

Glass wipe?

While PET plastic wine bottles present a number of advantages over their glass counterparts, they're unlikely to replace glass bottles in the near future, writes **Jane Faulkner**.

Hardys make one, so too Wolf Blass and Queensland winery Sirromet made one for their Day on the Green concert back in February. Actually they produced 30,000 all up. That is, shatter-proof plastic wine bottles better known by the acronym PET.

And no wonder it's called PET because the proper name is a mouthful – polyethylene terephthalate, which means it's a polymer. Apart from the recent innovation of producing plastic wine bottles, PET is now the most common soft drink bottle available and many food products are routinely packaged using the same material.

While Sirromet had to serve its wine in plastic for health and safety reasons given the 10,000-strong crowd, it was pleased by the outcome. Besides, no glass meant the concert was incident and injury-free. So to fulfil that legal requirement of no glass around a large crowd, its entry-level Perfect Day chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon merlot were bottled into 187ml PET containers that hold about two standard drinks. Both wines sold for \$5.

Sirromet's chief winemaker, Adam Chapman, agrees that PET bottles are perfect for entry-level wines to be enjoyed at outdoor music, sport or other events and locations where glass is banned.

"These plastic bottles are convenient and easy to use and the safety factor compared to glass is another advantage," says Chapman.

While the concert was a resounding success, after all Joe Cocker and Jimmy Barnes were the star attractions, days after the show, several events organisers contacted the winery wanting to know more about PET and where they could buy them. Sirromet will consider producing them but only if there is a demand. And there isn't one at the moment.

Ironically you'd be hard pressed to find any PET wine in a bottle shop as the few produced here are mostly on-sold into international markets, namely Canada and the United Kingdom.

Wolf Blass was the first in the world to use a PET wine bottle – a 750ml format that it still makes but you can't buy it here either. It was created specifically for the Canadian market.

Oliver Horn, global brand director for Wolf Blass, explains that a few years ago, the Liquor Control Board Ontario (LCBO) embarked on a program to reduce its landfill wastage by 10 million kilograms a year. Considering Wolf Blass is the biggest selling Aussie brand in Canada, the LCBO demanded a more environmentally friendly bottle. After a couple years of research and trials, two wines – a red and white – were launched in August 2006 ready for export under Wolf Blass' Bilyara reserve label.

There are now four Bilyara wines that head to Canada and last August, exports to the UK began with Wolf Blass' Green Label. To date, Wolf Blass exports about 840,000 PET wines a year. The savings from transport cost have been enormous given the lighter product - compare 580 grams for a standard wine bottle to 56 grams in PET. Wolf Blass has managed an 85 per cent reduction in packaging waste as a result.

Little wonder Horn is all in favour of PET as an alternative to glass but the downside is its short-shelf life. No wine business or packaging company would seriously suggest keeping wines in this format for very long. Although depending on the wine, the shelf-life can vary between three and nine months to even a year. It's why the bottles are stamped with a 'best before' date.

Of course, shelf-life relates to the main drawback: rapid oxidation. And the other serious drawback, once the bottles are made, they must be filled quickly.

"The bottles need to be filled within a month, certainly no longer," says Mark Ahern, sales manager for HP Packaging, a company that only produces PET, "because an oxygen scavenger is working from the moment the bottle is made."

While it's difficult to gauge how much longer a wine lasts if bottled quickly, fact is, wine sealed in PET oxidises more rapidly than if sealed in glass anyway. The scavenger is there to at least help in the short-term.

These bottles are also shatter-proof, extremely difficult to break, require less packaging, are light weight and recyclable. Why, then can't we buy them in a bottle shop?

"It's a new and emerging market, there's not even a category for it," says Horn, "and so people don't know much about it."

He suggests to "watch this space" because the more environmentally aware people are, the more accepting they will be of new technologies.

Considering HP Packaging produce most of the PET wine bottles in Australia, Ahern says that while the up-take has been what the company anticipated, "it hasn't been so successful that we can't keep up with demand. It certainly won't take over from glass."

And how exactly are PET bottles made and from what? It's a by-product of crude oil transformed basically into a pellet that is heated, extruded and finally moulded on a machine to form a bottle. At HP's packaging plant up to 40,000 bottles can be made a day.

To prove just how strong the bottles are, Ahern adds that "you can drive a forklift over the 187ml bottle and it won't break." Recycling is a by-product and the carpet industry being one of the main beneficiaries. For example, about 40 600mls PET water bottles can be turned into a square metre of carpet underlay.

But as to who is buying the products in the market, he doesn't know.

However, two domestic airlines, including Qantas, use PET, Jetstar International use Hardys Shuttles and for the Spring Racing Carnival, Seppelt (also a Foster's brand) specially packaged Fleur de Lys in 187ml PET bottles.

Hardys launched the Shuttle in December 2006 saying it was the "world's first combined wine bottle and glass".

For an easy-to-drink wine to take to outdoor events be it picnics or even a barbie at your mate's place, the Shuttle concept, at around \$5 a pop, is excellent. But its domestic distribution was initially limited because of a marketing proposal to make it the exclusive wine of choice during Cirque du Soleil's national tour.

From there, the focus was to sell them in wine sponsorship contracts for major

festivals rather than giving them a retail focus. That policy has changed as the Shuttle is now one of the few PET wines you can buy at various outlets. Since October 2007, they have been available nationally at Dan Murphy's and Liquorland and from April this year, First Choice outlets took them on. To date, Hardys have sold about 5000 cases, exceeding a sales forecast by about 200 per cent.

"Shuttles are probably the only true innovative wine packing concept since the bag-in-the-box, and it's all about convenience," says Jay Holata, senior vice president of supply chain at Hardys.

Don't expect an Eileen Hardy chardonnay or Wolf Blass platinum label Barossa shiraz to be packaged anytime soon in a PET bottle. Winemakers and aficionados think it unlikely that premium wine will ever be packaged in such a way. Clearly we're not talking about fine wine or grand cru Burgundy. PET is perfectly suitable for short-term drinking of mostly fruit forward, cheap and cheerful, clean but mostly bulk production wine.

Hardys also made the bold statement that the Shuttle was "ground breaking and set to revolutionise the way drinkers enjoy wine by the glass." That hasn't been the case.

There is not an overarching demand from consumers to buy wine in PET bottles. Even on a global scale, competition is hardly rife as everyone seems slow to embrace PET as a glass alternative. Given its positive attributes, it's somewhat puzzling. Maybe it's just déclassé.

However, in the UK, there's the trademarked Tulipak that was launched in May last year. It's a PET glass filled with wine then sealed with a foil lid. Recently, Italian wine bottler S.Matteo and SIPA, a Veneto company that produces PET moulding machines, have collaborated to make the first Italian PET wine bottle – a 1.5 litre flagon filled with presumably cheap bulk produced wine that will be sold at wine outlets and supermarkets.

Innovative French producer Boisset has also penetrated the Canadian market with Yellow Jersey, a PET bottle with a screw cap. Under this label, Boisset make a chardonnay, sauvignon, merlot and pinot noir selling for about \$16. Other than that, there are few exponents of PET.

Maybe it's just a matter of time before attitudes change. After all, Australians are inventive sorts: think how popular the bag-of-wine-in-a-box concept has become. But just for now, it seems we still want wine in a bottle. A glass bottle.

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