

# Thinking outside the box

Wine packaging is evolving beyond the bottle and this time it's not just boxes. Canned wine, single-serve glasses and sustainable packaging are big sellers, finds **Catherine Quinn**

**N**ot so long ago, bag-in-box wines were a symbol of “value” drinking and wine in plastic was laughable. Wine drinkers are, after all, a sophisticated bunch, and selling them low-grade packaging solutions would be akin to retailing shrink-wrapped caviar or easy-spread foie gras.

But, as technology allows ever more advanced packaging, the market has shifted and what was once associated with poor quality has been reinvented. Bag-in-box wines now boast elaborate packaging and big-brand names, while slimline cans of wine are tipped to become a popular purchase. Even single-serve wine in plastic glasses – a concept laughed off *Dragons’ Den* for being too low-brow for wine drinkers – have become bestsellers.

So is the market finally ready for innovations in wine formats? “The grocers and supermarkets say they are

looking for innovation, but they also tend to be sceptical about new formats,” says Abigail Pitcher of Barlow Doherty Creative, who develops wine label designs and marketing strategies for producers.

“What we’ve seen in terms of things like wine in cans hasn’t worked too well previously,” adds Pitcher, “but formats playing it a bit safer in terms of consumer expectations about wine have been well received. The 18.7cl bottles, for example, still look like consumers’ expectations of a wine bottle and box wines are also doing well.”

## Times are a-changing

Certainly bag-in-box wine has been quietly increasing its market share. Once a symbol of cheap 1970s parties, the concept has finally begun gaining ground as a product of reasonable quality. The bag-in-box market is growing 10.2% year on year and has a 6.5% share of the market, according to WineNation consumer research from Accolade Wines.

No small part of this is due to several “household names” in wine now retailing in the box. Stowells and Hardys all produce bag-in-box versions of their bottles and, having established good-quality credentials in the eyes of consumers, their kudos has opened the market up.

But brand endorsement is not the only thing ensuring bag-in-box wines are perceived differently by consumers. “A lot of the change in the way people see bag-in-box wines is to

## SIZE MATTERS

No small part of the most successful innovations is the ability to offer small serves. Wine was historically packed in a 75cl bottle because this format was perfect for two to share over dinner. But times have changed and, with single occupancy households at an all-time high, many consumers are looking to buy smaller measures of wine.

Bag-in-box wine has begun to reflect this, with smaller 3-litre boxes now being produced as opposed to the larger 5 litre format. "The 3-litre box means we can get a better quality of wine out to consumers in bag in box for the magic £10 price point, which supermarkets find works best for wine consumers," confirms Brahmachari of CRP-BiB.

Smaller wine bottles have been popular for some time, with supermarkets now selling two sizes – small glasses at 18.7cl and large at 25cl. According to Nielsen, minis have a 1.2% share of the wine market, although sales are flat. The latest big seller has been the launch of single-serve plastic glasses with sealed lids, offering the consumer all the convenience of a pre-poured drink.

Currently Marks & Spencer has exclusivity with the first developer of this innovation, Le Froglet, which was rejected

on Dragons' Den for failing to recognise the lack of market for plastic-housed wine. A year on and the single-serve glasses have become so popular that the supermarket is now launching a four-pack designed for picnickers. The range includes three French wines – Le Froglet Shiraz, Rosé and Sauvignon Blanc – priced at £2.25 each.

As with Baroke's patented technology, Marks & Spencer ploughed an enormous amount of time and funds into ensuring the wine in the glass matched consumer taste standards. "The wine glasses actually took 18 months to develop in order to get the quality of the packaging right," explains Belinda Kleinig, M&S winemaker,

who brokered the deal between Le Froglet innovators to exclusively supply the chain.

"There was a lot of work undertaken on the 'inert filling technology' in order to guarantee the quality and life of the wine itself," says Kleinig. "A lot of work also went into developing the seal, with extensive pressure testing on the lids. The blends are all identical to the full-size versions available in stores and our customers really like the convenience. This summer we are launching four-packs of Le Froglet for £8.99 each in white and rosé."



do with the packaging," explains Dev Brahmachari, managing director of CRP-BiB, which is the UK's leading provider of bag-in-box wine packaging. "There have been real developments in the quality. The packs are now manufactured with foiling, embossing, blocking and multiple varnishes, so they really stand out. But there's also been a change in retail in terms of the growth in own-label brands."

As Brahmachari sees it, bag-in-box wines were once the province of the "value" supermarket brand, but the ability of major stores to develop premium lines has changed customer perception. "If you think of the Tesco Finest range, most consumers would associate this with genuinely quality products," explains Brahmachari. "As a result, there's been an upsurge in own-brand products and box wines are part of this."

"The hardest thing is convincing consumers that bag-in-box wine is identical to that you'd get in a bottle." It is simply in a more economical format. "Wine producers vat large quantities and whether they bag it or bottle it the source is the same."

British consumers might be slow to catch on, but there has been some definite movement of late. In Scandinavian countries bag-in-box formats are actually preferred to bottles – shoppers understand they're buying the



Much of the change in how people see bag in box is to do with the packaging

same thing, but in a more lightweight and environmentally friendly fashion.

Other advantages are that the sealed vacuum bag removes risk of cork taint and keeps wine fresh for longer. The tap design of boxed wine allows the contents to stay fresh for six weeks, according to producers, while from an industry point of view the expansive space a box affords means considerably more room for marketing messages.

"Producers are realising that a box means a lot more room on a shelf to purvey marketing and branding," says Brahmachari. "Some brands are now using this to run special promotions."

### Canned innovation

But it's not all about bag-in-box wines when it comes to innovative packaging. Another concept that was initially dismissed was the idea of wine in a can. Ten years ago canned wine was an unparalleled flop, with manufacturers unable to bring products to market that were palatable ▶

for consumers. But a recent spate in technological advances have succeeded in producing cans with wines which hold their own against bottles. Plus manufacturers such as Rexam having mastered the process of canning wine to taste the same as it does in bottle.

“Our research shows that wine in a can does not taste any different to wine in a bottle, so it depends on the quality of wine filled into the can in the first place,” explains Kym Hamer, marketing manager for new product development at Rexam, which has recently innovated a new wine-in-can product for Echo Falls. “Results from a blind wine tasting with industry experts showed that those tasting the wines could not tell which was from a bottle and which was from a can,” adds Hamer.

Another part of the breakthrough is producers have realised the wisdom of using the can format for a drink style consumers already recognise – carbonated or bubbly wines. New products are also piggy-backing on the now-established canned spirit and mixer, which are sold with



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Research shows wine in a can doesn't taste any different to wine in a bottle

great success in major supermarkets. The slimline cans used to add a sophisticated feel to canned gin and tonics, and bourbon and cokes, works to great effect with bubbly wine, marketed at the young affluent female market.

“In our consumer research taste tests, sparkling canned wine performs extremely well and consumers tell us they prefer the light, refreshing taste of a wine spritzer to pre-mixed canned spirits,” confirms Clare Griffiths, European marketing director for Accolade Wines, which has recently launched its Echo Falls brand in a canned bubbly Spritzer format.

The Echo Falls wine comes in two varieties – White Zinfandel rosé and Pinot Grigio, both pre-mixed with sparkling water to create a spritzer, and accordingly light in alcohol and calories at one unit and 120 calories per can.

So, with the pre-mix spritzer selling well, is it possible that a canned still wine will be accepted by UK consumers? With the wine market attracting a decidedly traditional demographic in Europe this is still a difficult proposition. Although further afield, Australian wine brand Barokes has begun to crack the world market.

Barokes has developed a patented wine seal technology, Vinsafe, which allows it to keep the product free from metallic tang and with an enviably long shelf life of up to five years. This, teamed with lightweight packing and an attractive can design, means its cans of sparkling and still wines have sold well in Australia and Asia.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Japanese market has been very receptive to the concept, with major cities such as Tokyo and Osaka already well versed in all kinds of canned innovations, from hot coffee to sweet bread. With several EU countries currently retailing their product, Barokes is

**Above: Technological advances mean canned alcoholic drinks are no longer restricted to spirit and mixers; Hardys produces bag-in-box versions of some of its bottled wines (below)**

confident it is extendable to all manner of outlets, from in-flight wine serves to mini-bar contents.

### Looking to the future

So do these developments mean the market is finally more open to innovation in packaging? The experts are sceptical, but certainly the smart money is on environmental packaging such as PET plastic, which is more easily recycled. “Because PET could allow oxygen to ingress into the wine it could have an impact on flavour over a period of time, in the same way as cork can in glass,” explains Giles James, business development manager at Yealand Estate, which produces environmentally responsible wines.

“However, the technology we've developed goes a long way to protecting the wine from premature oxidation and therefore should ensure the wines stay fresher for longer. Although I think it's worth bearing in mind that it is better suited to wines and varieties that are better drunk young,” he says.

The wine category has “to stop living in the past”, according to packaging design guru Kevin Shaw from Stranger & Stranger. “Not much has changed on the UK shelves in the 18 years we've been designing labels. Just look to other categories and learn that change is good,” he says.

Multiples in the US are far ahead of the UK in terms of packaging and design innovations, Shaw adds, and it's now up to the UK's major retailers to drive change. “The multiples could support the environment issue a lot more than they do,” he says.

Overall, both wine producers and stockists can look forward to exciting times when it comes to product and packaging innovation. With premium supermarkets such as Marks & Spencer forging the way for new formats, it could be only a matter of time before these new packaging designs go mainstream. ■

