




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The Modest Pleasure of Boxed Wine

Wine in a box is affordable, ecological, and delicious—and its time has come. An Object Lesson.

MEGAN KAMINSKI | AUG 21 2014, 7:00 AM ET



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After a long day of work filled with meetings and too many emails, there are few things I look forward to as much as the glass of wine that awaits me at home. That evening beverage signals the end of a day's work, accompanying my favorite songs on the stereo and the preparation of dinner. With the gentle pressure of my finger on the rubber spigot, the cardboard box on the kitchen counter steadily fills a glass with pinot noir. Wine pours out, splashing around the bottom of the bowl. The plastic bag inside the box contracts. A gentle unwinding. A daily routine.

Like many people my age, my first memories of boxed wine are of my parents' big white box of Chillable Red Franzia in the fridge. That special red served ice cold seemed to go with everything, if my parents' habits were any indication, and its fruit punch flavor made it an ideal gateway beverage for curious youth of the '80s and '90s.

It took many years, though, for me to develop an appreciation of wine in a box, at least for anything beyond the purposes of a rousing game of *Slap the Bag*—a name for a drinking game involving the unboxed bag in a boxed wine box. Even if you've never participated in such a Tour de Franzia, or if you grew up with parents classier than mine, it's likely that your general feelings towards wine-in-


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a-box are ambivalent at the very best.



Partygoers about to engage in Slap the Bag (Sarah Murray/Flickr)

Boxed wine seems to be the antithesis of the refined experience we typically associate with wine—the distinctly adult pleasure of uncorking a bottle and carefully pouring the contents into a fluted glass before inspecting its legs and savoring its bouquet. Things are starting to change, though, and winemakers are expanding the range of boxed offerings with entries that taste more dinner party than dorm room. Quality boxed wine is quietly making its way into homes, though much of the box’s previous stigma still exists. Just as screwcaps experienced a meteoric rise from bottles of Boone’s Farm Strawberry Hill to bottles of Bonny Doon’s Le Cigare Volant Réserve, the box is becoming more accepted as a container for quality wines.

Most boxes of wine have the same basic architecture: an outer box which protects the contents and advertises the brand and the varietal or blend, a vacuum-sealed plastic bladder that holds the wine and keeps it fresh, and some sort of spigot, either with a plastic knob that twists or a rubber button to press down. There’s a bit of assembly required for the consumer, who must punch out a perforated cardboard panel to reveal the spigot.

Kind and cousin to the box is the [Tetra Pak](#), which resembles a large carton. While a box of wine contains anywhere from three to almost seven 750ml bottles, the Tetra Pak usually contains a more manageable 500ml or 1 liter. There are even [250ml Tetra Paks of wine](#) that amount to adult juice boxes. Tetra Paks are composed of a mix of paper, polyethelene, and aluminum with a tight polyethylene inside layer, which makes contact with the wine. A type of aseptic packaging, which is used to preserve everything from tofu to soup without refrigeration or preservatives, Tetra Paks are a cost effective way to preserve and distribute wine in a sterile environment.

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Some of the many shapes and sizes of Tetra Paks (Tetra Pak International S.A.)

It's clear that these packaging methods are the workhorses to their showier glass bottle cousins. Meant to toil reliably and unobserved in the kitchen, they are unfit for the ritual and flourish that has evolved around elegantly shaped bottles, with their delicate slender necks and finicky corks that require careful extraction. Perhaps it goes without saying, but both boxes and Tetra Paks tend to be unappealing at an aesthetic level. At their best, they are innocuous. I've searched far and wide, experimenting with a variety of sizes, shapes, and colors, but the closest that I've come to beauty is a kind of Ikea-like blankness, a non-offensive generic veneer. Perhaps the beauty of such pretenseless speaks in some way to the utilitarian quality of boxed and Tetra Pak wine, which rests firmly in the realm of the quotidian, rather than aspiring to become a treasured object.

While neither the screwcap nor the box allows the wine to age as a cork would, both eliminate the possibility of cork taint, a mustiness imparted by the interaction of 2, 4, 6-Trichloroanisole (TCA) found in cork with fungi and moisture. Screws and boxes also prevent other cork catastrophes like seepage and breaking. And, of course, they eliminate the angst that can arise from not having a corkscrew on hand! Stelvin capsules, the screwcap of choice, can now be found on a variety of high-end wines, from California cult favorite PlumpJack Winery to larger scale producers like Bonny Doon and even fine French wines—winemaker **André Lurton** became the first Bordeaux producer to release a *cru classé* under a screwcap.

Perhaps the future holds the same kind of widespread acceptance and use for the box. Like the screwcap, which became more prevalent when producers in Australia's Clare Valley and Barossa Valley collectively agreed to convert to that closure method, the box has also found its early champions outside of the United States. In America, boxed wine selection has been generally limited to red alcoholic fruit punch and white alcoholic fruit punch. European and Australian winemakers have been putting quality wines in boxes for decades. In some ways, boxed wine is a natural extension of the French tradition of bottles and casks that can be refilled at wineries; they provide efficient and ecologically sound ways of selling and storing wine. They also add to the longstanding tradition of having a house wine—a reliable standby, free from the pomp-filled expectations associated with “discovering” a new bottle. It's even possible to mimic the

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French with [your own refillable barrel](#), which functions nearly identically to a box of wine, though with an admittedly classier exterior.



DeLoach Vineyards' Barrel to Barrel program allows wine drinkers to purchase an attractive barrel. The wine itself is contained in boxed eco-bags within, just like an ordinary boxed wine. (Boisset Family Estates)

Environmental and economic considerations are also enticing American winemakers and consumers toward boxed wine. A three-liter box of wine [generates only half the carbon-dioxide emissions](#) of the equivalent volume in traditional bottles, when transported from a California vineyard to a New York store. Moreover, the [total energy required to produce a box of wine](#) is about 1/3 the energy required to produce a single glass bottle. And wine in a box is considerably less expensive than its bottled equivalents. For example, La Petite Frog Coteaux du Languedoc Picpoul de Pinet retails for approximately \$30 for 3L (4 bottles), while a bottle of the same wine retails for about \$10. And there is much to love about boxed wine, even beyond those purely practical reasons. Every glass tastes as if it is from a fresh bottle. Gone are concerns about a half bottle of oxidized wine left over from the night before. Boxed wine is also easy to transport on foot. I know from experience that lugging four bottles of wine home from the store is less pleasant than toting a slender box.

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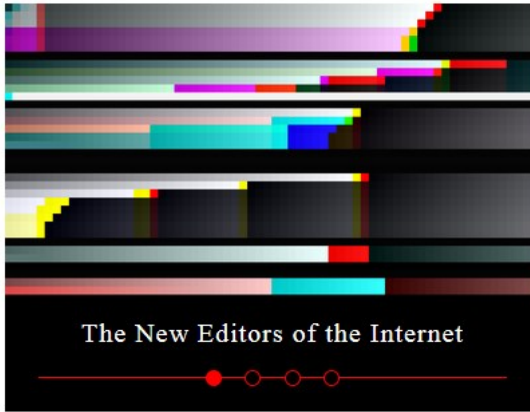
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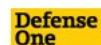
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