

Written by

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The phenomenal rise of canned wine

ALDER ON AMERICA PACKAGING CANNED WINE

Alder Yarrow charts the new big thing in wine in the US. We're very pleased to publish a monthly column by Alder who has been shortlisted for this year's Louis Roederer International Wine Writers' Awards and the 2019 Marchesi Mazzei Wine Columnist of the Year. Malu Lambert was also shortlisted in the Roederers, for her article here on [Clairette – a rising star](#), as was Andrea Frost for her column on [JancisRobinson.com](#).

I distinctly remember the first time I saw wine in a can. I was visiting the Francis Ford Coppola winery, probably around 2004. At the time, the wine-loving film director had been producing his sweetish Sofia sparkling wine for a few years, and after searching for a way to sell single servings of the wine, eventually settled on 187 ml cans. I remember seeing these cans, collected neatly in a pink hexagonal box of four, with straws included, and thinking to myself, 'That's pretty neat. I wonder if it will ever catch on?'

It took about 15 years, but wine in a can has progressed from Coppola's quirky (and intuitively brilliant) experiment to the next big thing in wine packaging. More than 600 individual canned wine products have entered the market in the last 10 years. According to Nielsen data reported in *Wine & Spirits Daily*, canned wine sales in America increased 69% in value and 49% in volume last year, bringing the total sales of the category to more than \$50 million. With overall growth in wine sales generally slowing in the country, this kind of jump demonstrates keen consumer interest in a different way of relating to wine.

And make no mistake, this is something new. Canned wine is not just about a novel vessel to hold our favourite liquid, it's a different model of consumption. For starters,

wine in a can is a single serving. And it is not designed to be poured into a glass, it's designed to be poured into your mouth.

This has led to a fundamentally different way of talking about wine for many wineries. Most of the marketing on and around wine in cans emphasises portability, the outdoors, and fun activities. Think picnics, beaches, pools and hikes – places where you're not going to (or frankly shouldn't) have a wine glass, let alone a table or a corkscrew. Consumers seem to be relating to these products differently from how they'd relate to your average bottle of wine.

'The smaller volume means you don't have to commit to a full bottle or have an open bottle sitting around for a day or two', says Michael Spaccarelli, general manager of Benmarl Winery in New York's Hudson Valley, which recently took home the top honours in the inaugural International Canned Wine Competition. 'Combine that with a lightweight can that is easy to open, and now wine is going places that beer has been going for decades: camping, boating, sporting events, train and bus rides, theatres, backyard barbecues and more.'

Spaccarelli's point of view was recently borne out by the results of a study executed by Mar-Kadam Associates, a branding and marketing firm run by Dr Robert Williams, an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Susquehanna University who also happens to have been the organiser of the aforementioned canned wine competition. His surveys of 984 consumers indicated that roughly 40% had heard of wine in a can, and for those who had purchased wine in a can, their reasons were split among convenience and occasion- or location-based reasons. This went a long way towards explaining why rosé is roughly the ninth most popular style of wine in bottles but is the second most popular type of wine in a can. Call it the Picnic Effect.

The report goes on to state that the respondents' interest in, evaluation of, and history of purchasing wine in a can was the same regardless of their age, gender, education, awareness level, or wine knowledge. In other words, completely different from what we might expect when looking at traditional wine-purchasing behaviours.

Wine in a can is breaking with tradition in almost every way possible, and people seem to like it.

'It's no longer a fad, it's a trend', says Heather Clauss, chief commercial officer at Free Flow Wines in Sonoma, California. 'The category is hot. We're blown away daily by the number of enquiries we're getting.'

Free Flow Wines is best known as the leader in keg wine, or wine-on-tap, for more than 10 years. But in April 2017, in response to interest from their customer base, Free Flow launched their first semi-automated canning line and became the first canning service solely dedicated to wine in the country. Clauss quickly had to install a second line of the same type, and a few days ago, they added a third, high-speed, fully automated line that will more than triple their capacity.

‘Before this new line was up, we were running multiple shifts per day, six days per week’, says Clauss, who now has more than 30 different customers with more than 75 different wines hailing from several countries. ‘We’re literally signing up new customers weekly.’

The business certainly seems to be booming. *Inc Magazine* named canned wine among the top 8 best sectors for launching a business in 2018, along with eSports, influencer agencies, elder care and alternative-protein food products.

‘I was interviewed by a reporter recently and he asked me what the new trends were in the wine industry’, says winemaker Alie Shaper, ‘and I said one: wine in cans, two: wine in cans, and three: did I mention wine in cans?’

Shaper, who has been making popular small-production wines from New York under her Brooklyn Oenology label, just launched her newest product, VINette, a canned wine spritzer she produced in collaboration with her business partner and fellow winemaker Robin Epperson-McCarthy (the cans are shown fresh off the production line in the image above).

‘This was really Robin’s idea’, says Shaper. ‘She kept telling me we ought to make a wine spritzer, but it was the middle of harvest, so I just said “yeah, yeah, yeah” and we went back to shovelling must.’ But the idea took root, and the two got serious after Epperson-McCarthy recounted the story of bringing a very nice bottle of Finger Lakes Riesling to her aunts in Louisiana and sat watching them mix it with seltzer and serve it over ice.

‘We were noticing the trends in the new crop of wine drinkers – the sober curious, the wellness focused, this interest in moderation – and we thought, why don’t we come up with something that bridges the gap between wine and this hard seltzer [carbonated alcoholic drink] boom that is going on in the market right now?’

The pair launched their inaugural batch of VINette last week with a rosé spritzer flavoured with pomegranate and lime, and a white wine spritzer flavoured with blueberry and rosewater. They plan on selling most of it directly to their existing customers, to wholesalers, and, for the first time, to grocery stores. ‘As you probably know’, says Shaper, ‘you can’t buy wine in grocery stores in the state of New York. But since VINette is only 6% alcohol, we can get access to that part of the market for the first time.’

Both the physical properties of cans (airtight, pressurised seal, smaller size, 360 degree labels, durability, lower carbon footprint) as well as the many more places and ways they tend to be sold than the traditional wine bottle, seem to be freeing winemakers from a set of implicit constraints that have historically defined what wine is, where it is sold, and how it is consumed.

‘Cans are going where no one else has gone yet’, muses Clauss. Just what that means remains to be seen.

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