Why does wine have to be in a bottle?

Longstanding visitors to this site will know of my campaign against unnecessarily heavy bottles. I'm pleased that there is now much more awareness of the environmental cost of producing and transporting ridiculous bodybuilder bottles.

Glass, being neutral in flavour, has served us well as a container for wine designed for long ageing. But more and more I wonder why we need a material as heavy, fragile and resources-hungry as glass for everyday wine, wine that is consumed within months of being bottled. Mass market retailers in the UK are seeing increasing demand for wine in pouches. See this article in The Grocer for how well Asda has been doing with 1.5 litre pouches with a tap. M&S are selling so much wine in pouches that Paul Sapin in Beaujolais have installed a pouch filling line especially for them. They report that now that nitrogen sparging is routine, the quality of wine packaged in pouches is much-improved.
Paul Sapin also fill M&S's plastic PET bottles which are slowly infiltrating shelves - and look pretty smart nowadays. They use only a tenth as much energy as glass bottles, although there are complex issues associated with recycling all the various different containers in which wine is packaged today, including the Tetra Paks [ Luis' ex employer - JR] illustrated above.

Michael Schmelzer of Monte Bernardi in Chianti Classico, who provided such a useful vintage report on 2011/12 recently, provides some facts and figures:

Last year we embarked on a new journey: we created an organic white and red wine in Tetra Pak for the US market. As a small producer, we needed more financial security to buffer against year-to-year fluctuations (low-production years like 2010 cost the same to produce as 'normal' years).

We could have increased the production of our existing range, but this would have required a compromise in our original quality goals, which we were unwilling to make. Instead we decided to enter the emerging market of alternative packaging, which we believe is becoming an important segment for wine.

In the US, over 90% of wine is consumed within 24 hours of purchase. Why do we need such a weighty package as a bottle, which requires more fuel to transport, for a product that is consumed faster than most families consume a litre of milk?

Compared with wine in glass, a litre of delicious organic wine in Tetra Pak costs 75% less in packaging, and 50% less to transport. These savings allow us to offer a wine that retails at 35% less, while giving our customers 33% more wine (a litre v 750 ml).

Will wine consumers allow the wine industry to follow the same path the auto industry does with fuel consumption - choosing a lighter bottle, which reduces package weights only by a nominal amount?

The current lightest glass bottle weighs only 10% lighter than a standard glass bottle*, a saving of 40 grams, which equals the total weight of a one-litre Tetra Pak!

We researched packaging alternatives for nearly two years prior to putting our first wine in Tetra Pak; and it has been almost a year since the wines hit the shelves - the response has been outstanding.

Jamie Wolff of Chambers Street Wines in New York said: 'In the past we've sold one other tetrapak wine but when we tasted the Fuoristrada wines we knew immediately that we'd finally found a tetrapak of the same high quality as the best bottled wines we sell. As we've introduced the wines to our customers we get the same surprised reaction: no one's ever tasted such good wine from tetrapak. The fact that the tetrapaks have ecological advantages has helped to make Fuori Strada one of our best-selling wines, but their success here really results from the wines being great values, and just plain delicious.'

We are proud to put our name on our Fuori Strada Tetra Pak wines. We only wish our European friends were ready too!

* a standard glass bottle weighs 410 g, a Tetra Pak 40 g; Tetra Pak is 80% paper

See also this article on wineeconomist.com