermarkets, priced at about \$2.50 a carton.

Cordier's new offering:
boxed wine with a straw

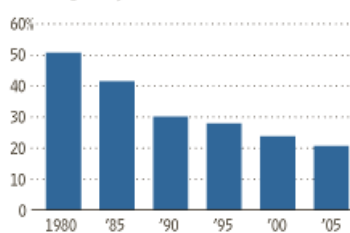
Cordier says it wants to offer a premium wine that will attract the younger generation. "It is a product that can sell in stadiums, hotels and airlines," says Vincent Bonhur, Cordier's head of marketing. But the company acknowledges its boxed wine may be too radical for the French: "In France, the wine market is still very traditional, but in markets such as Canada, the U.K. and Northern Europe, this new format should be a hit," Cordier said in a release.

Luring new consumers is crucial for an industry so embedded in the French economy. France is Europe's largest wine producer, making about 1.45 billion gallons a year, and also the leader in consumption, according to European Union statistics. Nevertheless, between 1995 and 2005, annual French wine consumption fell from an average of 16 gallons per person a year to 14.5 gallons, according to Viniflor, the national agriculture trade organization.

In the beginning, healthy exports of French wine abroad compensated for the waning demand at home. In recent years, however, exports have dropped because of competition from moderately priced, good-quality wines from countries such as Australia, Argentina and South Africa. Now, so much French wine remains unsold every year that the EU, which subsidizes wine-making in Europe, is discussing a law that would give winemakers incentives to reduce production altogether.

Tight-Lipped

Percentage of French population age 14 and older who reported consuming wine regularly¹:



¹Every day or nearly every day
Sources: VINIFLHOR; INRA

Adding to French wine makers' woes, the generation coming of age is drinking less wine. In 1980, nearly a quarter of French people between the ages of 20 and 24 drank wine every day, according to Viniflor. By 2005, only 2.3% did.

"We need to change the image of wine in our country," says Pierre Leclerc, director of the Economic Committee for France's South East Wines, "We have ignored young people and now we are paying the price."

Making it difficult to get such a message across, a law in France bans alcohol ads on television and requires billboard ads for alcohol to include health warnings. Wine makers are trying to persuade the French government to give wine a special legal statute to avoid the strict advertising measures.

So some companies are trying other tactics to get younger people's attention.

Bordeaux wine seller Omnivins SARL recently unveiled a wine called "Soif de Coeur," or "Thirst for Romance." The bottles had special labels -- in blue for men and pink for women -- that could be peeled back to reveal a code giving access to a dating Web site. The Bordeaux merchant, which buys its wine from a producer in southwest France, says it wants to "recruit new consumers with audacious trade and marketing concepts." Since March, it has sold 300,000 bottles, priced at about \$4.40 a bottle in supermarkets.

French wine maker [Albera](#) SARL targets nightclubs and bars with its fizzy Nayandei wine in bottles with funky labels. The company regularly sponsors events in clubs and snowboard competitions to raise its profile. "We wanted to create a desire for wine. Young people can taste our Nayandei range, then progress to something more classic," says the company's managing director, Fabrice Rieu, 32, who runs the Pyrenees-based company with his brother.

Toto Vino SARL, based in Néviau in southern France, makes a nonalcoholic, red wine-based soda drink, sold in cans for about \$2.50. Another non-alcoholic wine, in red, white and rosé, launched last year by Société Icône sells in the French supermarket Monoprix in bottles with a trendy minimalist logo.

Some wine makers are using an environmentally sensitive pitch, introducing recyclable plastic wine bottles. Boisset Vins & Spiritueux, a wine-and-spirits company in France's Bourgogne region, uses the polyethylene terephthalate bottles for its "Yellow Jersey" wine, which it has tested in North America. It plans to launch the bottles in Europe in August.

Purists aren't impressed with the creative exploits of French wine makers.

"There are limits to fantasy and marketing," says Philippe Faure-Brac, a former world champion sommelier. "To innovate is good, to respect is better."

Olivier Crozat, a former sommelier who manages the Wine Museum in Paris, disapproves of the idea of wine in a carton. "It is a pleasure in life to open a bottle or go down to your cellar to select the right one," he says. But he said it's clear that Cordier's boxed wine is aimed at a younger audience.

Other critics say the new marketing techniques -- from wine in cartons to plastic bottles -- may not actually work with young people, who tend to see wine as a drink for special occasions and to associate it with a traditional-looking bottle.

Castel Frères, France's biggest wine producer, recently hired psychologists to try to understand how customers react to packaging. Among the results of the study was that younger men prefer bottles with traditional labels. "Tetra Pak and the like only appeals to a small part of the population. It is a niche thing," says Christophe Polailon, head of marketing for Castel Frères. "It attracts interest, but it does not sell in the long run."

"Wine in a carton is just not very classy," says Laure Goupil, a 24-year-old who works in marketing in Paris and says she drinks around four glasses of wine a week when socializing with friends. "Drinking wine should be a pleasure," she says. "Choosing a bottle with a nice label is really important."

Aude Chabrier, a 24-year-old Parisian in the publishing industry, doubts marketing efforts can succeed in attracting younger drinkers to wine. "I think that young people need to get there by themselves," she says. "This is just part of a wider cultural change -- young people are just drinking less than before."

Despite the skepticism, the shift towards more exotic packaging and marketing has supporters even among the most celebrated of France's high-end wine makers. "Normally I am a traditionalist," says Michel Raymond, the cellar master at the Bordeaux-based Château Lagrange. "But if it works, why not?"

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