



Capital Press
EMPOWERING PRODUCERS OF FOOD & FIBER

Yes they can: the 'beerification' of NW wine

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN Capital Press 56 min ago

KENNEWICK, Wash.—Many Northwest winemakers, attempting to reach new consumers, are trying to make their wine more convenient and less pretentious by putting it in aluminum cans.

Some winemakers call this the "can revolution;" others call it the "beerification" of wine.

Canning wine is controversial and has created rifts within the industry, but the rising popularity is undisputed. Across the Northwest, sleek aluminum cans resembling soda or Red Bull are cropping up in grocery stores and restaurants.

"Four years ago, canned wine was a tiny industry," said Brad Mayer, senior vice president of marketing at Precept Wine in Seattle. "Now, it's huge."

Mayer was speaking to a crowd at the Washington Winegrowers 2020 Convention and Trade Show.

What consumers want

Canned wines are popular among younger generations. According to Mayer, consumers ages 21-34 make up 10% of total U.S. wine drinkers, yet purchase 33% of canned wine.

Winemakers say they're trying to appeal to the customer who's on the go. Industry data show consumers are buying canned wine to take where they wouldn't bring a bottle: to camping trips, beach bonfires, concert venues, tailgate parties.

"I can't reiterate enough how convenient it is," said Julian Barton, founder of Vice Canning Inc. in Wilsonville, Ore. "Boating trips, hiking. People—including me and my buddies—bring cans where we wouldn't carry glass."

In canned wines, according to Mayer's research, rosé, sparkling wine and flavored varieties are best-sellers. The No. 1 flavor choice, Mayer said, is watermelon.

Can sizes in Europe are typically smaller, according to Lulie Halstead, CEO of London-based consumer research firm Wine Intelligence. In the U.S., although some winemakers opt for smaller single-serving cans, most cans contain 375 milliliters, about half a bottle of wine.

Critics say average consumers don't realize how much they're drinking when they consume a single can. Canned wine marketers, they add, take advantage of inexperienced wine drinkers' ignorance about quantity and quality.

Short shelf life

With canned wines, "aging" is impossible. Shelf life, said winemakers, is abysmally short. After just two months, according to a recent Washington State University study, the flavor of wine in 13 out of 14 cans changed.

This is because aluminum cans disintegrate when exposed to copper, acid and carbon dioxide—all of which are in wine. Critics say the chemical interaction of wine with aluminum could also pose a health threat to consumers.

"Aluminum is not your friend," said Stephen Rothwell, assistant winemaker at Columbia Crest Winery in Paterson, Wash. "It's the enemy. Stinky and bad-tasting wines come out of aluminum."

But, Rothwell said, consumers keep buying.

"I know it's surprising, but people aren't noticing," he said. "Remember these aren't wine people like us. They can't tell the difference."

Most winemakers do not put "produced on" or "best by" dates on their cans, counting instead on the fact that canned wines sell quickly, especially when sold chilled from retail store coolers.

Some winemakers say they fear this will bruise trust in the industry.

"Giving bad wine to inexperienced drinkers could damage the overall industry," said a Washington winemaker who, fearing for his business reputation, did not wish to be identified.

Rothwell said the No. 1 thing a winemaker can do to extend shelf life is to keep the pH level about 3.2. He said aluminum disintegration can also be slowed by using a can liner designed for wine.

"Your liner is everything," he said.

Challenges and strategies

"Everything goes wrong when you're canning," said Barton of Vice Canning Inc. in Wilsonville, Ore.

Sparkling canned products, said Barton, need to be temperature-controlled, which isn't easy. He said the maximum chill level should be 38 degrees Fahrenheit, although 32 degrees is ideal.

"The colder, the better," he said. "The best one I ever carbonated I kept at 25 degrees."

Keeping cans cold also helps the aluminum stay rigid.

Another challenge, said Barton, is maintaining good seams. The seam on a can is where the body of the can and the top meet. Barton said checking seams carefully is critical.

Similarly, he said, it's crucial to check for dinged cans. A pinhole-sized leak in a single can may destroy an entire package. If the wine leaks onto other cans and deteriorates the packaging, a whole box may be lost.

Cans also bring out stronger flavors in the wine. According to Rothwell, if a new barrel is used to hold wine before it's put in cans, that new barrel taste, like oak flavor, comes out about twice as strong in canned versus bottled wine.

It starts in the vineyard

Winemakers say good canned wine begins in the vineyard.

Sydney Anderson, viticulturist at Goose Ridge Vineyards in Benton City, Wash., said the quality and shelf life of canned wine are tied to spray programs on the land.

Sulfurs, she said, need to be sprayed on vines at least 35 days before harvest or the final product will have a higher sulfite content, which can lead to can degradation.

"And you should avoid copper if at all possible," said Rothwell. "It destroys cans."

The revolution is here

Whatever the criticisms, the canned wine revolution is underway.

According to Nielsen, a marketing research firm, although canned wine still constitutes only 1% of the total U.S. wine volume, from 2018 to 2019, sales of canned wine rose by nearly 80%.

"There may be skeptics," said Jim Mortensen, CEO of Ste. Michelle Wine Estates in Woodinville, Wash., a company that has recently added canned wines to its selection.

"But this is what people want. It's working."

