

When It Pays to Be a Lightweight

By Dave McIntyre

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Two years ago, when Dominion Power proposed a new transmission line to serve the growing electricity demand in the mid-Atlantic corridor, plans showed the line bisecting Jim Law's vineyard. Law, owner and winemaker at Linden Vineyards near Front Royal, Va., decided to take action.

He switched to lighter-weight bottles.

"We waste so much electricity in this country, and there's a lot of energy wasted in packaging products, especially wine," Law said. "I'm not one to go out and change the world or hire a lobbyist to fight the power company, but I'll do what I can, one step at a time."

Law had been using a Bordeaux-style bottle with a reverse taper (wider at the shoulder than the base) for his top red wine, called Hardscrabble. By using a more modest bottle that was several ounces lighter, he figured he was reducing his impact on the environment: less energy used in production, in transport to Linden and, once filled, in shipment to market.



The power company eventually changed its plans. But the experience is still saving Law about 30 cents per bottle. And Linden Vineyards changed bottles for about 75 percent of its 60,000-bottle annual production; the rest was already in lighter-weight glass.

The term "carbon footprint" has growing relevance in the wine world. Producers are trying to out-green one another in competition for the eco-minded consumer, touting solar-powered operations or organic and biodynamic vineyard practices.

Much attention is focused on packaging, especially bottle weight. Fetzer Vineyards in California and Errazuriz, a major Chilean producer, recently announced they would switch to lighter-weight bottles to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

According to Fetzer, lighter bottles can make a difference. Reducing the average bottle weight from 20.3 ounces to 17 ounces over its 23 million bottles in annual production will save at least 2,100 tons of glass and avoid pouring 3,000 tons of carbon dioxide into

the atmosphere. And an environmental research firm hired by Fetzer estimates that every bottle recycled instead of dumped into a landfill saves nearly six pounds of carbon dioxide emissions, equivalent to what you would save by turning off your television for six days.

I recently picked up two bottles of California pinot noir. The Sterling Vintner's Collection 2006 featured a sleek, standard Burgundy-style bottle that fit in my wine rack and weighed 2 pounds 11 ounces. The Byron Sierra Madre Vineyard 2006, by contrast, was in a larger, wider, thicker bottle that weighed a full pound more. The Byron bottle is not unusual; many California wineries favor heavy bottles, and some South American producers increasingly are using them for their top-of-the-line wines.

One more pound per bottle translates into 12 extra pounds per case and hundreds of extra pounds per pallet, requiring more fuel to transport them. The heavy bottle costs the winery as much as \$2 more, which adds to the final retail price. These often hold high-end wines, so that extra cost might not mean much to consumers who can afford them. But I'd rather pay for the wine than the bottle.

Sommeliers don't like the "bodybuilder" bottles either, and not just because they don't want to look wimpy using two hands to pour. Trained to clasp multiple bottles between the splayed fingers of each hand, sommeliers find the heavy bottles vexing to lug around.

"Have you ever seen a restaurant that doesn't have stairs?" asked Raj Parr, wine director for Michael Mina's restaurant group, which includes the new Bourbon Steak in Georgetown. "These bottles are a nuisance."

Given the savings wineries can realize, why do so many still favor the heavier glass? If you suspect the influence of a marketing department, you're right.

"You can walk down a supermarket aisle and see 100 different chardonnays," said Eileen Fredrikson of Gomberg, Fredrikson & Associates, a California-based market research firm that studies the wine industry. "Price, package and position: The consumer picks the wine that stands out visually. There is an industry belief that the package contributes to the consumer's perception of the intrinsic value of a wine.

"Even some inexpensive wines are packaged in fancy, heavy bottles so they look more expensive," Fredrikson said.

The wine industry "sees heavier glass as a sign of quality," said Caroline Shaw, a spokeswoman for Jackson Family Estates, the parent company of Byron Vineyards in Sonoma County. She said Byron is exploring ways to reduce its carbon footprint, primarily by increasing the amount of recycled glass used in its bottles. But she said heavier glass adds to quality by helping wine age better because it allows less light through the bottle.

"The combination of darker tint and thicker glass ensures the wine will age in a more secure environment," Shaw said.

Of course, most wine collections are kept in dark cellars, where excessive light is not a problem. And European wineries generally do not splurge on ridiculously heavy bottles, even though their finer wines are meant to age for decades.

That brings us back to marketing. Should we even care about the carbon footprint of the wines we buy? Shouldn't we be focused on what's inside the bottle?

Well, if we're willing to pay more for electricity-saving light bulbs and phosphate-free detergent, and if we bring our own reusable bags to tote groceries to our hybrid cars, why not? This is just one more way in which our individual choices can collectively have a big effect.

"Personally, the difference for me is not about dollars but about being a good global citizen," Linden Vineyards' Law told me via e-mail. "We need an attitude shift, and small changes like these will eventually have a big impact."

Wineries already believe we choose wines based in part on the size and weight of their bottles. Let's prove them right.

Recommendations

REDS

Flavium Crianza 2005

* 1/2

Bierzo, Spain; \$10

For the past few years, Bierzo has been touted as Spain's next "big" wine region. It hasn't happened yet, but this spicy red from the mencia grape shows the region's potential for quality and value. Pair with spicy or grilled foods.

Monsieur Touton: available in the District at Connecticut Avenue Wine & Liquor, Magruder's, Paul's of Chevy Chase, Whole Foods Market Tenleytown; in Virginia at Cecile's Wine Cellar in McLean, various Whole Foods Markets; in Maryland at Cork & Fork in Bethesda, Frederick Wine House in Frederick, Old Farm Liquors in Frederick.

Altos las Hormigas Malbec 2007

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Mendoza, Argentina; \$10

This has been a consistent performer in recent years as Argentina's malbecs have gained popularity. It marries New World fruit with Old World sensibility, displaying good acidity to keep the exuberance in balance.

Bacchus: widely available.

Domaine de Gournier Merlot 2007

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Costieres de Nimes, France; \$9

A big wine for a small price, it has jammy plum flavors untainted by oak. It's pure fruit; not complex, just fun.

Kacher/Washington Wholesale: available in the District at Calvert Woodley, Circle Wine & Liquor, Chevy Chase Wine & Spirits, MacArthur Beverages, Pearson's, Schneider's of Capitol Hill.

Portada 2006

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Estremadura, Portugal; \$9

Portugal is a great source of bargain wines. This juicy, straightforward red has enough substance to stand up to burgers and hearty casual fare.

Dionysus: available in the District at Potomac Wine & Spirits; in Virginia at Arrowine in Arlington, Iron Bridge Wine Co. in Warrenton, Unwined in Alexandria; in Maryland at Iron Bridge Wine Co. in Columbia.

WHITES

Clif Bar Family Winery, "The Climber" 2007

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California, \$14

Made primarily from sauvignon blanc with pinot blanc, chenin blanc and Muscat blended in, this features tropical flavors of passion fruit and jasmine with citrus and peach to give it body. A delicious pairing with seafood or lighter chicken dishes. The red, a zinfandel-based blend, is equally good.

Country Vintner: available in the District at Ace Beverage, De Vinos, Rodman's, Wagshal's, various Whole Foods Markets; in Maryland at My Organic Market in College Park and Rockville.

Domaine de Regusse Aligote 2007

* 1/2

Vin de Pays de la Mediteranee, France, \$12

Made from an obscure Burgundian grape, this wine is almost green in color. Its racy flavors and vibrant acidity make it a refreshing quaff and an excellent match for oysters or salty appetizers.

Kysela: available in the District at Calvert Woodley, Cleveland Park Wine and Spirits; in Virginia at Arrowine in Arlington, Fern Street Gourmet in Alexandria, Unwined in Alexandria.

LaVis Dipinti Pinot Grigio 2007

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Vigneti delle Dolomiti IGT, Italy; \$15

LaVis is a northern Italian winery just introduced to this market. The pinot grigio shows the proper coppery color (the grigio) this grape should exhibit when it is not diluted with cheaper grapes. It has the refreshing, crisp acidity Italian pinot grigio is known for, with a tad more body than usual.

Washington Wholesale: available in the District at Wine Specialist, S&R Liquors.

Yellow + Blue Torrontes 2008

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Cafayate, Argentina; \$12 (1 liter)

Taken to its logical conclusion, concern over wine packaging might lead to the abandonment of glass altogether. But that won't happen until really good wines are marketed in alternative packages. Yellow + Blue uses cardboard TetraPaks for two organically grown wines. Fans of Gewurztraminer will appreciate the flowery litchi flavors of the torrontes; there is also a pleasant malbec. Both are fine but are distinguished more for their packaging than their value.

Capitol Beverage Group: available in the District at Connecticut Avenue Wine & Liquor, 1 W Dupont Circle Wine & Liquors, all Whole Foods Market locations.

KEY

***** Exceptional**

**** Excellent**

*** Very good**

Prices are approximate. Check Winesearcher.com to verify availability, or ask a favorite wine store to order through the distributor.