How do consumers know if a wine is really environmentally sustainable? With so many factors along the production chain that can impact the environment — from using pesticides in the vineyard to shipping heavy boxes of filled bottles long distances — creating and maintaining an ecologically sustainable program is a challenge more producers are accepting.

Those efforts include packaging that’s sustainably produced, recyclable and reusable.

Last year, TricorBraun WinePak, a packaging producer based in Fairfield, Calif., began offering a certification to wineries that were using ecologically produced Ardagh Group ECO Series glass bottles, which are lighter weight, use recycled glass and are made in factories with clean-burning furnaces. If 90% of a winery’s bottles are ECO series, TricorBraun issued a certificate testifying to its green practices.

The idea came from the wineries, says Heidi Cook, WinePak’s business development manager based in Coquitlam, B.C., who wanted something to display in a tasting room that would show customers sustainable practices. “Most of it is good marketing and
explains to their customer what they’re doing,” she says. “These bottles are sometimes more expensive and wineries are taking on the burden of providing packaging at higher expense.” The program was only launched in Canada, although TricorBraun has considered expanding it to the United States.

APPLETTE FOR RISK

Larger producers have the resources (but not necessarily the risk appetite) to try a new product, particularly if it means reconfiguring a large production facility. Smaller producers might have the interest and be more willing to try something new and unusual, particularly if it helps them stand out from the crowd, but they often lack the resources. Investing in new packaging is a huge risk, says Cynthia Sterling, principal of Sterling Creativeworks based in Napa, Calif. “The tiny producers don’t have a research and development budget. The big ones do, but they’re very cautious — and understandably so.”

A recent example is PaperBoy Wines, a brand of Healdsburg, Calif.-based producer Truett-Hurst, which was put, as the name implies, in paper bottles. But the first manufacturer, GreenBottle, had problems with production. The next producer had quality control issues, and production was stopped. (Both companies later went into bankruptcy administration.) Truett-Hurst has put the project on hold because it hasn’t found another manufacturer who can make the bottles at the rate and quality it requires.

Glass bottles aren’t going to disappear from wine shelves anytime soon. For one, consumers associate glass with environmental sustainability because it’s recyclable — but its weight and the cost of transport and carbon footprint diminishes its eco-viability. Consumers also often associate a heavy glass bottle with a premium product, says Sterling. Switching to lighter glass means carefully rethinking the entire packaging design so that quality indicators aren’t lost. “What I’m hearing from clients is concern about finding the most ecologically sound options that will also let them project the right brand image,” she says. “With lighter-weight glass, we have to work harder in other parts of the packaging to convey quality, but it’s a worthwhile tradeoff.”

In Europe, directives adopted by the European Union compelled producers to reduce their carbon footprint, and glass manufacturers looked for and created novel production methods that would cre-
ate lighter, yet durable, glass. SPG Packaging, a Fairfield, Calif., subsidiary of global glass manufacturer Verallia, reviewed and adapted the entire production process to create its Ecova bottle line, says Jean-Pierre Giovanni, vice president and general manager. The cost savings of the bottles is around 10%, and corporate wineries are the biggest customers. The company created a lighter bottle at around 400 grams (the range is 400 to 800 for sparkling wine) that still has a premium look and feel. “The bottle has a taller presence, and all that adds weight to it,” he says. “When consumers have it on their dining tables with friends, it reflects premium wine.”

One issue glass manufacturers in the United States face is the lack of a regular supply of broken glass at a consistent price, says Giovanni (SPG manufactures in France). “It’s hard to run a manufacturing operation when you’re not sure of supply. It’s getting better, but there’s a lot of room for improvement in the collection process so recycled glass becomes available and can be reused.”

ADVENTUROUS IDEAS

There are some adventurous companies that aren’t just reusing conventional materials, but creating entirely new ones. Ecovative, based in Green Island, N.Y., has pioneered a method of creating packaging materials from mycelium — basically, mushroom fungus — combined with clean agricultural waste. The mycelium “eats” the waste and makes new fibers, which are then broken down and put into molds. The mycelium grows around the molds, leaving no air pockets, which means a form-fitted packaging solution. The company offers a one-bottle and a three-bottle shipper, with options for horizontal or vertical placement. The horizontal version has thermal protection; the vertical doesn’t, but it’s less expensive. They’ll also do custom designs for large orders.

The Celeste Ecova sparkling wine bottle (SGP Packaging by Verallia) is made with lighter yet durable glass.

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The properties, says Ecovative co-founder Eben Bayer, are similar to expanded polystyrene. The result is a product that’s made from waste, is compostable and recyclable — and even gives back to the soil. “All the materials we make for our packaging are home compostable. Lots of this packaging waste doesn’t end in recycling and trash, it doesn’t end up in parks and the ocean,” he says. “But if it does, it gives nutrients to the environment, not pollutants. It works with nature if it ends up there.”

Tom Kandris, CEO of PackageOne in Sacramento, Calif., says that more wine customers are looking for eco-friendly packaging. “A lot of wine customers are earth-friendly,” he says. “Some are locked into traditional approaches just because they don’t know what’s out there.”

The company developed a corrugated shipping box made with recycled cardboard that, in some cases, Ecovative’s single lay-down wine shipper, made from waste, is compostable and recyclable.
can eliminate the partition between bottles. The bottles fit tightly into the box but, because there’s no cushioning, a brand owner needs to be confident about the quality of the glass it’s using, and also consider using labels that won’t scuff. But they’ll realize the cost-savings of using less materials.

“We need to invest more in the label printing and have a really good design to give correct cues to the consumer and the trade about the quality and price,” says Sterling.

If a producer selects a lighter bottle, the premium product and environmental cues can come from other packaging elements, she

Many consumers rely on the packaging to indicate wine quality.

CREATING PREMIUM CUES

PackageOne’s in-store display units are made from forest, agricultural, textile and urban waste and can be made into almost any shape or design.

Eco-packaging decisions can extend to in-store marketing, too. PackageOne offers an in-store display unit made from its own ECOR material that’s easy to assemble, light but with the strength to support the weight of a display of bottles, is printable and recyclable. ECOR is made from forest, agricultural, textile and urban waste. It can be made into almost any shape or design, letting brands put a creative spin on their displays. “You can put 50 to 60 bottles of a standard Claret on one of these displays. It looks beautiful and natural,” says Matthew Lerwill, PackageOne’s vice president of marketing.

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adds, like bottles with unusual designs. She mentions bottles with unique bases, or patterns embedded in the glass that only become apparent once the contents are poured out. “They’re cool, wonderful and they speak to craftsmanship,” she says.

More of her clients are opting for sustainably harvested, FSC-certified paper for labels, too, a trend she first became aware of around 2012. The traditional metal foil stamping on labels is not as popular as it once was, she says. “Not only is the foil on the label and into the system potentially toxic, but there’s a lot of waste at the printer. If you have a hot foil stamped border and parts of the brand name hot stamped, you have to use foil as big as the label, but only about 5% is transferred to the label and the rest goes into trash or recycling.”

Part of the trend is labels eschewing designs like the traditional chateaux, a trend she says is due, in part, to younger consumers who are “more open” to unconventional packaging. “They don’t feel like they must have foil and traditional cues on the label itself,” Sterling says.

The younger consumers have high expectations that the products they purchase will be sustainable, agrees Verallia’s Giovanni, and will push wine producers to adopt more environmental practices — slowly. “The wine industry has to be very conservative in adopting changes,” he says. “Some people are taking more risks than others; its moving along, but slowly. There’s a high risk moving to something new because consumers might not recognize the brand anymore.”

Danielle Beurteaux is a freelance writer based in Brooklyn, N.Y., who writes about drinks, business, investing and technology for national magazines and websites.

Comments? Please e-mail us at feedback@vwmmedia.com.

Wilridge Winery’s owner and winemaker, Paul Beveridge, was an environmental attorney before taking on winemaking full-time, so his adoption of green practices has a precedent, “We consider ourselves the greenest winery in Washington state,” he says, “Whatever we can do, we do it.”

Wilridge Winery, which is based Seattle and Yakima, began offering refillable bottles for a red blend, a white blend and a seasonal variety in 2010. Two formats are available; a 1.5 L magnum and a 20 L keg. There’s an $8 deposit for the bottle and a $45 deposit for the keg; customers can return either to a purchase point (along with closures). The winery sanitizes and refills the bottles, and is the first winery in Washington state to have such a system since Prohibition.

The program is a result of Beveridge putting his legal experience to use and getting the state to agree to allow refillable bottles. But the liquor board only allows refills at the winery. For three years, Beveridge and his cohort have had a bill (SB 5213) awaiting a vote that would let retailers fill bottles as well. Beveridge points to convention and vested interests afraid of change blocking the bill.

But customers love the program, he says. “They feel so proud of themselves for bringing it back, it’s just like a milk bottle. Plus they come back to the retail location.”

It’s also a cost savings for the winery, he says, which is passed along to the customer. “The customer only pays for the deposit once,” he says, “It lets us compete with bigger wineries that have a much bigger economy of scale.”

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