Brilliant new packaging?

27 May 2010 by Jancis Robinson

I have just published my very enthusiastic tasting notes on Chapoutier's 2009 Sélections Parcellaires. Because I was out of the country, I couldn't attend Michel Chapoutier's recent presentation of these wines in London but his UK importer Mentzendorff suggested that Chapoutier sent me samples to my London home to try, for which I was, as you can read in my tasting notes, extremely grateful.

But see below just how much packaging was involved. I put a standard 75cl bottle on the floor next to all these cardboard boxes to give you some idea of scale.

Admittedly this wasn't helped by Chapoutier's sending two bottles of each wine (presumably worried that even during the brief journey from Tain to London one of the samples may have been contaminated by a TCA-affected cork). I was also surprised to see such a prominent exponent of organic and biodynamic viticulture sending every bottle encased in a large polystyrene container. I have a passionate distaste for this non-recyclable form of packaging when there are so many reliable cardboard alternatives. The polystyrene contained in the boxes enough filled more than two dustbins and will presumably be swelling some landfill somewhere on the outskirts of London for many decades to come.

Some of you may remember my recent enthusiasm for this set of samples of four different wines sent to me by the San Francisco custom-crush facility Crushpad. It took up about the same space and weight as a paperback. It was delightfully easy to unpack the little box and access the wine too, since the wine samples were packaged in a stylish screwtopped tube, each firmly nestled in secure cardboard slots.

By chance, the day after the Chapoutier wines arrived, I was sent two different pairs of wine samples, one pair in 75cl bottles packed into standard cardboard boxes and one pair of samples of the 2009 dry white from Ch Broustet packaged using the same system as is used by Crushpad, WIT, or Wine in Tube. You can easily see the difference in space, weight and ease of use in the picture below.

WIT was established in Dec 2006 in France by an oenologist/engineer and a sommelier, both French. The idea was to optimise wine sampling by developing glass tubes sealed with an aluminium screwcap, which could be silk screened with company logos and other labelling. The capacity of the initial tubes was 6cl/60ml, the amount of wine used for professional wine sampling, claiming a tenfold reduction in freight costs (I would have thought it was more actually). They then adapted the tubes for the spirits market by creating tubes with capacities of 4cl and 5cl.

They then went on to develop a 10cl tube, enough to fill a small glass of wine and the size Broustet sent me, as shown below, with a phone to demonstrate size. The idea is to allow, as salesperson Ana Lenz puts it, 'wine lovers to taste a glass of wines not often available in glasses at restaurants. We made partnerships with some of our loyal clients (French winemakers [who are] producers of grand crus et premiers grand crus) in order to develop a range of final products to be sold and distributed for final consumption. Now, you can buy your tasting box for gifts, or for savouring great wines comfortably at home, with no waste when a whole bottle won't be consumed (no wine waste). After conquering the French market, we started business with USA (Crushpad), Japan, Spain, Netherlands, Germany, Austria. Contacts with South Africa, Austrialia, Uruguay, Chile and Brazil are already in their first steps.'

I first came across the packaging at a large consumer wine tasting in Paris two or three years go and would say that they have yet to 'conquer' the French market, although I do see these appealing tubes more and more - both for professional sampling and for selling small quantities of wine.

Presumably the costs act as a brake on wider adoption of this appealing new form of packaging because, according to

WIT, producers have to pay not only for the packaging itself but also for the special equipment needed to bottle wine in a WIT. They have something called a WITmaker (costing about €2,500) that guarantees that the wine sample will last at least six months but for larger-scale production they suggest a special if compact bottling line that costs €150,000 for wines that have to last for at least two years. They say that the average cost of a wine tube is €0.86 if bottled by the producer, or €1.16 if bottled by WIT themselves.

Lenz adds, 'If you are going to re-bottle previously bottled wine, you need a much more sophisticated process. If you're bottling out of barrels, you could probably get by with less. It could cost anywhere from $10,000-150,000 to get going depending on the aforementioned use cases and also the type of volume you'd like to produce. It also depends somewhat on who is doing the bottling (experienced winemaker v cellar hand). Rebottling wines is an art/science that is still being figured out to some degree. Young wines with sufficient acidity and free sulphur levels are the easiest and it gets more tricky from there.'

WIT tubes are now available in capacities of 4, 5, 6 or 10 cl. As someone who has to almost beat a path through a forest of wine bottles with just a few centilitres taken out of each to get around my house, I admittedly have a huge personal (if commercially uninvolved) interest in this subject. But it does look like something of potential interest to any wine producer who sends out a high volume of samples and/or is interested in selling their product in small, stylish doses.

I'd be very interested to know of anyone's experiences with this new packaging. More details from www.witfrance.com