

Wine = ? jumbos

31 Jan 2010 by Jancis Robinson/Syndicated, updated

When Spanish wine producer, journalist and active purple pager Victor de la Serna told us on our [members' forum](#) how much less his 2008 production would weigh after he switched to lighter bottles, I thought he had put a decimal point in the wrong place. But no, he assured me that by choosing 400 g bottles in place of the old 650 g models for Finca Sandoval, his relatively small winery in the Spanish region of Manchuela, he would be saving 20 tons of glass, and of course all the energy required to transport that extra weight.

I did another double take towards the end of last year when Nicola Jenkin of WRAP, the UK body that encourages sustainable business practices, told delegates at the [WineFuture conference](#) in Rioja quite how much glass the world's wine industry uses each year: the equivalent in weight of 22.5 million jumbo jets. As it turned out, I was right to do a double take. When I asked her to check her arithmetic, it turns out that that should have been 49,000 jumbos. A rather different, but still sobering, figure.

The day after she delivered her bracing talk to almost 1,000 wine luminaries from around the world, I discussed it with the head of one of Spain's largest wine companies. 'Well, that sort of thing doesn't really matter, does it?' he said. 'I mean, wine's one of the most natural products on earth.' This was just before he proudly showed me his new barrel hall, installed on the top of a hill but at ground level, 2,400 square metres and as tall as a three-storey house but with every barrel on the floor. He did admit that the air-conditioning bills in summer were considerable, even though he failed to see the irony of being surrounded by scores of small private wine cellars, all carefully burrowed out of the hillside to take advantage of the naturally cool temperatures there .

The wine industry may not be the worst offender in the global scheme of things at a time when the planet seems to have such a desperately short time to avert disaster, but precisely because wine has (so far) enjoyed the reputation of being one of the most 'natural' products, wine producers should surely do everything they can to preserve that image - difficult enough in view of several recent television exposés alerting consumers to the chemical additions used by many producers in both vineyards and cellars. Some observers think that public attitudes will change so fast that we will want to see carbon footprint details on all wine labels before very many years.

Miguel Torres of Catalunya is showing the most complete dedication to sustainable practices I have so far seen from a wine producer. He has clearly studied the topic personally in admirable detail and is thoroughly convinced of the need for a holistic approach, from driving an electric car to pushing his wineries' waste carbon dioxide through algae beds to turn it into biofuel. I have been following his trail-blazing path through the wine world for the last 35 years – from importing French vine varieties into Spain, via branching out in to Chile and China far earlier than most of his peers - and am more impressed by what he is doing now than by anything else so far. Even though I know that many other wine producers - Cullen in Western Australia, Parducci in California and Stratus in Ontario, for example - have been in the forefront of realising that sustainable farming practices are only the beginning. Perhaps unexpectedly the Champagne region has been the first in France to have come up with a [regional policy on sustainability](#), and is being followed by Bordeaux, I was told by [Bernard Farges](#) of the largest Syndicat Viticole there last Thursday morning. The Californians have recently beaten them to it, as Linda Murphy reported [here](#).

Every aspect of the production and distribution chain deserves a radical rethink. On a personal level as a wine writer, I'd like to suggest that a large part of the Amazonian rainforest could probably be saved if every wine publicist weaned themselves off the vast amounts of paper and often ridiculously thick cardboard they devote to press packs, tech specs, invitations and brochures. We're all electronic now, and we really don't need a whole page per wine telling us how many different fruits the winemaker could detect in it.

Laudable acts are often just good sense, and are not necessarily fuelled by altruism. As Victor de la Serna said of his lighter bottle initiative, 'it's less expensive, too, which doesn't hurt'. Tesco, the UK's dominant supermarket group, does not usually undertake something unless it will be reflected on the bottom line. But like all the major UK supermarkets, Tesco signed up to the 2006 Courtauld commitment, a sort of Kyoto-like agreement to make serious reductions in the amount of packaging of everything they sell, including wine. The giant wine companies Constellation and Foster's Wine Group have too. Because such a high proportion of the wine sold in the UK is imported, it has in practice been wine producers, often the non-British owners of major branded wines, who have had to switch to lighter bottles for the UK,

usually a significant market. They have tended to do the same for all their customers, so the UK initiative is having an effect worldwide.

These wine exporters have seen that the cost of introducing new bottle moulds, modifying bottling lines and so on has taken only a few months to write off, and they are now presumably delighted to have much lower bills for bottles and transport, while being able to boast that they are doing their bit for the environment. In fact I suspect many of the 'green' initiatives we have seen in the wine world have been inspired by marketing more than belief, but that's fine if the result is a good one.

Many wine producers are worried that their products will look 'cheap' if they switch to lighter bottles, but I honestly think that it will be only about a year before virtually all wine consumers start to perceive heavy bottles as a naughty negative rather than a positive attribute. The very amateur picture here shows two recent naughty heavy bottles: Tomero Malbec Gran Reserve 2006 Mendoza from Argentina and Domaine Cazes' Credo from Roussillon next to a regular bottle of Ch Latour for comparative purposes.

Producers have traditionally reckoned that their wine is safer in a heavy bottle. But glass technology has changed enormously in the last few years so that many of the lighter bottles are actually just as strong, and sometimes less liable to break, than their heavier precursors. There are wine bottles now that weigh [as little as 300 g](#), as opposed to the nearly 1,000 g that some of the most ridiculously heavy bottles weigh - with Argentina being a particular offender in this respect. I wonder whether the recent, much-trumpeted embrace of lighter bottles on the part of Chile's dominant bottle manufacturer has anything to do with traditional trans-Andean rivalry? The Chileans are certainly leading the way in South America towards more ecologically sound wine packaging, and most of the big brands are now in bottles that weigh considerably less than 400 g.

Wine production may seem intuitively 'green' but certainly in the UK, and probably in many other countries, wine bottles represent the heaviest components in domestic waste. The next important step for most countries is to have a truly effective way of recycling all those empty bottles.