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One of his flights features French Rabbit's Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot—\$4 for two-ounce tastes of each varietal. Servers bring the French Rabbit in Tetra Pak containers right to the table.

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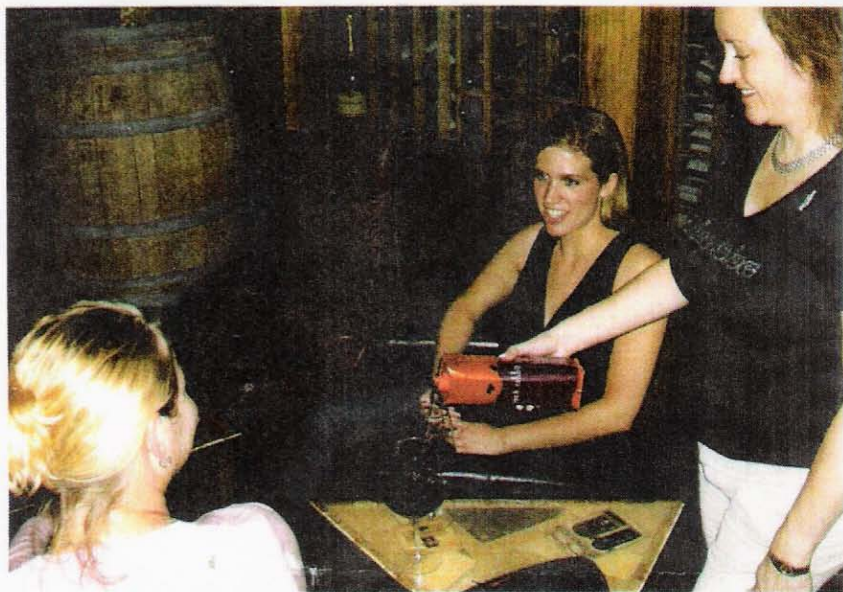
Embracing Alternatives

Restaurants say innovative packaging has gone from crazy to cool

Suzanne Gannon

On a recent Sunday evening at Veritas in New York's Flat Iron district, sommelier Yoshi Takemura poured a pair of wines for a table tucked into a quiet corner—the first, a 2004 Pfeffinger Dry Riesling from Pfalz for \$35, the second a \$125, 2004 Felton Road Pinot Noir Block 5 from New Zealand's Central Otago region. It was a typical tableside presentation, except for the fact that both bottles were sealed with screwcaps.

"It's not that big a deal," Takemura said. "What customers drink is not decided by how the wine is sealed." He said he reserves screwcaps for wines that are "really meant to be consumed young," and estimated that 99% of the 100,000-bottle inventory that earned the restaurant a *Wine Spectator* Grand Award are still cork-finished.



Flights of French Rabbit wines served directly from their Tetra Pak containers have received an enthusiastic response from customers at trendy Vines Wine Bar in Parker, Colo.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Though wines sealed under screwcaps racked up a 51% growth in retail sales in a recent six-month period, restaurant sales are still taking baby steps.
- Nevertheless, foodie-favorite restaurants like Veritas and Jean Georges in New York and Gary Danko in San Francisco are unashamed to pour vintages bottled with screwcaps, many of them imports.
- At Rathbun's in Atlanta, diners are so intrigued when they are served wines sealed with Alcoa's Vino-Seal that they want to take the glass stopper home with them.
- Wines packaged in Tetra Pak cartons are also being served in some restaurants, and are especially favored by diners who want to take their unfinished wines home with them after dinner.

Much has been made lately about the runaway success of alternatively packaged wine at the cash register. According to ACNielsen's New Innovators Trends on Wine Packaging study, completed in April, screwcap-topped wines accounted for approximately 3% of all 750ml bottles sold at food retail in the six months ending in March—\$68 million of the overall \$2.7 billion spent on wine in the same outlets. The segment grew by 51%, more than three times the rate of nonscrewcaps. Seven percent of wine-buying households had purchased 187ml single serving packages of wine, according to the study, and sales of wines in Tetra Pak cartons crossed the \$4 million mark in 2005.

But how are these new-fangled, aseptic packages and twist-off closures going over in America's restaurants?

"Five years ago, we were the first sommelier restaurant to pour screwcaps by the glass, and people looked at us like we were absolutely crazy," said Jason Alexander, wine director at San Francisco's Restaurant Gary Danko. "But they've really embraced it."

His by-the-glass offerings now include several wines finished with the Stelvin closure produced by Montreal-based Alcan. Among them are three Austrian Grüner Veltliners, one New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc and one German Riesling. He estimated about 50 wines of the restaurant's total list of 1,800 are packaged with something other than natural cork.

In some cases, Alexander features the same wine with both screwcap and cork closures, and indicates the distinction on the wine list. He says



Screw-capped wines are accepted without question by diners at Annie Gunn's in St. Louis, Mo. Here, owner Thom Sehnert (standing, left) glad-hands guests with wine director, Glenn Bardgett (right), who says, "If everything else is equal, I almost always go with a screwcap."

the strategy piques customers' curiosity and, consequently, offers another opportunity to educate.

"If people don't understand, if they have an image that the screwcap is tied to Hearty Burgundy, the best way to get them to understand is to explain (the necessity of) quality assurance from a business perspective." He added, "I tell them that if you knew 10% of your product would be ruined...you would do something to fix it."

Glenn Bardgett, wine director at Annie Gunn's in St. Louis, first took note of the screwcap when he discovered one on a Silverado Sauvignon Blanc in Napa four years ago. He became the city's first restaurateur to feature the item, and in the years since, has embraced the screwcap to the tune of a quarter of the 40 wines he serves by the glass, each at a different price-point.

A self-described "significant proponent of cork alternatives," Bardgett said, "If everything else is equal, I almost always go with a screwcap. It's easier for me if I can guarantee to the customer that the wine is good."

Only once did he encounter negativity, and it occurred when a woman who had already enjoyed two glasses of Caymus Conundrum ordered a bottle and then rejected it because of the cap.

At the 500-seat Pappas Bros. Steakhouse in Dallas, sommelier Drew Hendricks noted that in general, guests' reception to plastic corks is more curious than their reaction to screwcaps. Though he rarely hears about adverse reactions to noncork-finished wines, he recalled that a few

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Lee Riggs, owner of Vines Wine Bar in Parker, Colo., is a certified wine educator and advanced sommelier exam candidate, who focuses on wine flights paired with small plates; alternative packaging works well for a restaurant serving some 90 wines by the glass.

years back, a guest rejected a bottle with a mold-injected cork, citing a “plasticky taste.”

As much as 20% of the 60 wines he offers by the glass feature alternative closures, some with synthetic corks, some with screwcaps. He uses the occasion of a screwcap to break the ice with a little humor, telling guests to “remain calm” and not get “over-excited,” which usually confuses them. Then he produces the bottle, unscrews the cap, “and everyone laughs.”

Bernard Sun, corporate beverage director for the Jean Georges Restaurant Group, N.Y., said that although he has no objection to screwcaps, they do require some careful planning when it comes to storage. To avoid damage to the caps, he doesn’t stack more than four cases on top of one another. And when it comes to presenting and opening the bottles, servers are trained to leave the cap on the *guèridon* (*service table*).

Although on-premise depletions of wines with alternative closures are not yet tracked, Ronn Wiegand, MW, who publishes “Restaurant Wine” newsletter, estimated that screwcaps account for less than 1% of wines

sold in fine dining restaurants, while in casual restaurants the figure may be approaching 2%. Wiegand believes synthetic stoppers may account for 1 to 2% of on-premise wine sold.

“More and more companies are moving to alternative closures to prevent having a wine spoiled by a flawed cork,” Wiegand said.

Another closure increasingly available on-premise is the Vino-Seal by Indianapolis-based Alcoa. Marketing manager Laura Clark estimated that 500 wineries around the world from Germany to South Africa to South America are currently using the device, which consists of a glass stopper held in place by an O-ring gasket and overlaid with a poly-laminate capsule. She predicted that by 2007, 24 million bottles—up from 14 million in 2006—will be sealed with it. Current winery customers include Whitehall Lane, Sineann and Barking Frog, among others. “Screwcaps are a good solution to eliminate TCA, but you lose the ritual and the emotion of opening the wine,” said Clark, whose company’s closure does produce an inviting sound upon opening, clicking subtly when the glass stopper is dislodged.

Wine buyer Cliff Bramble said the Vino-Seal is getting rave reviews at Rathbun’s in Atlanta, from both the staff and guests. “The ceremony is the same...guests pick it up and feel it,” Bramble said. “(Sometimes) they want to take it and put it on bottles at home.” Bramble sells the Lachini Vineyards 2005 Pinot Gris for \$44 and will soon sell the Sineann 2005 Pinot Noir; both feature the Vino-Seal closure (see *Wines & Vines* August 2006, “Pacific Northwest Wineries Pioneer Glass Closures”).

While Tetra Pak remains predominantly a retail

phenomenon, there are some signs that it has a place on-premise, particularly with restaurateurs inclined to think out of the box about the box.

Lee Riggs is one such thinker. A certified wine educator and advanced sommelier exam candidate, Riggs opened Vines Wine Bar a little over a year ago in Parker, Colo., a Denver suburb. Focused on food and wine pairing, Riggs decided to offer 30 individual flights of wine to showcase small plates like wild mushroom ravioli with white truffle oil and a beef brioche. He also sells 90 wines by the glass and 159 by the bottle.

One of his flights features French Rabbit’s Chardonnay, Cabernet



Cappiola Italian blends in Tetra Pak containers are featured at Santosuosso’s Pizza, Pasta & Vino, in Medina, Ohio, where many customers prefer to pick up their wine with their take-out meals.

Sauvignon and Merlot—\$4 for two-ounce tastes of each varietal. Servers bring the French Rabbit in Tetra Pak containers right to the table.

“We’ve had a couple of snobs snub their noses at it,” Riggs said. “But 90% of our customers are all over it and the servers love it.” He estimated that he sells five or six cases a month, and added that another great feature is the portability in cases where the customer doesn’t finish the wine.

“The server just pulls on the rabbit ‘ears,’ reseals it and (the customer) takes it home.”

In Medina, Ohio, George Santosuosso is betting on a similar level of enthusiasm for Capiola, a new line imported from Italy and presented in a Tetra Pak container that features the eye-catching profile and strong nose of the famed Duke of Urbino. He’s featuring the line’s Bianco and Rosso wines at his restaurant, Santosuosso’s Pizza, Pasta & Vino, as a companion to take-out orders, offering customers a taste from behind the counter as they pay for their dinners.

“A lot of customers don’t want to come in and drink and then drive home,” Santosuosso said. “This way (they can pick it up along with) their veal chop.”

He charges \$10 per pack, and estimates he sells about 80 per month. But unlike Riggs, Santosuosso said that for Capiola customers who opt to dine in, he serves the wine in a decanter. “Don’t ever let your mindset say ‘this is only \$10, it can’t be good.’ You’ll be missing something that’s really neat.”

Santosuosso and others would likely agree with Paige Poulos, founder of the Alliance for Innovative Wine Packaging, who said, “The market has matured so much that it’s no longer alternative, it’s innovative.” ■

(Based in New York, Suzanne Gannon writes on travel, culture, food and wine. She spent several years in the wine business. Her work has appeared in Town & Country, Art & Antiques, Executive Traveler and Via, among others. Reach her through edit@winesandvines.com.)