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CANNED WINE



A can hunt in the USA

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Miami-based Sarah Phillips of Liv-ex, winner of last summer's writing competition, swapped classed growths for canned wine for a while – all on our behalf. See also a couple of recommended alternatively packaged wines at the end of this article.

Last Saturday, I poured a can of Cabernet Sauvignon into a decanter. It doesn't sound right, does it? Cans have long been for fizzy drinks, and besides, there's something romantic about

bottles of wine – especially the noise made by the cork as it exits the bottle neck. But the environmental – and practical – case for ditching glass bottles for certain wines has been building, as Jancis argued earlier this year. They're heavy, fragile, inefficient of space, expensive to transport, and in many countries have low recycling rates.

Here in the US, the most interesting alternatives to bottles come in cans. The market for canned wine has exploded in the recent years, growing 69% to over \$50 million (£40.3 million) in 2019 according to Nielsen data; a trend explored in detail by Alder Yarrow last August. As he pointed out then, over 600 different canned wine products have entered the US market in the last decade, so there is no shortage of choice.

But are they any good? I was a long-term sceptic, but a January boat trip nudged me to give them a try. The results were positive, especially in an environment where glass bottles and wobbly wine glasses are to be avoided, so I decided to give the category a chance. Now, 50+ cans into this tinny experiment, I'm ready to share some observations.

First, let's be honest. There's a lot of rubbish. Canned wines are available for as little as \$1.99 (£1.60) per 375 ml can – half a bottle! – if you look hard enough. Many sell for under \$3 a can. This is reflected in the quality. These are often sweet with ripe, candied fruits, and some have artificial oak flavours. My note for one, the Mancan White, concluded: 'Its only saving grace? The very short finish.'

But that's only part of the story. The growing acceptance of canned wine has lured several more ambitious producers into the market. They recognise the advantages – size, convenience, environmental – and are canning more premium examples.

One exciting newcomer is Maker Wines, which shipped its first cans in November. Its founders Sarah Hoffmann and Kendra Kawala, both Stanford business school graduates, work with several producers – or 'makers' – across California to can premium examples such as the serious canned Cabernet that found its way into my decanter.

Retailing for \$7–\$14 per 250 ml, these are oceans away from the sticky-sweet canned wines on some grocery-store shelves. Both its whites – a Chenin Blanc from an urban winery in Clarksburg, and an organic Viognier from Mendocino – are elegant, classy and moreish. The rosé is a delicious maverick. Wine from three rosé production methods goes into the blend, dispelling the myth that all canned wine is mass-produced and uninteresting.



Better quality wine from all over Europe is also finding its way into cans. Amble + Chase rosé is one very good, and widely available, example from Provence that retails at \$5 (£4) per 250 ml can. Another is ONYVA Sauvignon Blanc, which is a citrus-driven, grassy and refreshing example from the Loire Valley. It costs \$32 for four 250 ml cans.

When it comes to cans, size matters. During my can-hunt, I found examples in 187 ml, 250 ml and 375 ml servings, with the latter two making up the vast majority. Smaller is better. Given the higher alcohol content, canned wine should be drunk more slowly than cans of beer, and even the 250 ml portions began to warm up in the Florida sun. Size can also be deceptive. It would be dangerously easy to forget that a 375 ml can contains the same as half a standard bottle. A lot of examples are surprisingly easy to drink.



Canned wine comes in many different sizes – up to half a 75 cl bottle's worth

Drinking wine from cans takes a while to get used to. Sparkling wines felt most natural to begin with, since we're used to the sensation of drinking fizzy soda from them. Oregon giant Union Wine Company, which was among the first to bring canned wines to the masses with their Underwood range, seem to have taken note. Their carbonated white and rosé are both clean, fruity and refreshing – almost Sprite-like. At \$6–\$7 per 375 ml, they strike a good balance between price and quality.

The drinking vessel was a consideration for Alex Milligan, president of David Milligan Selections, which is behind the ON Y VA Sauvignon Blanc. 'When we were selecting the juice, we chose one based on palate richness so that it wouldn't need to rely on the nose', he says, 'but you definitely get more aromatics when drinking from the glass.'

Canned wines are often marketed for outdoor drinking, but their ability to provide a single serving at home is important, too. Hoffman says that this is one of the key selling points for Maker Wines. She has found that older millennial women in particular – including many busy, multi-tasking new mothers – have been receptive to the idea of opening a can of premium wine

at home and pouring it into a glass for a single serve. The Cabernet comes with an instruction to do so.

If this catches on, it could save considerable delivery costs – and carbon emissions. One of the main gripes with glass bottles is their weight and awkward shape, which makes shipping inefficient. Cans do not suffer from these problems. In fact, the award for the most compact wine delivery that I've ever received goes to Empathy Wines, a California-based company co-founded by Gary Vaynerchuk. It recently launched a line of high-quality, fresh and fruity sparkling canned rosés which sell online at \$75 for 12 x 250 ml (\$10 goes to charity). Think of it as a mini 12-pack.



This little pack of 12 cans of Empathy contains four bottles' worth of wine

And what of other non-glass packaging? The options are fairly limited. In Florida, a line of simple, fruity French wines in plastic bottles is stocked by Whole Foods. Their brand name, Pool Boy, hints at their use. Bag-in-box largely remains the domain of a handful of big producers. La Vieille Ferme, the inexpensive wine produced by the Perrin family of the southern Rhône, is one good option. Its red, white and rosé wines come in both bottles and boxes.

So while canned wine remains quite niche, this is where most choice beyond bottles can be found. Not all of them are good, but several good examples exist if you know where to look – and the market is growing. That said, it may be a while before de-can-ting goes mainstream.

Canned wines to try

Maker Wines, California (\$7–\$14 per 250 ml can, sold in packs)

Maker’s impressive foursome includes a fruity Chenin Blanc, a floral Viognier, a tangy rosé, and a powerful Cabernet Sauvignon. Two new additions to the portfolio are due this year: a sparkling Sauvignon Blanc and a Pinot Noir. Its cans are [available online](#) and from independent retailers in California.

Amble + Chase, Rosé, Provence (\$4.99 per 250 ml can)

Typical Provençal rosé in every sense – except for the packaging. It’s delicately aromatic and carries good concentration of raspberry, strawberry and peach. It’s easy to find in stores such as Total Wine.

ON Y VA Sauvignon Blanc, Loire Valley (\$32 for 4 x 250ml cans)

Grassy, fruity – lemon, lime juice and gooseberry – and refreshing. It’s [available online](#), as well as at various independent retailers, golf clubs and country clubs.

Empathy Wines, Rosé & Bubbles, California (\$75 for 12 x 250 ml cans; \$10 goes to No Kid Hungry)

Gary Vaynerchuk co-founded Empathy Wines in 2018 and added a line of good-quality carbonated rosé this year. It’s very moreish – lucky it [comes in packs of 12](#). Think strawberries, white peaches and sunny days.

Underwood, Oregon (\$6–\$7 per 375 ml can)

The highlight of the Underwood range is the is the very ‘crushable’ still rosé, with its punchy raspberry and strawberry fruit. The carbonated white and rosé both offer welcome refreshment on hot days. These are widely available in supermarkets and liquor stores.

Yes Way Rosé, IGP Méditerranée (\$16.99 for 4 x 250 ml cans)

Yes Way Rosé does not pretend to be a serious wine, but here’s the thing: It’s a tasty, fruit-driven rosé at a good price. It’s sourced from the South of France and tastes of raspberries and watermelon. Would I enjoy it by the pool? Yes Way.

Joe to Go, Oregon (\$40 for 6 x 375 ml cans)

The [Joe to Go range](#) includes a particularly can-friendly Pinot Noir – it’s soft, juicy, a little

peppery, and tastes good at fridge temperature. The delicate Pinot Gris and fruity rosé are well-made, too.

Frico Lambrusco by Scarpetta (\$14.99 for 4 x2 50 ml cans)

Frico Lambrusco is red, fizzy, plummy and lightly sweet. The can features an image of a pig's bum. Don't take it too seriously. Do order pizza.

Jancis adds I recently tasted two wines packaged in bags in boxes that I can recommend. See details of this Provençal rosé and this organic Languedoc red from a world-famous London restaurant.