

WINE

Don't be snooty about boxed wines

BY BILL WARD
 Minneapolis Star Tribune

It has always been a good idea for wine enthusiasts to think “outside the box,” to expand their horizons. These days, those options include thinking “inside the box” — literally.

Boxed wines are bigger and better than ever, vying with rosé as the fastest-growing category in wine sales. The quantity has risen in large part because the quality has, too. The flavored-water-with-a-kick abominations of the past are gone. Being flexible, portable and durable doesn't hurt.

“Consumer acceptance is growing, and people seem to be liking them better,” said Peter Houghtaling, wine buyer at Sentyrz Supermarket in northeast Minneapolis, “especially in the premium section.”

That would be the “three B's” — Black Box, Bota Box and Big House — which are especially popular with younger consumers.

“Those do skew younger than traditional stuff like Franzia, which is still selling quite well,” said Houghtaling. “We sell a ton of Black Box especially, and it crosses over all age demographics. But people are now more willing to try different things.”

And consumers are finding more things to try. In the past year, House Wine has come on strong as a conten-



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der with the “three B's” in the premium field, and other outfits have entered the fray. Houghtaling has taken to stacking boxes in the middle of an aisle, and at Morelli's in St. Paul, the “Cardboard Corner” is constantly packed with customers.

Boxed wines go back nearly half a century. The Aussies invented them in the 1960s and still love them, affectionately calling them “goons.” For some time, boxed wines have been more popular Down Under and throughout Europe than on these shores. But that's changing.

Boxed wines, usually sold in 1.5- or 3-liter containers or smaller Tetra Paks (which now even come in 250-milliliter size, basically an adult juice box), have myriad attributes.

• They make great sense, economically and practically, for single folks or couples who have decidedly

different palates. Instead of having an opened bottle go bad in a matter of days, they enable people to have one glass at a time — of wine that tastes fresh — for a stretch of 30 days. They're also easier to store.

• Not only is a 3-liter box a much better bargain than the equivalent four bottles, it's much more friendly to the environment, requiring less packaging and transportation. Even the tony eco-bent Whole Foods stores carry them.

• You don't have to worry about the wine being “corked.”

• They're great for occasions, parties and holiday gatherings. The Big House White, with its myriad fruit flavors, is a perfect wine for the wide-ranging dishes (sweet, savory, salty, etc.) on the Thanksgiving table. They're also portable, much easier to bring to a picnic or camping outing, and shatter-proof.

• You can drink the wine discreetly — but you shouldn't have to. There is absolutely no reason for shame about liking boxed wines. Indeed, they “democratize” wine.

Still doubtful? Funnel some boxed wine into an empty screw-capped bottle and share it with guests. It might just open some minds to what the rest of us already know.

