



# Thinking Outside the Bottle

## New wine packaging works well for kayakers

Review and photos by Susan Conrad

**T**he heavenly aroma of garlic, onion and basil mingled with the pungent scent of salt water, wafted around us as we scurried about camp tending to the usual chores. After a long day of paddling, conversation was not necessary, at least until the tents were erected, the tarp slung, the fire crackling, dinner served and wine poured. With a crimson sunset lingering in front of us, our stomachs growling and salivary glands kicking into overdrive, I thought, “It doesn’t get any better than this.”

Our camp-side feast featured grilled salmon cakes, bowtie pasta and crusty bread. We smugly toasted our good fortune and reached for the spigot to help ourselves to another glass of wine on tap. Yes, boxed wine. Our epicurean excesses were washed down with fine boxed wine. No, that is not an oxymoron.

I’ve packed my fair share of glass bottles from sea to shining sea, drank decent Cab Sauvys on the fjords of the Inside Passage, consumed shady Chardonnays on glacier-carved lakes in Montana and imbibed blissful Beaujolais in Belize. Slowly, however, I have become liberated from the cork, and my kayak excursions have evolved into thinking “outside the bottle.”

It’s now time to embrace the trend, release the stigma and recognize the benefits of boxed wine. Boxed wine isn’t really a new

concept to kayakers. Renowned kayaker Audrey Sutherland was using the classic silvery wine bladders decades ago while logging countless miles around the Hawaiian Islands and along the Inside Passage. Audrey’s equipment always had multiple uses. Her versatile wine bladders also functioned as pillows, cushions, signaling devices and, of course, water containers.

I still have at least a dozen of my old Mylar bags, fully entombed in duct tape, buried at the bottom of a neglected gear box. Once we drank all the wine, these became our official water jugs and a steadfast piece of gear on all overnight trips. These flexible bags were amazingly strong and virtually leakproof.

### A Brand-New Bag

Today’s new, improved wine box liners no longer have a shiny, metallic coating and many do not have the convenient pop-off spouts, eliminating the option to reuse them as water bladders. However, the good news is the wine is significantly better quality. No longer the homely stepsister of sophisticated *vino*, boxed wines have come into their own, and especially from a kayaker’s perspective, have many advantages over bottled wine.

Boxed wines are convenient, economical, eco-friendly, and in many cases, downright tasty. You won’t need to pack a

corkscrew or carry around an empty bottle for the remainder of your trip. Dump the box in the recycling bin before you head out and then as you consume the wine, the bags take up less space in your kayak and handily fill in many of the unused nooks and crannies in the hatches. Stuffing the bags, sans boxes, up against the front bulkhead, in front of the foot pegs, is an additional storage option (since your feet are in close proximity to the bladders, I'd recommend placing the bags in nylon stuff sacks or heavy-duty garbage bags to protect them and inhibit the transfer of any bacteria to the spout). One more bonus: The bag floats, so if it happens to go overboard and you're quick to snatch it up, you can still enjoy a glass that night with dinner.

As you swirl, sip or slurp your glass of boxed wine you can feel good about reducing your carbon footprint. Fuel emissions are cut drastically because cardboard is lighter than glass and requires less fuel to transport. Boxed wine packaging amounts to just 4 percent of its total weight, compared to 70 percent for glass bottles. The boxes are usually made from recycled materials and are recyclable. (The bags are usually recycling category 7 and not widely accepted in recycling.)

You can expect the wine to taste good for up to six weeks after it has been opened. The beauty of bag-in-box packaging is that as you consume the wine, the bag compresses around the remaining contents. Oxidation is unlikely because air never comes in contact with the wine as it does with bottled wine. The result is that your last glass during week three tastes as delicious as your first glass in week one.



## Boxed, Not Bagged

Starting in 2007, many wineries began using the innovative aseptic-box packaging system (Tetra-Pak is among the best known), resulting in a lightweight, flexible, shatterproof container. It's made with a plastic-coated paperboard carton lined with aluminum foil, similar to plastic-coated milk or juice cartons. The newer aseptic packaging promises a shelf life of up to one year and eliminates the chances of bacteria entering the product during the filling process, a common cause of spoilage with bottled and corked wines. Similar to their bagged wine counterparts, the containers are environmentally friendlier than glass bottles, requiring less energy to produce and transport. They are also resealable, portable and practical. However, they're difficult to recycle because of their multilayer construction. The access to carton recycling in the U.S. is a paltry 20 percent, compared to 80 percent in Canada. Tetra-Pak and other leading carton manufacturers have banded together to increase access to carton recycling in the U.S.

## Down the Hatch

Hundreds of bags, boxes and pouches encompassing dozens of varietals crowd the shelves of alcohol resellers. Will a Blanc

de Noir, a Pinot Grigio or a Riesling accompany you and your paddling companions on the next adventure? Or perhaps a Syrah, a Malbec or a Merlot will grace your hatches. With so many boxed wines on the market, how does a discerning kayaker decide which varietals to bring? To make this task less daunting for you, we reviewed 21 boxed wines, narrowing our choices down to the top three whites and reds. Although they may not fully rival expensive bottled wines, our favorites promise to pair nicely with and even enhance whatever culinary delights you create in your own camp kitchen.

Our three-person tasting panel conducted a blind test, assigning each varietal a score based on the widely used *Wine Spectator* magazine's 100-point scale:

- 95-100 — Classic; a great wine
- 90-94 — Outstanding; superior character and style
- 80-89 — Good to very good; wine with special qualities
- 70-79 — Average; drinkable wine that may have minor flaws
- 60-69 — Below average; drinkable but not recommended
- 50-59 — Poor; undrinkable, not recommended

Since everyone's palate is different, any form of wine rating is going to be somewhat subjective. Some argue the concept is skewed because of the human element, yet most of the major wine media use it to good effect. What's important is to embrace the subjectivity behind the process and just go with the flow—much like kayaking.

Immensely enjoying our wine journey, we found it difficult to refrain from remarking out loud on the qualities of these wines as we rolled them on our tongues. Incorporating all of our senses and asking

ourselves some difficult questions, we rated the wines based on color and clarity, body and structure, aroma and taste, and overall impression. We then compared notes and compiled our scores.

## Winning Whites

In the white category, **Silver Birch Sauvignon Blanc** received the highest marks and was our top-scoring wine overall, tallying 92 points. Considered "outstanding" on our 100-point scale, that's not bad for a boxed wine. Honey and spice and everything nice with notes of orange and vanilla earned this medium-bodied, buttery-smooth wine the top spot on our list. The ample, fruity aromas came bursting through, barely swirling the glass. We highly recommend this wine if you enjoy a crisp, acidic Sauvignon Blanc. Silver Birch is a New Zealand wine, imported by Underdog Wine Merchants. The large, 750 ml bladder equals four bottles and retails for about \$24. (Note: All prices listed here will vary, depending on the seller.) Pair this with some pasta liberally sprinkled with freshly grated Parmesan cheese and you'll be a happy camper.

**Black Box Chardonnay** took second place in the whites, with a score of 87 points. We were smitten with this medium-bodied, tangy wine with hints of vanilla, floral spice, creamy oak and apricots. This complex wine is fresh and bright, with a dry sensation that lingered on the sides of our tongues. When Black Box launched its first wine in 2002, it was the first premium boxed wine on the market and the first to date its vintages.

This Monterey County, California, wine will easily wash down your favorite crustaceans or fresh catch of the day. A three-liter box sells for about \$19. You can purchase their 500 ml box for about five bucks; that half liter amounts to three 5.6-ounce servings, or enough for one thirsty kayaker to enjoy with a carbo-loaded meal after a long day on the water.

**Bandit Riesling**, a Washington State wine, captured third place in the whites with 86 points. It's sweeter, with floral notes, a whiff of lime and coconut and a nice, light finish. Three Thieves, the company behind Bandit wine, is a pioneer in the production of smaller, more portable boxed wines. The company states that one truckload of empty Bandit cartons equals 26 truckloads of empty glass bottles. Choose from their one-liter boxes, which cost around \$9, or their handy 500 ml boxes for about \$4.50. Add an umbrella straw and *voilà*, instant beach party.

### Winning Reds

In the red lineup, **CalNaturale Cabernet Sauvignon**, an organic vintage from Paso Robles, California, took first place. This lovely, full-bodied, leggy wine scored 91 points. Its complex structure contains essence of chocolate and berry, with earthy overtones that linger nicely on the palate, coaxing you to want more. This is a red-wine drinker's wine. If fine dark chocolates are in your food stash, save a few sips of this wine to wash down at least one or two squares after dinner. It's available in both 500 ml and one-liter sizes for \$7 and \$11, respectively.

The deep garnet color, fruit-forward aroma, full-body structure and woody essence of **Bota Box Old Vine Zinfandel** won us over for second place, scoring 86 points. A somewhat astringent, yet balanced wine, it felt warm and tangy on the tip and sides of the tongue. Traces of black pepper, black cherry and a pleasant, lingering finish drove home the point that good wine doesn't need to cost a fortune; you can expect to pay about \$5 for the 500 ml Tetra-Pak or about \$20 for the three-liter size.

With an overall score of 85, **The Climber Cabernet Sauvignon** was barely edged out by Old Vine Zin. It left a creamy feel on the tongue, and our palates noted a subtle smokiness along with plum and blackberry. This wine has personality and could be the perfect companion to any camp meal. Although not a factor in the scoring process, we were impressed with Climber's smart packaging. The 1.5 liter pouch, equal to two glass bottles, has a convenient carrying handle and an ultra-lightweight design, making it ideal for any adventure. The folks at the Sonoma, California, Clif Family Winery donate one percent of sales from Climber pouches toward Trees for the Future, an organization that has been helping communities around the world plant trees since 1989. Suggested retail is \$16.99.

### Honorable Mentions

After selecting our top three red and white choices from the 21 samples we reviewed, we felt four other wines deserved a

mention. With its aromas of berries and citrus, lightly acidic, lingering flavors of vanilla and Granny Smith apple, the organic **CalNaturale Chardonnay** scored 81 points. CalNaturale wines are the first and only California wines made from certified organically grown grapes to be available in Tetra-Pak flexible packaging. This wine, produced by California Natural Products in Mendocino, California, sells for \$7 for the 500 ml box and \$12 for the one liter.

Also scoring 81 points and tied for runner-up was the **Bota Box Pinot Grigio**, made by Bota Box Vineyards in Lathrop, California. Medium-bodied, lightly oaked and refreshing, this wine features aromas of fruit and honey, lingering flavors of ginger and lemon, and a light finish. The three-liter box is packaged in 100 percent recyclable, unbleached, post-consumer fiber printed with soy-based inks and sells for \$16. The 500 ml box sells for \$5.

Smooth and creamy with a buttery taste, hints of vanilla and pear, and a long, pleasant finish, **Climber Chardonnay** scored 80 points. Made by the Clif Family Winery in Sonoma, California, the 1.5 liter pouch sells for \$16.99.

Next was **Herding Cats Chenin Blanc/Chardonnay blend** (80%/20%), also scoring 80 points. This wine has a sugar-cookie aroma, is light to medium-bodied, and has a faint flavor of green apple and citrus.

The taste falls off a bit, but it's still good. Made in South Africa and imported by Underdog Wine Merchants, Herding Cats is part of Better Wines, Better World, an organization that works with retailers and wineries to help them become more sustainable. A three-liter box sells for \$15.

If your sense of taste is enhanced by your environment, chances are any of these wines will appeal to you. Depending on your preferences and palate, one particular flavor might not measure up in a fine restaurant, but on a quiet beach with a crackling campfire, relaxing conversation and anticipation of adventures to come, you've got a simmering nirvana.

When space and weight matter, wine in a box makes perfect sense. Go ahead, break the glass habit—you won't regret it. After a long day on the water, while catching up with friends as the sun fades, few things beat a camp feast enhanced by a great glass of wine poured from a lightweight, collapsible bag or box. **SK**

*Susan Conrad is an ACA Open Water Coastal certified instructor as well as a personal trainer. Although passionate about any form of paddling, expedition paddling is her true love, with a 1,100-mile solo journey up the Inside Passage recently checked off her bucket list.*

*She lives in Bellingham, Wash., and enjoys trail running, mountain biking, whitewater kayaking and, of course, sea kayaking in the Pacific Northwest. Fine boxed wines and dark chocolates are non-negotiable on all of her adventures.*

