

Wine Spectator

Would You Pop a Can of Pinot?

Versatile and eco-friendly, wine in cans is increasingly popular, but some think it's just a fad

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Photo by: Courtesy Lila/Madero Films

Winemakers like Lila are touting the convenience of canned wines for active customers.

When you're looking at replacements for packaging invented in the 17th century, it makes sense to offer something that feels novel but looks familiar. Nicholas Johnston, a research assistant for the Texas Wine Marketing Institute, completed his doctoral studies this year by asking young consumers for their reactions to alternative wine packaging—wine without the bottle. His two-part study, *Beyond the 750ml Bottle: Millennials' Responses Towards Alternative Wine Packaging*, included a small focus group of wine drinkers, followed by a national survey of 1,151 respondents, ages 21 to 39.

"The cans actually generated quite a bit of discussion, both negative and positive from all groups," Johnston told *Wine Spectator*. "With the Tetrapak, they'd look at it and go, 'Oh, isn't that what my coconut water comes in? That's interesting,' and they'd move on. But the cans they'd stop on because of the design of the packaging. The cans generally had the highest overall perceptions of [wine] quality based on the packaging."

Wine producers and merchants are seeing the discussion play out in the market. According to Nielsen data of off-premise sales published in July, canned wine sales in the U.S. grew 125.2 percent in value in the 52 weeks ending June 18, 2016, with sales at \$14.5 million, up from \$6.4 million the previous year.

While consumers have been trying sparkling wine in cans for over a decade—bubbly drinks in cans are more familiar—canned table wines have only found their place in the past year. Off-premise sales hit \$6.8 million in the past 12 months, a whiplash-inducing 1,014.5 percent growth over the prior year.

"When we first launched [cans, in 2011], there was definitely consumer resistance," said Ben Parsons, owner and winemaker of Denver winery [The Infinite Monkey Theorem](#). "Only at the end of 2014 did it really start to take off. That's because we got calls from buyers like Whole Foods." Almost overnight, the brand went from a local urban winery to a 42-state presence, selling the canned equivalent of almost 40,000 cases in 2015 and inking a deal with Frontier Airlines.

Convenient wine

Every canned winemaker interviewed by *Wine Spectator* said canned wines' most attractive and obvious benefit is versatility. That was the goal when Francis Ford Coppola Winery introduced the first modern American canned wine, the "[Sofia Mini](#)" fizz, in the early 2000s. Winery president and director Corey Beck recalled, "Around 2000, Francis came to us and said, 'You know, the thing that always gets me about the wine business is that it's very difficult to buy a single serving. You can go in and buy a can of Pepsi or a can of Budweiser, but you can't buy just a can of wine.'"

"When you're knocking out your honey-do list, out in the garden, manning the grill, poolside, when you're going out on the boat, going to a picnic and just want to dump a case in your cooler," is how Graham Veysey, who launched Mancan in Cleveland in 2015, described cans' utility. It also makes sense at bottle-unfriendly venues like outdoor parties, concerts and theaters.

There's also size-convenience. "My wife doesn't have to open up a whole bottle of Pinot Grigio to make a sauce," said Kevin Mehra, founder of the négociant 90+ Cellars, whose company launched the Lila canned brand in 2016. Ryan Harms, whose Union Wine Co. started canning [Underwood Cellars](#) Oregon wines in 2013, recalled a recent conversation: "A woman in her seventies said, 'We need these for the golf course!' She's not at all what I'd expect for the demographic, but she needed the utility of it."

Another major benefit of aluminum cans is environmental. According to the Container Recycling Institute, aluminum cans are recycled 45.2 percent of the time in the U.S., glass bottles 27.8 percent. Many localities don't accept glass for recycling. Even the carbon footprint of shipping the wine is reduced: The same amount of wine weighs less in aluminum than in glass.

Canned quality?

Why is canned wine having its moment now? Undeniably, demographics play a major role. Younger consumers have demonstrated a willingness to try unfamiliar wine styles and containers. According to Mehra's internal research, when polled on whether they'd try wine in a can on a 1 to 10 scale, under-42s averaged "in the 8s"; over-50 consumers fell under 3.

Within the Millennials, however, Johnston found a disparity in his own studies. "The younger Millennials just completely bashed [the can]. They thought it looked childish. They said, 'That just reminds me of being in high school.' I think they want to be perceived as not being a kid anymore." But with age and increased confidence in purchases, Johnston found "the tone completely changed. [Older Millennials] thought it was a great idea" for its portability and novelty. Johnston found that cans beat out most other forms of alternative packaging in perceived functionality, and all of them in perceived attractiveness.

Large brands like [Barefoot](#) and [FlipFlop](#) are joining the wine-in-cans realm, bringing aggressive marketing to the category. But long-term success in this value segment will depend on reaching an audience beyond urban-dwelling Instagram "influencers" and Whole Foods shoppers.

Canned wine's share of the U.S. market is still less than 1 percent, and some retailers remain more skeptical than producers about its staying power. "I see it as a fad," said Doug Jeffirs, director of wine sales for the major Chicago-area chain Binny's Beverage Depot. "I think there's going to be a few mainstay brands that are going to have a little longevity, but by and large, the rest are going to go away." Jeffirs has stocked about a dozen brands of canned wine. Some have been successes, others less so; likewise, sales have been stronger at certain Binny's locations, like one near the Chain O'Lakes boating destination and another near the Ravinia outdoor concert venue.

But good packaging doesn't beat good wine, and Jeffirs thinks the wine quality largely has yet to match the hype. "We tasted a *lot* of the new cans, because of course [producers are] so excited about it, and everybody's trying to pitch them. But a lot of what we tasted was just not good. Some of them even tasted more like the can than the wine."

Beck agrees that quality is the paramount consideration. "You can get someone to buy it once on the cool, innovative packaging, but then [quality has] got to be in the can or the bottle or whatever you're doing to get them to come back again."

Budweiser has no vintage

Canned winemakers face a marketing challenge. Do they make and market these wines like bottled wine or canned beer?

Mancan has opted for the latter. "The idea is that it's non-varietal and non-vintage so that you can have consistency year after year, just like your favorite beer tastes the same in 2016 as it did in 2012 even though you've got different barley or hop harvest," said Veysey. Mancan has a red, a white and a sparkling offering.

Jeffirs of Binny's has witnessed that approach work as well. "What we've seen in our sales results is a lot of the straight varietal stuff they're trying to do is really just not working in the can. This is supposed to be more of a fun thing. So the lighter, fruitier stuff is working better."

Union and Lila follow a different philosophy. "We're a winery. We grow, harvest and ferment wine. This isn't just a marketing concept," said Harms, whose Underwood Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris are the same Willamette wines they put in bottles, as well as an Oregon rosé in both containers and a sparkling Chardonnay only in cans. "We've had both the canning line and bottling line coming from the same vat."

Wineries are also navigating the unique challenges of a container that had not been used to store—and market—wine until recently. Canned wine doesn't age like bottled wine. Early adopters like Coppola needed to experiment with preservative linings, sulfur additions and atypical packaging rhythms (to ensure freshness, Coppola fills cans four times a year, Union twice).

Such know-how is now largely in place, but federal metric standard-of-fill laws have not answered one question: How much is "one can" of wine? Wineries may opt for cans of 187ml, 250ml (if sold in a four-pack), 375ml or 500ml, all sizes that are in use. The FDA defines one serving of wine at 12 percent alcohol as 5 ounces, or 147.9 milliliters.

Winemakers who opt for small cans think larger sizes defeat a key benefit of canning wine in the first place. "If you have a 500ml can, that's not single-serve, because you have to pour it into a glass," said Parsons, whose Infinite Monkey Theorem blends are sold in four-packs of 250ml cans. "That's three glasses of wine."

Veysey, who uses 375ml cans that nearly mimic the 12-ounce ones for most beers and sodas, said, "We get the question, 'Well isn't that more than one glass?' And our answer is, 'Yeah, but when do you ever have one glass of wine?'"