

Monsieur, shall I decant the Tetra Pak?

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Attention Ontario oenophiles: Fancy getting your favourite domestic vintages out of a box made from cardboard, aluminum foil and plastic? No? Well, too bad. Such containers could become de rigueur wine packaging in the not too distant future — even though the Ontario wine industry is dead set against it.

The Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) is urging Ontario winemakers to package their varietals in "Tetra Pak" containers. You know the sort — those little boxes that typically contain juice and milk for the Romper Room set. Economic coercion is apparently part of the plan: The LCBO is informing Ontario producers that if they don't get with the Tetra Pak program soon, their shelf space at LCBO stores could be in jeopardy.

The LCBO is cloaking itself in environmental stewardship to push its packaging agenda. The liquor board notes that since Tetra Paks are lighter than glass bottles, the LCBO is doing its part to reduce the sheer tonnage going into Ontario's blue boxes.

But the Tetra Pak strategy is inherently flawed.

First, according to Waste Diversion Ontario, a miniscule 13% of Tetra-Pak packaging was recovered last year, meaning 87% ended up in landfill. And none of those Ontario Tetra Paks were recycled in the province because no such facility exists. Instead, Tetra Paks —

much like Toronto's garbage — are shipped to Michigan for processing.

Second, if the LCBO truly cared about going green, it would implement a deposit return system for its glass bottles. Such a system exists in British Columbia. In 2004, the B.C. Liquor Distribution Branch recovered a whopping 86% of wine and spirit bottles.

Third, and most significantly, there's no facility in the province capable of packaging Ontario wines in Tetra-Pak boxes. One reason for this is that high quality Ontario varietals that qualify for the Vintners Quality Assurance seal of approval must be packaged in glass bottles.

So, what's the unspoken strategy behind the LCBO's Tetra Pak offensive? According to insiders, the LCBO stands to save approximately \$500,000 per year thanks to weight reduction and decreased disposal charges. But given that the LCBO had net sales of \$3.5-billion for the fiscal year of 2004-05, that seems like chump change.

Ask Ontario vintners how they feel about Tetra Paks, and they turn redder than a bottle of Merlot. Unfortunately, they cannot go on record with their ire lest they anger their principal Ontario retail channel. Producers say the LCBO can easily penalize critics by reducing shelf space or de-listing their brands outright.

The LCBO is so gung-ho on its Tetra Pak agenda that it is currently promoting cardboard-encased foreign wines at the expense of domestic product. The *National Post* recently obtained a copy of an internal LCBO document regarding a current sales promotion. Management is offering prizes ranging from radios to wine goblets as reward for sales persons who can move the most Tetra-Paked French Rabbit, a brand one wine aficionado describes as "mass-produced factory plonk."

What is especially irksome to the folk in wine country is that it has taken decades to distance themselves from the dark old days when the Ontario wine industry was infamous for such laughable products as Baby Duck and Blue Nunn.

Today, much of the product is world-class, yet the liquor board wants producers to put it in containers that most consumers identify with apple juice.

Bottom line: If the LCBO truly cared about going green, it would embrace a deposit return system for glass bottles. Forcing domestic vintages into Tetra Paks could very well be a deathblow for the Ontario wine industry.

And to think it's all about saving a lousy \$500,000.

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