

'Oscar Krüger article: What's in a container?'

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We are all consumers of many kinds of goods, and in that capacity, we can hardly be unaware of the importance of the containers in which those goods are packaged. Containers protect and condition what they contain, and they can be part of the experience of consumption, enhancing or limiting our enjoyment of the good.

We are less accustomed to thinking about the role of containers in the process of production. I read a fascinating ethnographic article recently that draws attention to just that.

Oscar Krüger, a social anthropologist at Lund University, spent several years researching small wine production in Italy (I was fortunate to be able to contribute to the supervision of his PhD on the topic). In 'Peasant in a Bottle: Infrastructures of Containment for an Italian Wine Cooperative', published in *Ethnos*, he explains the importance of different kinds of containers of wine for artisanal producers.

The standard designs of the glass wine bottle were established long ago. There are only a few options, and any elaboration is taken to be flashy, rather than as a sign of quality. But that doesn't mean that the bottle is unimportant for the producer.

From the wine producers' point of view, there are two ways of selling wine into the consumer market, distinguished by the type of container used. Most wine is sold to wholesalers in tanks, to be blended and bottled later on, close to the end market. Bottling at the site of production is more expensive, but is a seal of quality. That is because it allows what is distinctive about the product--above all its expression of a specific *terroir*--to be preserved from the vineyard to the table. As Oscar writes, 'by integrating the act of sealing into the grape-growing farm itself, the winemakers ensure that they themselves are made present at that final point, irrespective of whether it is Turin or Tokyo' (p.9). The bottle remains sealed until it is opened by the consumer, whereas wine sold in tanks will be decanted into a series of different containers before it is bottled, breaking the connection with the specific site of production.

This connection between the glass bottle and the marketable quality of the character of the wine of a single estate goes back to the 1660s, where the idea of *terroir* as the expression of the unchanging and unique 'taste of the place' developed early. The extension of this idea in Italy, as *territorialità*, has been seen as a way to escape the downward pressure on prices that has come with the development of commodity markets in food and drinks. Tying a specific product--first wine, then a host of other comestible products--to a specific place allows both product and place to acquire greater distinctiveness and greater value. Clearly where this connection is facilitated by the relatively small and heavy glass bottle, it comes at a cost for the producer, and for the environment.