

## WINE

TASTE-TESTING BOXED WINES: A  
SUMMER SMACK-DOWNBy *Special to MIX*

By KATHERINE COLE  
Photography by FAITH CATHCART

In March, Thomas Angove, the Australian inventor of the iconic "wine cask," died at the ripe old age of 92, leaving behind an eponymous family winery and a legacy of wine-filled plastic sacks encased in 1-gallon corrugated-cardboard boxes. Thanks to Angove's innovation, campers, boaters and college party hosts have been enjoying lightweight, low-cost wines for 45 years now without fear of breaking glass.

When Angove developed boxed wine in 1965, he democratized a beverage that largely had been limited to an elite audience, at least in the United States. Everyday consumers who once might have been intimidated by wine's exclusivity factor were drawn in by the ease and accessibility of corkscrew-free sipping. In addition, the cask's collapsible polyethylene bladder meant that, once opened, a boxed wine stayed fresh for weeks on end.

But let's be honest: Boxed wine used to be the domain of discount supermarkets, a flavored alcoholic beverage that didn't taste like the grapes it purportedly came from.

That has changed recently. The rise of a quality bulk-wine industry, an increasing demand for inexpensive wine and a new sense of environmental responsibility among consumers and producers have meant that 2010 has seen better nonbottled wines being sold at higher-end retail outlets. Even for the most upscale drinkers, this has been the year of the alternative package.

Intrepid picnickers and partiers that we are here at MIX, we couldn't ignore this trend.

So we recently gathered up 36 wines packaged in boxes -- and cans -- of all shapes and sizes. These weren't your everyday supermarket swill; rather, they were the new boxes we've been seeing at gourmet groceries and reputable bottle shops.

Intrigued, we wrapped them up for purposes of anonymity, ordered a few pizzas, gathered at the fab Central Eastside Arts District headquarters of the Wine & Spirit Archive, and started tasting.

### THE DUDS

First, the bad news. Without clever graphic design work and promising-looking verbiage to divert our attention, we found that these pretty packages held plenty of duds.

"I've tasted a lot of messed-up wines," remarked Todd Steele at one point. "I've already hit a couple that taste like they were manufactured on the New Jersey Turnpike."

Of particular concern were a few offerings that fell outside the box, both literally and figuratively: Wines in cans. Although we had sipped bubbies from cans previously with no ill results, these still wines smelled, according to Nancy Rommelmann, "like cat food. Also: feces, plaster, gasoline." Apparently this is an innovation whose time has not yet arrived.

Halfway (size-wise) between the foul-tasting can and the bulky bag-in-box format is the Tetra Prisma Aseptic, a slender, thin-coated cardboard box made by the same company that produces those foil-lined soup, broth, chai tea and juice boxes. We liked these containers for their light weight, portability and refrigerator-friendly size, but alas, none of the Tetra wines struck our fancy.

### LOGISTICS

The traditional "cask" boxes were not logistically faultless, either. One tore in transport, requiring a duct-tape bandage to keep the pliant plastic bladder inside from spilling out. Other spigots were permanently positioned at an angle rather than vertically, requiring participants to hold their glasses to the side (yes, we know that we should have been able to twist them; maybe we just have wimpy wrists).

Then there was the question of the type of spigot. The twist-release style was deemed too much trouble, the simple push-button much easier to manage one-handed. And forget about the romance of the wine experience: As we cleaned up at the end of the evening, we felt like medical technicians handling blood transfusions when we tore open the boxes and poured what remained of the bags of red liquid down the drain.



### LONGEVITY

We're not in Twinkie territory here: Those polyethylene bladders do not age well. Nicolas Quille, our chief winemaker panelist, warned us to be sure to check the "best by" dates that are usually printed at the bottom of the box (or, look for a packaging date and add nine months to determine its shelf life).

However, if you've got a fresh cask, the good news is that the airtight shrinking bladder ensures that the wine inside will last for weeks after it's opened.

Because it lacks this bladder, the Tetra Prisma doesn't have this advantage; it's not much better than a regular screw-capped bottle when it

## Taste-testing boxed wines: A summer ...

comes to freshness over time (squeeze the air out of the top of a Tetra -- sort of like a toothpaste tube -- before refrigerating, however, and the wine inside should stay tasty for a few days).

And the can? Once it's open, it's open. We're still at a loss as to why canned wine even exists, except to think that the Japanese market -- famous for its beer-stocked vending machines -- might be an explanation.

### THE WINNERS

OK, enough kvetching. Now on to the really good news: These wines are cheap. Our winners may look spendy because their contents are equivalent to between four and nearly seven bottles of wine. That pencils out to a per-bottle cost of between \$5 and \$6.80. Not bad.



Our winning wines didn't have much in common other than the fact that they came in boxes. They hailed from California, Chile, Portugal and France (sadly, we didn't get any Oregon casks; while some are served in restaurants, they haven't yet made their way to wine shops). They were vintage and nonvintage, blends and single varietals.

We chose them simply because they were fruity and fun. They washed down our pizza slices just fine, and we deemed them worthy of a summer barbecue or picnic.

Would we serve them from plastic cups? Make them into sangria? Add an ice cube?

Yes, yes and yes. Why not?

So while we aren't quite ready to toss out our corkscrews, we do plan to raise a plastic cup this summer in a toast to Thomas Angove. Because -- four and a half decades later -- we wine snobs are finally ready to embrace the box.

### THE WINNING WINES

*Note: Many of these wines will be sale-priced as summer progresses, so consider the prices below to be on the high end.*

#### WHY-NOT WHITE

*2008 Bota Box California Chardonnay (3 liters for \$20; equivalent to \$5 per bottle)*

Kerry Newberry nailed it when she deemed this white "nice for a family picnic" and "something Mom would like." Benign, but not totally bland, it was floral and fruity, with notes of peach, nectarine, apricot and the barest hint of vanilla. Plus, when we unwrapped it, we liked the look of the bleach-free recycled-paper box. Why would we buy a wine like this? At this price, why not?

#### EASY APERITIF

*2009 Gran Verano Chile Sauvignon Blanc (3 liters for \$22.50; equivalent to \$5.60 per bottle)*

Our tasters easily identified this as a sauvignon blanc thanks to its aromas of asparagus, grapefruit, grass and gooseberry. Tropical fruit salad on the palate -- guava, pineapple and litchi -- added an extra layer of fun to the glass. Todd Steele complimented it as "well-balanced," with "true varietal character," adding, "I could sit in the sun and drink a lot of this."

#### STANDBY OF ANY COLOR

*Terra da Malta Portugal Branco (white; 5 liters for \$36; equivalent to \$5.40 per bottle), Terra da Malta Portugal Tinto (red; 5 liters for \$39; equivalent to \$5.85 per bottle)*

Bright acidity and floral, stone-fruit and citrus-rind notes were cues for Darryl Joannides that the "easy drinking" white must be a Portuguese blend. Which it was. Nicolas Quille was impressed, deeming it "the wine of the night." Then, as we were unwrapping our winners, we realized we also had voted for a red blend from the same producer. With its jammy fruit, the vanilla-accented red begged to be served at a barbecue. Dixie Huey found a "touch of earthiness and minerality" in the tinto, deeming it "simple but pleasant."

#### **ALL-AMERICAN RED**

*2008 Black Box Wines California Cabernet Sauvignon (3 liters for \$27; equivalent to \$6.80 per bottle)*

Black Box appeared on the scene in 2003 offering something novel: High-quality, appellation-specific, vintage-dated wines in a box that wasn't hideous. Seven years later, the company continues to hit the mark with this judiciously oaked crowd pleaser reminiscent of a blueberry-cherry pie. Grant Butler suggested pairing this all-American red with Italian fare such as lasagna or pasta with red sauce.

#### **OLD-WORLD RED**

*Edmond Burle Vin de Pays de Vaucluse (5 liters for \$45; equivalent to \$6.75 per bottle)*

Next to so many over-manipulated wine-flavored beverages, this old-world gem stood out as an original to Martha Holmberg, who enjoyed the Burle's light body and herbaceous finish. Turns out Portland-based importer Phil Smith contracts directly with artisanal producers Damien and Florent (sons of Edmond) Burle to bring their rustic values here. This blend of 2008-vintage Southern Rhone fruit is sourced from old-vine Burle vineyards that fall just outside the boundaries of the prestigious Vacqueyras and Gigondas appellations that his label is best-known for. What does that mean? This wine is a hard-core bargain.

#### **WHERE TO BUY**

*Note: Prices are approximate, and store lists, which are limited to the greater Portland area, may be incomplete. You can ask your local wine merchant to special order any wine listed in this column.*

#### **WHY-NOT WHITE**

*2008 Bota Box California Chardonnay (3 liters for \$20)*

Fred Meyer (any)  
Trader Joe's (any)

#### **EASY APERITIF**

*2009 Gran Verano Chile Sauvignon Blanc (3 liters for \$22.50)*

Alberta Co-op Grocery  
Fred Meyer Tigard and Tualatin  
Lamb's Palisades and Wilsonville  
Thriftway Marketplaces  
Market of Choice Burlingame and West Linn  
New Seasons Markets: Cedar Hills Crossing, Concordia, Mountain Park, Raleigh Hills and Seven Corners  
Whole Foods Market, Fremont  
Wine Xing

#### **STANDBY OF ANY COLOR**

*Terra da Malta Portugal Branco (white; 5 liters for \$36)*

City Market  
Pastaworks Hawthorne and Mississippi

*Terra da Malta Portugal Tinto (red; 5 liters for \$39)*

City Market  
Fred Meyer Hollywood West  
Pastaworks Hawthorne and Mississippi  
Whole Foods Market Fremont

#### **ALL-AMERICAN RED**

*2008 Black Box Wines California Cabernet Sauvignon (3 liters for \$27)*

Widely available in supermarkets and bottle shops

**OLD-WORLD RED**

*Edmond Burle Vin de Pays de Vaucluse (5 liters for \$45)*

Fred Meyer Northwest Best

Vino

Vinopolis

**Panelists:**

Ted Farthing

Beverage marketing consultant, [tedfarthing.com](http://tedfarthing.com)

Dixie Huey

Proprietor of Trellis Wine Consulting, [trelliswineconsulting.com](http://trelliswineconsulting.com)

Darryl Joannides

Owner of Cork -- A Bottle Shop, [corkwineshop.com](http://corkwineshop.com)

Erica Landon

Hospitality and sales director, Hawks View Cellars, [hawksvinecellars.com](http://hawksvinecellars.com);

proprietor, Walter Scott Wines, [walterscottwine.com](http://walterscottwine.com)

Mimi Martin

Co-owner, The Wine and Spirit Archive educational center,

[wineandspiritarchive.com](http://wineandspiritarchive.com)

Kerry Newberry

Wine, food and sustainability writer, [kerrynewberry.com](http://kerrynewberry.com)

Nicolas Quille

Winemaker and general manager, Pacific Rim, [rieslingrules.com](http://rieslingrules.com)

Nancy Rommelmann

Journalist, [nancyrommelmann.com](http://nancyrommelmann.com)

Todd Steele

Proprietor, Metrovino, [metrovinopdx.com](http://metrovinopdx.com)

Grant Butler

The Oregonian's critic-at-large

Martha Holmberg

Editor-in-chief, MIX magazine

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