Red, white and green

3 Feb 2009 by Jancis Robinson/FT

It is my fervent hope that one small but important side effect of the universal need for cost cutting and sustainable practices will be the demise of bodybuilder wine bottles, ridiculously exhibitionistic bottles that are extra-thick, extra-dark and extra-heavy. The costs involved in making and transporting them are far more than those associated with regular bottles. Worst of all are those producers who import them, empty, from the other side of the world, before filling them and sending them all the way back to Europe again. These completely opaque bottles also manage to be a potential health hazard both for those required to lift boxes of them in warehouses and wine stores, and for us wine drinkers who cannot tell how much we have drunk until the bottle is empty.

I have been running a name and shame campaign against them on my website since 2006 and find that particular sinners in this respect are wine producers in North and South America, although Spain and Italy have more than their fair share of offenders too. (Is it a macho thing?) But France in general and Bordeaux in particular is by no means free of this thoroughly bad habit. Châteaux Magrez-Fombrauge, Mouton-Rothschild and Pavie are put into some of the heaviest wine bottles I have encountered. The average bottle weighs about 460g but some of these can weigh well over a kilo unfilled.

In general of course it is a marketing tactic born out of a desire to make the wine look especially valuable. But I have found that in most cases those who choose these bottles simply haven't thought about the consequences of producing and shipping particularly heavyweight bottles. This was certainly true of one thoroughly right-on, fully organic Oregon wine producer with whom I discussed the disjunction between his impeccably ecological vineyards and his heavyweight bottles.

Fortunately, it is no longer true that lighter bottles are necessarily more fragile. And nor is it true that lighter bottles have to look much meaner and stumpier. Bottle manufacturers are now able to offer bottles as light as 330g which look perfectly normal and are strong enough to be safely transported over long distances. Special lightweight bottles strong enough to withstand the pressure that builds up in champagne have even been developed.

I was closely involved in the selection of a red and a white wine just launched in UK supermarkets and off-licences in aid of the charity Comic Relief, whose 2009 fundraising campaign has just begun and culminates in Red Nose Day, Friday 13 Mar. Called, perhaps inevitably, Red Nose Red and Red Nose White, this South African pair were deliberately shipped to the UK in bulk to reduce carbon emissions and transport costs (bulk shipping technology has improved considerably in recent years) and then put into lightweight 356g bottles. We deliberately chose clear rather than green glass because it is so much easier to recycle in the UK, where there is a long tradition of bottling spirits in clear glass and much less commercial demand for the green glass that most wine is sold in. The importers of this wine, Bibendum Wine, claim that in total more than 1,276 tonnes of carbon emissions will be saved by bottling these Red Nose wines in the UK, although presumably that figure depends on some debatable assumptions.

Shipping wine in bulk is contentious. Gregory Ridder is the wine-loving president of the Asia Pacific division of O-I Glass, the world's biggest supplier of bottles to the wine business. He argues, as one might expect of Australia's dominant bottle supplier, that to ship wine in bulk, as WRAP, Britain's Waste & Resources Action Programme, is urging Australian wine producers in particular to do, would eventually diminish the Australian wine industry and a good proportion of the jobs currently associated with it. As for the New Zealand wine industry, which has been one of the most obvious targets of those who argue against shipping wine in bottle over long distances, its proponents argue that much of the energy used in New Zealand, and virtually all that consumed in the South Island, is renewable hydro-electric energy - and that the carbon emissions associated with ocean transport are relatively low.

The wine trade is still debating many of the niceties associated with developing respectable, planet-saving practices. Like most farmers, vine growers depend very much less heavily on agrochemicals than in the past, but the world's wine producers are now finding themselves having to address sustainability in all aspects of the wine business.

Vineyards (and cellars) in many drier wine regions routinely use amounts of irrigation water that would make the average wine drinker gulp. Programmes for cleaning up winery effluent are by no means universal. Some producers, distributors and retailers are beginning to embark deliberately on more thoughtful practices and policies but they are still the exception rather than the rule. Bibendum, supplier of the Red Nose wines, was one of the first UK-based wine companies

to evolve an ecologically sensitive policy. The Red Nose wines, for instance, were sourced from the SAAM Mountain project, whose environmental and ethical credentials tick all the boxes. I was therefore rather shocked last week to be sent samples of wines from Bibendum's current sale in nasty, unrecyclable polystyrene packaging. Company policy, I was assured, is to use polystyrene only if re-using packaging already sent to them. Passing on the problem then.

From my perspective, polystyrene is next in line after overweight bottles to be removed from the wine supply chain. There are so many perfectly good cardboard alternatives now, all of which can easily be recycled. I plan to follow the lead of Melbourne wine writer Jane Faulkner, who has appended to all her emails for the last few months the stern message, 'WINE COMPANIES - NO SAMPLES IN POLYSTYRENE. ONLY CARDBOARD FOR RECYCLING PURPOSES' - to great effect apparently.

FEELGOOD WINES

Red Nose White, Chenin Blanc 2008 Paarl
Distinctly superior, bright-fruited dry white made from South Africa's signature grape. A bargain.

Red Nose Red, Pinotage/Shiraz 2008 Paarl
When helping to put this blend together I was worried that it would be overshadowed by the white, but it has turned out to be a really vibrant, even slightly subtle wine - also underpriced.

Each wine is £4.99 from Booths, M&S, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Somerfield, Tesco, Waitrose with £1 going straight to Comic Relief, thanks to the generosity of everyone involved - producers, shippers, packagers, importers and retailers.

See more detail in wines of the week.