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French Rabbit hops into boxes

Drink wine



DAN KISENKO

Everybody stops and stares in curiosity. Some pick up the package for a closer look. A few place it in the shopping cart.

This is something new in Ontario — wine in a Tetra Pak. Vintage-dated wine at that. French Rabbit appeared quietly on LCBO shelves a few weeks ago and was officially launched this week with much fanfare (in Toronto, naturally).

And the promotion angle on this new general list series of wines is very clear: We Ave the Environmentally Friendly Wine.

Now, for context, keep in mind that, when it comes to wine, Ontarians are very skittish about packaging. We've had bag-in-a-box wines for decades, but that's a different and bulkier technology, and few people would ever concede that those actually might contain drinkable stuff. Screw-top technology has advanced

immeasurably in recent years and now dominates some producing regions such as New Zealand. Even some bottles priced at \$100 and more are now under screw top. Yet the prevailing public perception is still that only cheap plonk comes packaged that way. The simple fact is that many people think Tetra Pak is OK for kids' juice boxes and that the only wine they can or should drink comes in glass and has a natural cork stuck in it.

So for French Rabbit to come into the market in boxes — plastic screw-top boxes at that — is a pretty gutsy move. And one that requires very careful and focused marketing.

The wines offered in these containers are three very familiar and comfortable single varietals — Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon — grown in the pays d'Oc in the south of France. The producer is a company called Boisset, one of the biggest winemakers in that country and one that is well-respected.

The French Rabbit wines are decent and consistent; what you'd expect from the pays d'Oc climate. They are all styled for the younger consumer, with muted tannins and forward fruit. Of the three, I like the Chardonnay (code 621706) the best, with its crisp acidity and green apple-celery character. The Merlot (code 621664) is the softest of the line, very plummy and fruity, while the Cabernet Sauvignon

WINE SIPS

Mailvoire Wines unveils their new barrel cellar and tasting room with a "cellar-bration" on Aug. 18 and 20.

There are three seminar-tastings covering the character of the winery's own Moira vineyard Chardonnay, the many faces of Gewurztraminer and Pinot Noir by the barrel. Those cost \$10 each.

There's also a guided nature walk along the base of the Niagara Escarpment (Saturday only), and it's free.

For details and schedules or to sign up for anything, call the the winery at 1-866-644-2244 or visit the website mailvoirewines.com. Mailvoire is at 4250 King St. E. (Highway 8) between Beamsville and Vineland.

(code 621680) has all the right flavours — black currant, red berries — in an approachable style.

The Tetra Paks themselves are certainly eye-catching, especially when you get a few dozen together on a shelf. They're bright, almost neon, metallic orange teamed up with shimmering purple, green and pink. Now that they've got your attention comes the French Rabbit message. Their working slogan is "savour the wine, save the planet."

The container cuts packaging waste by 90 per cent compared with glass and costs much less to recycle.

The waste you create is just 4 per cent of what you buy, compared with 40 per cent with a glass bottle.

This bit I love: to deliver containers to the bottling plant, one transport truck loaded with empty, flattened Tetra Paks carries the same volume as 25 trucks hauling glass, with corresponding environmental benefits in fuel savings and pollution reduction. And then there's the value aspect to the new package.

While the focus of French Rabbit wines is clearly on the Tetra Paks, they are offering the wines in normal glass bottles as well in some stores.

But if you buy the Tetra Pak, you get 1 litre for \$12.95, while glass is 750 mL for the same price.

That's two extra 4-oz glasses in the box, free.

The arrival of a Tetra Pak choice in this market is in my view long overdue, as was the move to more screw tops.

They are very consumer-friendly. Much of the rest of the world takes Tetra Paks for granted — in some cases insists on them — for everything liquid. We'll just have to see if the idea finally catches on here.

dtkislenko@thespec.com
905-526-3450



Tetra Paks produce far less waste than glass bottles.