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FOOD//WINE, BEER & SPIRITS

Boxed wine gets a bad rap. This famous Hawaiian restaurant convinced California wineries to make it anyway

By [Jess Lander](#), Wine reporter

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Merriman's, which has locations on four Hawaiian islands, is replacing many of its by-the-glass selections with high-end boxed wines.
Steve Czerniak/Merriman's Honolulu

A famed Hawaiian restaurant chain has convinced a group of notable California wineries to try something quite controversial: Put their wine in a box.

Merriman's, the fine dining restaurant with locations on four Hawaiian islands, will replace several of its by-the-glass offerings with high-quality boxed wines. The initiative is part of Merriman's plans to become carbon-neutral, with the goal of cutting its glass use by roughly 20,000 wine bottles this year.

Chef Peter Merriman founded his first restaurant on the Big Island in 1988 and pioneered a Hawaiian movement of locally sourced, regional cuisine. On the beverage side, Merriman's is best known for its mai tai topped with honey-lilikoi foam, but it also has one of Hawaii's most exciting and diverse wine lists. "The weight of the bottles being shipped over the ocean and every leg of the trip in trucks was a big contributor (to Merriman's carbon footprint)," said Merriman's beverage director Jason Vendrell.

“Originally, we just started doing lighter-weight bottles, but that seemed like such an incremental step, so we figured we’d take a bigger swing and go to boxed wines.”

Long associated with frat parties and cheap, low-quality booze, boxed wines get a bad rap. But in recent years, fancy boxed wines — some priced at over \$100 — have popped onto the market. Wineries are desperate to engage [younger drinkers](#) and data shows that sustainability often influences their shopping habits. A glass wine bottle’s carbon footprint is about [five times more](#) than a bag-in-box, and glass bottles are one of the largest contributors to a winery’s overall carbon emissions.

Shipping wine to Hawaii emits significantly more carbon than shipping elsewhere in the U.S. as the long journey, which can take one to two months, requires loading wine into a container and onto a boat. A case of wine in boxes is responsible for 80% less emissions than a case of wine in glass, Vendrell said.

High-end California wineries like Tablas Creek, Ryme and Bedrock have led the push for this stigmatized alternative packaging, hoping to change the consumer’s perception of it. And while most of Merriman’s customers won’t know that the glass of wine they ordered was poured from a plastic spout attached to a cardboard box, the restaurant has inspired another wave of high-quality boxed wines. Thus far, the program includes **six hip California wineries**: Napa Valley’s [Matthiasson](#), Frog’s Leap and Failla; **Sonoma’s [Obsidian Wine Co.](#)**; and Central Coast producers Linne Calodo and [Melville](#). Several have decided to also sell the boxes to wine club members, tasting room visitors and other restaurant accounts.

Matthiasson, which boxed up its rosé for Merriman’s, plans to offer it to its mailing list. In addition to the carbon emission savings, the packaging is less expensive, costing the winery about \$2 less per bottle. “We have a lot of members that buy a case of rosé every year for the summer,” said Matthiasson founder Steve Matthiasson. “A (bag-in-box) is four bottles and three boxes fit into a bigger box perfectly.”

Linne Calodo owner Matt Trevisan, who has been selling wine to Hawaii since 2003, has made a “fresh and lively” Paso Robles Grenache blend with a bit of Mourvedre, Syrah and Carignan. He saved some for his customers, priced the box at \$160 and “sold out the first batch in three days.”

“The feedback we’re getting from everyone,” he said, “is that it’s so nice to want to have a glass of wine and not have to open a whole bottle that night — not to feel like they have to drink four glasses over three days.”

Boxes extend the shelf life of the wine; bag-in-boxes are believed to stay fresh for about a month, while bottles only last a few days.

Obsidian co-owner Arpad Molnar said he hopes Merriman’s “kicks off a trend,” and he’s begun pitching boxes of the winery’s estate Cabernet Sauvignon to other restaurants. “There are so many benefits. It’s not just transportation,” he said, adding that a shipping pallet can fit more than double the amount of wine if it’s in boxes compared to glass bottles.

Over nearly four decades, Merriman’s empire has expanded to 11 restaurants across Hawaii, including the more casual and vibey Monkeypod Kitchen, which is [rumored](#) to be plotting a Bay Area location. All 11 spots will soon serve some of the boxed wines. “We’re not sacrificing quality at all,” said Vendrell. “I wanted to make sure that the wines were significantly better in quality than what someone would expect from a boxed wine.”

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