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Winemakers think inside the wine box as image shifts with better varieties

By Lauren Shepherd, The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Composer-turned-writer Steph Waller considers herself something of a wine connoisseur.

But she isn't seduced by the sweet smell of cork or the curve of a narrow glass neck. Instead, the California native swoons over a glass poured straight from the box.

Waller is one of a growing group of wine drinkers turning to the box rather than the bottle. With better wine varieties now in boxes, wineries are attempting to give the category a new identity far from drunken fraternity parties that gave box vino its cheap, low-quality image.

The effort seems to be slowly paying off. Box wine is now the fastest-growing wine category. According to data from ACNielsen, volume of 3-liter box wine grew 44% in the past year, compared with a 3% gain in overall table-wine volume.

"It's gaining tremendous acceptance," said Ben Dollard, president of Pacific Wine Partners, a unit of Constellation Brands.

Vintners have been experimenting in the past few years. Wine now even comes in plastic bottles and cans. Although wine has been packaged in a box for some time, the new boxes aren't like the 5-liter jugs of sweet, headache-inducing wines of the past.

Although those are still available, there are now premium varieties with more complexity and hints of berry, apple or oak.

Of course, the premium entries are more expensive. For example, a chardonnay can run \$20 for a box that contains the equivalent of four bottles, whereas the lower-quality 5-liter boxes sell for \$6 to \$10 for more than six bottles of wine. The premium boxes are still a steal, however, since one quality bottle can run \$10 to \$30 or more.

Box-wine makers can charge less for quality because the packaging materials are much cheaper. Morningstar analyst Matt Reilly said, for example, that bottling a \$4 or \$5 bottle of wine can cost \$1, whereas a box can cost a tenth of that.

And, of course, you can't beat the convenience. You can take a box of wine just about anywhere or leave it at home and not worry that it will go bad. Box wines typically stay fresh as long as four weeks after opening because the vacuum-sealed bag inside prevents the wine from being exposed to air.

"A box just kind of sits in the fridge, and I don't have to think about it," said Waller, who is also writing a book about box wine

Despite the advantages, Wall Street analysts and wine industry experts say it could take some time before *Wine Spectator*-reading enthusiasts can fully embrace the box.

"People need to feel comfortable that their friends won't make fun of them," said Barbara Insel, managing director and wine researcher at MKF Research.

For now, the new wines are attracting drinkers content with a glass a night at a value price and less sophisticated than the tasting-room aficionados.

Although the wines can now be found in major retailers such as Safeway, Wal-Mart, Kroger and Albertsons, many stores stock it in the same section as the lower-quality box wines of yesterday.

To attract people who'll spend upwards of \$15 on wine, premium box wines would ideally be shelved with their bottle counterparts.

"You see that a lot of times with new categories when you try to rebrand something," Reilly said.

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