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## FEATURE-Bagged or boxed? - Wine targets green shoppers

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By Sylvia Westall

LONDON, July 18 (Reuters) - Set the dining table, light some candles and crack open a nice bag of wine.

Serving guests wine from a plastic pouch or box may no longer be a social faux pas, say some in the wine industry – as consumers warm to packaging that is seen as kinder to the environment than glass bottles.

"At the moment, these are seen as a niche packaging format," said Kate Coleman, spokeswoman for Britain's Wine and Spirit Trade Association, commenting on the new types of packing.

"But take screw caps – people have grown used to them and now find them very acceptable."

Unlike with most materials, recycling some types of glass can produce slightly more harmful greenhouse gases than if they were thrown away, according to preliminary research commissioned by the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP).

WRAP, a government-funded body, is also researching whether the new forms of wine packaging have environmental benefits.

But some wine companies, perhaps scenting the potential of the 'green' consumer market, are hoping to shake off the image of boxed or bagged wine as poor quality.

Wine company Ehmanns is working with its South African exporter to launch a plastic wine pouch in mid-August.

The pouches will be filled with two-bottles' worth of its 'Amiston Bay' brand of white Chardonnay or Rose.

"There's so many foodstuffs, like soups, where you get premium products ready in pouches, so the pouch has got a very strong premium element," said Johan Hewitt, brand and business development manager at The Company of Wine People, which is exporting the wine.

Hewitt estimates 200,000 pouches will go on sale for about 9.49 pounds (\$19.28) in Britain's Tesco supermarkets, and will be aimed at beach-goers and barbeque enthusiasts.

Even though the pouches cannot be easily recycled, the company says their carbon footprint is 80 percent smaller because the lightweight packs use less energy to produce and transport.

Similarly, Trincherro Family Estates, a California-based wine producer, sells some of its wine in slim purple boxes, which it says are more environmentally friendly to transport.

### QUALITY CONTROL

The total UK market for bag-in-box wine stands at 390 million pounds, with a steady annual growth of 2 percent, according to Tesco.

In its own stores, Tesco says the bag-in-box category represents the 5th biggest section in wine behind bottles from Australia, France, the U.S. and Italy.

But shoppers outside a supermarket in central London were unsure new 'green' packaging could give wine a premium image.

"Opening a bottle is social occasion," said Xavier Bonnard, a 35-year-old French banker loading up the top box of his motorbike with shopping.

"Maybe it will be like people driving electric cars – if it looks nice then people will eventually accept it. But not now, no, no."

Statistician Nadine Seeward, 34, who said she usually spends between 5-11 pounds on a bottle of wine, was also dubious.

"The connotation is that wine in a box is really poor quality, so you would have to change attitudes," she said.

"I'd have to taste to see if it was of the same quality."

Supermarket Waitrose says it is nonetheless also looking into stocking more wines in alternative packaging.

"The category is growing, which we think would at least in part be due to the better quality inside the pack," a spokeswoman said.

## BOTTLES FOREVER

For those who work with wine, the problem is not the taste of wine in alternative packaging but its persistent negative image.

"The quality of bag-in-box wine has improved tremendously in recent years. But I think the perception of the consumer is very different," said professional wine taster Susan Hulme, from the Association of Wine Educators.

She said wine in the new forms of packaging would compare well to bottles from the cheaper end of the wine market, which each cost 5-7 pounds.

Increased environmental concerns, however, did not signal the end for the glass bottle.

"I can't see some of the very prestigious, very famous wines going into bag-in-box in the near future," she said.

While some wine companies use their packaging to attract environmentally conscious customers, WRAP stresses the country of origin is key to the product's carbon footprint.

"The UK market is important as 98-99 percent of our wine is imported," WRAP said in a statement.

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