

## Schildknecht on reefer madness

23 Mar 2008 by David Schildknecht

In answer to my [article about wine shipping temperatures](http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/reefer_madness.html), our old friend David Schildknecht, who until recently was a wine importer in Ohio, sends the following very personal and practical observations. Do feel free to add your experiences on the Add'a comment box below.

Frozen containers (which I have had the horrible experience of receiving) generally occur not because anyone is negligent enough to set the wrong temperature on a container, but because of a malfunction in the thermostatic controls. They are a nightmare in terms of what you see on arrival (which can include bullet-like holes punched clean through the sides of cases where the corks have shot from the bottles); of disposal (a hugely expensive prospect); and of pinning responsibility on the thermostat and receiving insurance to cover at least most of your losses. And I have had the great luck to only be able to report what this is like in the winter with temperatures close enough to freezing that I did not deal with hundreds of gallons of wine seeping from a container that nobody wants to touch until pushed to by the insurance company, and with wasps and flies arriving from a ten kilometre radius.

Ordering up a refrigerated container is insufficient protection for a trans-Atlantic shipment - at least in France - because a) the importer has to make sure to pay for the container to be turned on from the point of consolidation, otherwise, the refrigerating is only turned on at the dock when the container is about to be loaded on the ship; b) the trucks that are picking up the wine for consolidation have to be refrigerated, too, or else one must take great care in checking the weather and one must at least make sure that the lorries are solidly closed as opposed to utilizing canvas flaps, which I am sure you realize are very common throughout the EU. [I had indeed heard this, to my horror – JR]

So-called "thermal blanket" containers are a form of importer roulette. If one really is shipping during a season when the chances of encountering dangerously high or low temperatures are minimum, then one should ship in a "reefer" (the only sort of container sufficiently insulated to really protect wine) but simply not turn it on, and be given the option of plugging it in when the container arrives in the port of entry. If the reefer is never turned on, it costs slightly less than an "operating reefer".

With the price of an operating reefer comes the circular plate that shows temperature over time. If your refrigerated container malfunctioned, you have the evidence.

I have seen even simpler devices to stick on to a bottle that will discolour if it is subjected to dangerous heat. Consumers should come to insist on this sort of protection. Vogt's card sounds more sophisticated - so much the better.

But all this costs money, and frankly consumers who are on the look-out for the best price for a given wine too seldom consider how it was shipped. We used to say "for fine wine, anything less than an operating reefer and refrigerated pick-ups is penny wise and pound foolish," but

in truth nowadays it adds very considerably (up to \$4 or £2 a case, which must then be marked-up) to have wine completely protected in shipping as compared with, say, shipping with an "insulated blanket" and just hoping no damage is done to the wine en route to the consolidation and containerization.

And as risky as it is to send any wine across large distances without refrigeration, it is sheer folly with Pinot Noir, with Chardonnay, or with any wine that has not been subjected to cold stabilization and sterile filtration (which means it should be considered unthinkable to ship a great deal of the most interesting wine in the world un-refrigerated).