

# New Sparkling Packaging Blends Innovation with Traditional Cues

Andrew Adams

**DESPITE ALL THE DISRUPTIONS** from the COVID-19 pandemic—most notably the loss of the on-premise market—the sparkling wine category has enjoyed a stellar year in terms of sales.

Prior to the pandemic, sparkling at all price points was doing well compared to the general wine category, and that strength has continued. As 2020 comes to an end, it may not seem as if there were many reasons to celebrate at home during the past year, but several of the largest sparkling wine producers report that consumers seem to have done just that.

Data by Nielsen reveal that in the 52 weeks ending Sept. 5, 2020, total sparkling wine sales rose by 16.3 percent over the previous year to more than \$2.1 billion. Total table wine was up by 10.8 percent in the same period to \$16.5 billion. Sales of sparkling, during the four weeks ending Sept. 5, were up 33 percent to \$152 million.

Such growth brings new brands both in standard packaging and, increasingly, in cans. Unlike table wine, sparkling wine packaging is bound by consumer expectation, tradition and the necessities required to deliver a highly pressurized product safely to market.

That means innovation in packaging often is done in subtle ways or in alternative formats. According to data from the Gomberg Fredrikson & Associates Price Service report, many of the new sparkling brands introduced to the market in the past year have been in smaller, alternative format SKUs of national brands, such as Barefoot, or new sparkling wines launched onto the market in an alternative format.

## Canned Sparkling Wine Finds Fans

Darcey Lacy, founder and creative director of Watermark Design in Charlottesville, Virginia, partly attributes the popularity of cans to how well they play to an online audience. “The Instagram revolution requires a cute package, and cute cans deliver in spades,” she said. “Especially with a boom in direct-to-consumer products that are primarily sold online, social media is a huge driver, so the packaging must sing and speak to that specific market in order to drive sales.”

One relatively new sparkling wine in can is Oro Bello, which was developed by Atlas Wine Co. The brand has a modern design aesthetic with colors and imagery suitable for a sparkling wine yet match the design of the entire Oro Bello product line.

The wine was developed by winemaker Alexander Remy, who joined Atlas as general manager and winemaker in 2015 with the intent to develop a portfolio of wines with relatively affordable prices that over-deliver on quality. He



said the sparkling wine, which is described as a “Blanc de Blancs” on the front and officially labeled a California-appellated carbonated white wine on the back, was one of the most challenging projects he’s tackled.

Remy observed that the market has seen an explosion of wine-in-can brands, seeking to parlay the success of White Claw and other lighter, effervescent beverages. The result is grocery store shelves stocked with competitively priced wine-in-can brands made with mediocre, or worse, quality of wine.

The biggest technical challenge is also the most fundamental: the bubbles.

Champagne pressure can be as much as 6 bar, and Remy said quality sparkling wine needs a minimum of 4 bar. Most of what is being sold as “sparkling” in can, he said, is actually only 2 to 3 bar because a significant amount of carbonation is lost during transfers and can filling.

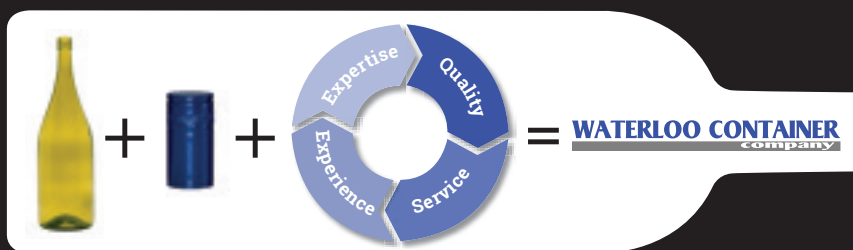
Remy said he decided to force carbonate in tank, transfer fast and cold and then get the wine to a canning line in Modesto, Calif., which is the only option for running a line at temperatures cold enough to preserve sufficient carbonation. Shrink-sleeved labels weren’t an option with the line running at such cold temperatures, so he had to buy printed cans direct from Ball.

The finished wine comes in a four-pack of 187ml cans with a retail price of \$18, which is the same as the Oro Bello Chardonnay and Rosé packaged in a traditional 750ml glass bottle. “To me there is no secret in the winemaking,” Remy said. “It’s definitely going to take a year to get all the things together to make a sparkling wine-in-can at decent pressure.”

Atlas produced nearly 7,000 4.5L cases of the sparkling wine, and Remy said it has been a commercial success but not in grocery stores. There, it’s competing with much lower priced brands and gets lost in the wine-in-can shelves. Remy contends it should instead be placed next to bottles of sparkling wine and Champagne. “For me I made it a replacement for a Prosecco on a Tuesday night. I didn’t mean for the cans to be shot-gunned on a boat,” he said.

Most sales have come through the winery’s website and from on-premise accounts where it has continued to do well despite the pandemic.

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### Subtle Changes to Traditional Packaging

Considering the cost and logistical hurdles of putting sparkling wine in can, it then makes sense that when wineries do add a sparkling wine to their portfolio, those wines are most often in a traditional format. Price, wine style, intended consumer and consumption occasion all seem to factor more heavily in sparkling wine.

A crown cap may be a much simpler and relatively cheaper option, but most consumers would likely find it to be an odd or underwhelming choice unless they were the type of consumer in the market for an organic petillant natural.

For established sparkling wine brands there appears to be less need and fewer incentives for changes in packaging strategy. New brands need to strike the right balance of innovative touches to capture the attention of consumers while also conveying the traditional hallmarks of sparkling wine quality.

"The brands that are newer or ready for a packaging change to engage consumers, we're seeing a nice balance between cleaner and modern design... and those cues for tradition that reinforce quality perception," observed Cynthia Sterling, creative director for the design firm Affinity Creative.

Sterling recently worked on the redesign of the Italian prosecco brand Avidi for Trinchero Family Estates. The redesigned brand employed a striking, colorful border around the front label that was based on historic tile from Italy. The result is something that Sterling described as eye-catching yet conveys an impression of wine quality commensurate with the price.

In general, she said packaging materials are much more important in sparkling wine, and metallics are quite effective in incorporating the festive element of sparkling wine consumption. A few custom touches on the bottle can help achieve that goal as well. "A proprietary bottle shape can go a long way in differentiating the brand," she noted.

Some wineries are incorporating wire hoods with custom metal discs that feature designs or unique colors to stand out while others are using unique materials on neck tags or the capsule as well.



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### A More “Modern” Approach

For wines priced between \$15 and \$20, Sterling said the latest designs focus on simpler, bolder graphics that are in line with the general trend to convey an impression of a lighter, almost healthier beverage. “Consumers are looking for beverages that are session-able so they can drink and be social and not end up drunk,” Sterling said. “We see that a lot in the sparkling seltzer category, and I think it is transferring over to wine. We’re starting to see wine producers think about the consumers’ interest in beverages that are healthier and ‘better for me’ and allow them to live the lifestyle they want.”

Dave Schuemann, owner and creative principal of the design firm CF Napa, said the sparkling wine category has been “exploding,” and he has been working on several new projects by wineries that want to capture some of that momentum. “There’s a push to develop wines that decouple themselves from the Champagne tradition and move into a younger demographic,” he said.



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Many of these wines are taking concepts similar to what’s seen in high-end fragrance packaging: elegant, simple, with a few bold touches from either color or custom containers to convey luxury.

Wine, in general, has not always been the most innovative sector in terms of packaging design, and sparkling wine has been even less so, but Schuemann said in recent years more brands have broken from tradition by not using a capsule around the wire cage.

CF Napa’s work for the sparkling wine brand Ultramarine won a design award by the global advertising journal Lurzer’s Archive. Ultramarine is a highly allocated sparkling wine brand founded by winemaker Michael Cruse, who was named *San Francisco Chronicle’s* Winemaker of the Year in 2016.

According to Schuemann, the absence of a capsule gave the brand a Millennial, tradition-flouting coolness that was quite effective when it hit the market. It features an iridescent label that has a shimmer almost like fish scales and is also similar in appearance to the settling bubbles of a freshly poured glass of sparkling wine. “That was our first entry into just breaking all the rules,” Schuemann said.

For lower-priced wines that consumers may buy for a less momentous occasion, such as a dinner party, Schuemann believes that a signature, custom touch, such as a cartouche, gives a sparkling wine that premium look and feel that consumers are looking for.

And while winemakers may not be too thrilled by it, another trend Schuemann is seeing a lot of is Rosé sparkling wine in clear glass with label and capsule colors picked to accentuate the wine’s color. “That has become a real trend,” he said. “They want the consumer to see the beautiful pink of the wine and pull it right off the shelf.” **WBM**