

## A WINEMAKER'S WONDERINGS

# CONTAINERS, VESSELS AND KEGS

BY JAMES CHRISTOPHER TRACY

Throughout history, winemakers and wine drinkers have used animal skins, earthenware jars, pottery amphorae, stoneware, wood, concrete, glass, stainless steel and now plastic to hold wine. Even today much of the world's wine is never formally bottled and is consumed locally in whatever bottles (or other vessels) are available. Additionally there is still quite a bit of wine shipped around the globe in bulk and bottled in a different market, as has been done for thousands of years, only it was in barrels or amphorae instead of Flexitanks. Glass bottles are a relatively recent invention (1600s), and until the 1860s wine was still almost always sold by the measure in bulk and then bottled. That leaves only 150 years for glass-bottled wine to take over.

But bottling in glass changed the way we think about and perceive wine, and it enabled fine wine and the wine connoisseur to develop by allowing and engendering successful aging and maturation of wine in a bottle sealed with a cork. The glass bottle is now standard in all its various sizes; the classic (750ml) for everything, the half bottle (375 ml), the magnum (1500ml) for fine and cheap wines, and the larger jugs (3000ml) usually reserved for the cheap, industrial stuff.

Alternative packaging—besides glass—is surging, but also controversial. One of the most exciting developments in our local East End and greater metropolitan New York market is the introduction and quick embrace of wine in kegs. Wine in kegs (stainless steel, reusable, 19.5- or 20-liter kegs) has been popular for years in Europe, has built on the West Coast of the United States for the last decade and has started to take off in the last 18 months locally.


There are three great reasons for using kegs: First it is environmentally friendly; we eliminate bottles, corks (or closure), labels and capsules, so there is no garbage and no recycling and less space needed for storage.

Next, there is no wasted wine; there are no corked or oxidized bottles, and the wine is good to the last drop, being stored under low pressure under inert argon or nitrogen gas. No more throwing out unused or old portions of bottles, plus no one needs to open bottles and there is no broken glass.

Finally, these savings on packaging allow us to offer high-quality wine for over 20 percent less money per liter to the restaurateur, which should then be passed on to the consumer. This seems like a no-brainer for wines that will be consumed rapidly in by-the-



glass offerings in restaurants close to the source. Locally, Channing Daughters, Paumanok, Raphael, Shinn, the Gotham Project and Red Hook all have wine available in keg. More and more of the best restaurants are adding wine-on-tap systems like Luce/Hawkins and South Fork Kitchen on the East End; Verace and H2O on the Island; Vesta in Queens, Buttermilk Channel and Colonie in Brooklyn and the Breslin and the Dory in Manhattan among many others.

I will always love my bottles and corks, and we still bottle all the wines that we also put in kegs. But the factors are too compelling not to put a portion of our production into kegs. Yes, there are a few pejorative considerations—most notably the maintenance and cleanliness of the tap systems and the less-than-romantic perception of the vessel. The fact is, the keg (which literally means “small cask” or “barrel”) is neither blue collar nor black tie, it just is another vessel that carries with it its inherent advantages and disadvantages just as every other container has in the history of wine. 

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