



Dylan Melvin, co-founder of Chicago-based My Dear Friends, which sells small-production wines in 1.5-liter “Bagnums.” E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Good wine, no bottle required

By Anna Lee Iijima
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For Dylan Melvin, good wine doesn’t need a glass bottle to prove its worth. The Chicago beverage consultant and co-founder of My Dear Friends sells wines sourced from small, family-owned growers across South Africa’s Western Cape in colorful 1.5-liter pouches called bagnums that hold the equivalent of two standard wine bottles. The unconventional packaging is an approachable, shareable way to introduce drinkers to expressive, thoughtfully made wines, Melvin says. But what matters most is the wine inside. “These wines are really unique,” he says. For generations of American wine drinkers, bagged and boxed wines have been synonymous with cheap, bottom-shelf plonk. But a growing number of quality-minded producers are challenging that perception, introducing distinctive, terroir-driven wines in formats discerning drinkers might otherwise dismiss. Both formats use flexible pouches with built-in taps, sold on their own or housed in cardboard boxes. Compared with glass bottles, they’re lighter, more portable and have a substantially smaller environmental footprint. They also keep wine fresh for weeks after opening. In Nordic countries like Sweden and Finland, high-quality boxed wines have long been popular. In 2025, bag-in-box accounted for nearly half of all wine sold by volume in Sweden, where selections range from inexpensive, generic wines to French Chablis, Piedmontese nebbiolo or Oregon pinot noir. In the United States, however, the shift toward premium bagged and boxed wine has been considerably slower. At Tablas Creek Vineyard in Paso Robles, California, boxed wine might seem an especially unlikely fit. Founded in partnership with Château de Beaucastel, the storied Châteauneuf-du-Pape producer, Tablas Creek pioneered Rhône-style wines in America and earned a reputation for exceptionally elegant, age-worthy wines. But the winery has also long been a leader in sustainable viticulture. Certified organic since 2003 and biodynamic since 2017, it became the world’s first Regenerative Organic Certified vineyard in 2020. Tablas Creek’s venture into boxed wines began with a self-audit of the winery’s carbon footprint. The findings were eye-opening, partner and general manager Jason Haas recalls, identifying glass bottles and their transportation as major sources of the winery’s emissions. Switching from conventional glass bottles to bag-in-box, he estimated, could cut packaging-related carbon emissions by roughly 84%.

Still, Haas initially dismissed the idea, wary of boxed wine’s association with cheap, mass-market products. But a friend challenged him to reconsider. If a winery like Tablas Creek wasn’t willing to change those perceptions, who would? In 2022, Haas announced the release of Tablas Creek’s first boxed wine, its Patelin de Tablas rosé, to wine club members. It sold out in just four hours. At nearly \$100 for a three-liter box, the equivalent of four standard bottles, it was among the priciest boxed wines in America, though still modestly cheaper than buying the same wine in \$30 bottles. But the price didn’t deter buyers, many of whom told Haas they’d never purchased boxed wine before. Demand for subsequent releases prompted Tablas Creek to triple production and expand distribution. Beyond the environmental benefits, customers discovered another compelling reason to embrace boxed wine — freshness. Unlike an opened bottle, a box’s collapsible pouch limits oxygen exposure with each pour, keeping wine fresh for weeks. It’s an especially appealing format for anyone who enjoys an occasional glass of wine. “It’s like having wine on tap at your convenience,” Haas says, without the commitment of opening a bottle. But for both Haas and Melvin, the packaging is ultimately secondary to the wine itself. My Dear Friends’ skin-contact white, for example, comes from dry-farmed grapes grown by third-generation farmers in Swartland, hand-harvested and vinified in small batches with native yeast. Tablas Creek considers its Patelin de Tablas series its “neighborhood” wine, a fresh, youthful counterpart to its more cellarable bottlings, but they share the winery’s commitment to organically grown grapes, native yeast fermentation and deft blending. The format also embodies a unique sense of generosity and conviviality, says Melvin. The 1.5-liter bags are made for holiday gatherings, house parties and picnics, yet the wines are elegant enough to serve at a dinner party, he suggests. “What made it special was making something worth sharing,” he says. Bagged and boxed wines are intended to be enjoyed relatively young and fresh, rather than aged. Compared with wine in glass bottles, they have a shorter recommended shelf life, often around 6 months from their fill date. But whether for everyday drinking or the long stretches of the holiday season, the format has plenty to offer. Melvin’s packaging supplier estimates that a bagnum can keep wine fresh for up to 45 days after opening, while Tablas Creek’s website recommends several weeks for its boxed wines. Both



My Dear Friends 1.5-liter “Bagnums.”

Wine bags and boxes worth buying

- MY DEAR FRIENDS 2024 RED TABLE WINE (SWARTLAND)**
1.5L bagnum \$30 at Foxtrot
Every bagnum from My Dear Friends comes with a simple instruction: “Pour generously.” This easy-drinking red is a blend of cinsault, mourvèdre, syrah and touriga nacional grapes, sourced from dry-farmed, sustainable vineyards in South Africa’s Swartland region. Fermented with native yeasts, it’s a light-bodied, fresh-footed wine that would drink well slightly chilled.
- TABLAS CREEK 2025 PATELIN DE TABLAS BLANC (PASO ROBLES)**
3L box \$105 at Tablas Creek
A Rhône-inspired white, this fragrant, floral blend of grenache-blanc, viognier, roussanne, marsanne, vermentino and picpoul blanc brims with stone-fruit flavors and a touch of spice. Versatile and thirst-quenching, it’s the kind of wine you’ll love having on hand in the fridge, ready for just about any mood or meal.
- BEDROCK WINE CO. 2025 ODE TO LULU ROSÉ (CALIFORNIA)**
3L box \$100 at Bedrock Wine
Founded by winemaker and Master of Wine Morgan Twain-Peterson, Bedrock Wine Co. is

- celebrated for distinctive wines from some of California’s most historic old-vine vineyards. This is an homage to the dusky, savory rosés of Domaine Tempier in Bandol. Sourced primarily from 130-year-old vines of mourvèdre, this is a personal favorite of Haas, who tries to buy a box every year. Distribution of the boxed version is limited, so act fast if you spot one on a reputable store shelf.
- RYME CELLARS NV ORANGE SUNSHINE (CALIFORNIA)**
3L box \$105 at Ryme Cellars
Founded by husband-and-wife winemakers Ryan and Megan Glaab, Sonoma-based Ryme Cellars specializes in minimal-intervention wines made from lesser-known Italian grape varieties. It was Ryme Cellars’ bag-in-box vermentino that first inspired Haas to explore the format at Tablas Creek. It’s not currently available from the winery, but you can find their orange wine, a “crushable” blend of skin-fermented vermentino, pinot gris and greco grapes now.
- SCHPLINK 2025 GRÜNER VELTLINER (WEINVIETEL)**
3L box, \$40 at Communal Brands
Zippy and spry with bursts of crisp green apple and lime flavors, this

- is a crowd-pleasing white that’s equally suited to holiday parties or sipping solo. Made by Weingut Norbert Bauer, an 11th-generation family-run estate in Austria. Sustainably farmed.
- COLETTE CABERNET FRANC (BOURGUEIL)**
3L box \$45 at Communal Brands
This is an eminently quaffable red, perfect served lightly chilled. Produced by Château de Minière in Bourgueil in France’s Loire Valley, this light-bodied, sprightly cabernet franc is beautifully aromatic with bright raspberry and red cherry flavors and a fresh, juicy finish. Certified organic.
- VAGABONDE ROUGE (CÔTES DU RHÔNE)**
1.5L bagnum, \$25 at Communal Brands
Penetrating in fruit but delicate in tannins, Côtes du Rhône, the classic red blends of the Southern Rhône are made for holiday entertaining. This bang-for-your-buck bagnum is made by Rocca Maura, a small cooperative sourcing organically grown grapes from Lirac, just across the river from its more famous neighbor, Châteauneuf-du-Pape. A generous proportion of cinsault lends a lively, refreshing edge.

Melvin and Haas, however, report considerably longer-lasting results. Haas recalls discovering a nearly empty box of rosé in his refrigerator six months after opening it. “I poured the last glass out, and it was delicious,” he says. Refrigeration helps, even for reds, which can be brought back to serving temperature before drinking. Premium bagged and boxed wines can still be hard to find on retail shelves, so buying directly from producers or specialty sellers offers greater choice and often fresher stock. Online, an especially good place to find well-priced but high-quality selections is the importer Communal Brands, founded by Master of Wine Melissa Saunders, which

specializes in wines from small, low-intervention producers. Their perennially popular Hérison Rouge, a blend of gamay and pinot noir from Burgundy, is just one of a growing number of excellent wines available in bags and boxes.

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