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New Paks for wine

GORDON STIMMELL
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If you've set foot in an LCBO store recently, you have no doubt been blinded by the shiny foil Tetra Pak wines stacked prominently on display. Not to mention the billboards prominently posted along highways.

The LCBO is on an environmentally friendly mission. The new packaging is part of its plan to reduce its glass intake by 10 per cent by 2007. Of course, the LCBO is charging the producers of Tetra Paks a huge amount to market and display their wares.

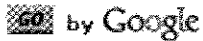
These Tetra Paks aren't pretty, and just the sight of these recyclable paper cartons is enough to make wine lovers wince. But there is no doubting the efficiency of the packaging. Nature's most efficient carrier is the egg, with



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13 per cent packaging (shell) and 87 per cent contents. Tetra Paks are only 4 per cent packaging and 96 per cent contents.

These Tetra Paks are apparently 75 per cent recyclable, with 25 per cent going to landfill. The push is on by the LCBO to get such folks as apartment dwellers to help cut down on the thousands of empty bottles put out in blue boxes each week.

The squarish or octagonal sides make Tetra Paks easier to ship and perfect for storage, since they reseal easily. The non-glass package is certainly safer for poolside, carrying in coolers, and on boats with designated captains. They also stack nicely in the home fridge.

The biggest rollout hit stores at the end of July, with Boisset's French Rabbit in tall, 1-litre Tetra containers. There's a chardonnay, a merlot and a cabernet sauvignon, all line priced at \$12.95. The same three wines are available in 750-millilitre bottles, for the same price. So you get more for your buck if you buy the glaringly ugly box. Is this some kind of pressure?

The tastiest are Vendange from California in Tetra containers, a shiraz and a chardonnay in 500-millilitre packages for \$6.95. The size is also better, easier to carry and pour, and perfect for two people who want to share a glass each.

I hear Bandit is coming in September from Trinchero/Sutter Home in California. Its Three Thieves Bandit Bianco Tetra Briks (another form of Tetra container) in the U.S. contain white trebbiano from the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy.

So how do these taste? My top picks are the **California Vendange 2003 Shiraz** (\$6.95, rating 88/100) with blueberry, vanilla, blackberry and vanilla notes and flavours, and a nice spicy finish. **Vendange 2004 Chardonnay** (\$6.95, 87) shows a whiff of butter, lemon oil, pear and freshly sliced apples with a decent spicy finish.

The **French Rabbit Merlot** (\$12.95, 83) has aromas of cedar and blackberry, with flavours of leathery stewed sour cherries and blueberry. This is not overwhelmingly wonderful, and has some hard tannins. I did not taste the Chardonnay or Cabernet.

Speaking of packaging, the other container concept sprouting all over the world is wine in cans. The LCBO has been going very slow on canned wine.

Wine in cans has been around for years. The French tried and failed to sell Beaujolais in cans to the U.S. in the 1970s. In the 1980s, United Airlines and Delta carried California wine in cans. All came crashing to earth, mainly due to a quality control thing.

New technology has improved the can concept, with a sealed plastic liner

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inside the can.

Barokes in Australia has a Bin 241 Chardonnay Semillon in dandy little 250-millilitre cans, with nice citrus, lime and lemony spiced apple flavours, which I rated 86. I found the Barokes Bin 121 Cabernet, Shiraz Merlot less appealing, with slightly oxidative meaty black cherry and cooked plum flavours, rating 84. So far, they have not been purchased by the LCBO.

Another producer, Woomba Wines, is making a line of canned vino simply called Aussie Wine. And I will spare readers the details of a nasty patent and legal war currently raging between producers of canned wines Down Under.

The LCBO purchasing folks are wary of cans for good reasons because of a disastrous experience buying Sofia Coppola Mini Blanc de Blancs sparkling wine in 187-millilitre cans with straws.


This sweet sparkler from the daughter of Francis Ford Coppola (the filmmaker makes fabulous wines in California) was released at Christmas in 2004 in four-packs at the ridiculous price of \$29.95. It is now \$9.95 and still not selling. Its perfumey flavours remind me of liquid rose petals.


Hey, it was way overpriced to begin with. The classic selling idea behind every new venture is to start low, then increase the price to meet growing demand. If the wines in these new package concepts taste wonderful, and are reasonably priced, they will soon find a loyal following.

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