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Coming soon to a wine store near you: screw tops, Tetra Paks and plastic bottles

Local vintners brace for changes as new wave of global viticultural packaging trends heading B.C.'s way

Glen Korstrom

Want B.C. wine in plastic bottles or Tetra Paks? Don't hold your breath. But if you want screw caps, there are plenty of options.

Foreign wine companies are experimenting with alternative packaging, and B.C. Liquor Distribution Branch executives expect local consumers to be able to buy wine in various formats by mid-April.

"There's been a seismic shift. Everything's gone green," said Kelly Wilson, who is the BCLDB's executive director of retail services. "We have 500 screw caps in B.C. liquor stores and countless synthetic corks."

Tetra Pak boosters cite Franklin Associates' October 2006 study that found the cartons have a lower environmental impact than either plastic or glass containers.

The study claimed that if all the table wine in Canada were to be packaged in Tetra Paks instead of glass, the amount of greenhouse gases saved would be the equivalent of taking 43,000 cars off the road.

Boisset America started importing French Rabbit in 2006. It's currently the only Tetra Pak wine to yet grace B.C. liquor stores.

Vancouver-based Stile Wines managing partner Carmen D'Onofrio said he plans to import Tetra Paks filled with wine from Australia's Andrew Peace Wines in mid-April.

By then, Fosters Wine Estates Canada will already be selling plastic bottles of its Australian Wolf Blass Bilyara Reserve chardonnay and Bilyara Reserve cabernet sauvignon to B.C. residents.

Those shatter-proof polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles have a 12-month shelf life, sell for between \$14 and \$16 and will be the first wines in plastic bottles available at B.C. liquor stores.

Ontarians have bought more than 100,000 bottles of Wolf Blass' plastic encased wines in the first six months since they were introduced in central Canada in mid-2006.

Amcor PET Packaging produces Wolf Blass' plastic bottles in Australia, but the global packaging giant can't produce them in North America because it's embroiled in a patent dispute with another packaging powerhouse, Constar International Inc.

Constar owns the patent in North America for the sophisticated plastic bottles, even though it has not perfected their production, said Lynne Brophy, Amcor's North American regional sales manager for liquor in the company's diversified products division.

The PET bottles for wine are far more complex than the plastic bottles that hold vodka and other spirits for sale in B.C. liquor stores. Amcor's plastic wine bottles contain an ingredient that Brophy described as an "oxygen scavenger." The compound seeks and removes oxygen from the plastic to ensure that no air gets to the wine.

Wolf Blass has substantially reduced its transportation budget by packaging some of its wines in PET bottles because it can entirely fill containers that it ships to the northern hemisphere.

Shipping lines have weight limits that restrict winemakers from completely filling containers with wine in glass bottles. Plastic packaging weighs 85% less than glass.

Screw caps are increasingly popular because they're easier to open and have a more air-tight seal than cork.

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The top selling red wine in all Canadian provinces except Quebec, Yellowtail shiraz, is slated to come bottles with screw caps within six months, said Yellowtail spokeswoman Libby Nutt.

B.C.'s Blasted Church Vineyards, Quail's Gate Estate Winery and Stag's Hollow Winery all have wines bottled in screw caps.

Tinhorn Creek Estate Winery started screw-capping its entire 390,000-bottle production last year.

"We tested it. We were happy with the results, so we jumped ahead and started using screw caps on our higher-end wines," said Tinhorn co-owner Kenn Oldfield.

Oldfield rented a screw cap machine in 2004 to seal 1,920 of 19,200 bottles of his 2001 vintage Oldfield collection merlot. In 2005, he bottled all 19,200 bottles of his merlot with screw caps.

He sold his filling and corking machine for \$30,000 and bought a filling and screw capping machine for \$80,000.

"For the long term, you can expect to see our wine in glass bottles with screw caps," Oldfield said. "We're not looking at other options. We're not ready to bet the farm on being on the bleeding edge of choosing the wrong one."

More conservative B.C. winemakers have yet to experiment with screw caps.

Cedar Creek Estate Winery proprietor Gordon Fitzpatrick started using synthetic corks for some of his roughly 400,000 bottles of wine in 2005.

He believes synthetic corks eliminate the cork taint but he fears that they may negatively impact fine wine stored long term.

"We spend about \$0.90 each for high- quality corks. Cork breathes a little bit naturally. So, for premium red wines, no one is absolutely certain that hermetically sealed packaging is for the benefit of the wine," Fitzpatrick said.

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