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SE LIFESTYLE

HD **Incredible bulk: why are we bottling foreign wine in Britain? Increasingly, wine is shipped to the UK vacuum-packed in huge tanks, then bottled here. But how does this affect the taste?**

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Ch-**chink**. Clatter. Burr. Ah, the sound of bottles being filled with liquorice-and-eucalyptus-scented Australian shiraz at the highly efficient rate of six **million** a week. Step outside this gleaming facility and you won't be hit by warm air, though. There are no kangaroos, just a few raucous grey seagulls and a flat, damp dockscape. We're not in New South Wales but Avonmouth, the port on the edge of Bristol.

The bottling plant, owned by Accolade (formerly Constellation Wines), is the biggest of a handful around the country that receive **wine** shipped in vast flexi-tanks and repackage it into bottles and boxes destined for supermarket shelves. The phenomenon of "The Incredible Bulk", as it has been called, has led to global bulk **wine** exports rising from 560 **million** to 1.24 **billion** litres in a decade, according to Rabobank which published a report on the subject, noting that the main demand comes from Britain, Germany, the United States and **China**.

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You can tell if your **wine** has been bottled on these shores because the label on the back must by law announce it, though it usually does so in minuscule print. Chances are if you **buy wine** in supermarkets you will have had one. Accolade in Avonmouth bottles not just its own brands (which include Hardy's and Echo Falls) but also those of Treasury **Wine** Estates (who own Lindeman's and Beringer), Sainsbury's and Morrisons. Last February Asda became the first retailer to own its own UK bottling plant, in Norfolk. Greencroft Bottling in Co Durham packs around 100 **million** litres a year that go into pub groups as well as retailers. Tesco, which estimates that about a quarter of all the **wine** it sells has been bottled on these shores, uses a facility near the Manchester Ship Canal in Cheshire. You may have seen its head of **wine** (a former naval officer) on Gregg Wallace's Supermarket Secrets standing astride a barge and prodding the large 24,000-litre polypropylene bags in which the stuff arrives, "Look! It's vacuum-packed so it feels completely solid." My more acidic colleagues have been teasing him about his "performance on HMS Plonk".

Is that fair? Bulk **wine** arrives here from the New World, principally Chile and Australia but also Argentina, South Africa, the US and New Zealand. By necessity – it is moved in 24,000 and 26,000-litre tanks – it must have been produced in high volume. Almost exclusively, then, the cheap stuff. Last year the average value of Australian **wine** exported here in bottles was A\$3.82 (£2.02) a litre against the bulk average of A\$1.06 (56p) per litre (those are FOB – free on **board** – costs; that is, the cost of the packaged **wine** before shipping).

It's a practice that allows supermarkets to create their own brands from leftovers in glut harvests. It also gives flexibility in packaging and marketing (sizes, the chance to shout about a competition medal), as Concha y Toro, the Chilean producer that imports Frontera and Isla Negra in bulk, points out. Some also cite environmental concerns. In truth, the decision not to move heavy glass around the world is not about being green, it's about cost. Oversupply coupled with extravagantly high duty (57 per cent of the cost of the average £5 bottle **sold** in this country is pure tax) means that anyone hoping to sell **wine** here must make every single penny really earn its keep.

"Bulk shipping is contentious in South Africa because it takes work away from the glass and bottling industries," says Jo Wehring of Wines of South Africa (WOSA). "The reality, though, is that if you're not competitive you're going to lose market share and that will also lead to a loss of jobs."

Last year 64 per cent of South Africa's **wine** exports to Britain arrived here as bulk **wine**; in 2012 it was 67 per cent, but a weak rand last year underwrote a slight drift back to bottling at source. For other countries the trend continues to gather pace: bottled **wine** exports from Australia to Britain fell by 19 per cent last year against a drop of four per cent for bulk, according to a new report, which fingers the "continued shift to exporting in bulk" for the difference in performance.

What should we think about the quality of **wine** that is bottled here? It is true that, even if their volumes permitted it, you would not catch artisan or fine **wine** producers letting their baby leave the winery in a giant bag to be messed around with by someone else in another time zone. Bulk shipping can make **wine** taste a bit flat. But I don't believe bottling in Britain is necessarily against the cheap-**wine**-drinker's interests. Such commercial wines tend to be more stable and inert, so less likely to spoil. Fierce competition means savings in shipping costs go into the **wine**, not the producer or retailer's pocket. Also, technological developments have finessed the process. For example, oxidation is a threat but Accolade claims that **wine** now picks up less than 0.1 parts per **million** of oxygen when it is transferred into bottles.

"The monitoring of quality is now vastly more intricate," says WOSA's Wehring. "Bottled samples are sent back to the **Wine & Spirits Board** in South Africa who check that the chemical analysis of the product going to the consumer is the same as it was when it left the winery."

Mark Jarman of Morrisons also points out that **wine** bulk-shipped across the equator is less prone to heat spoilage, as "the mass of liquid reduces the temperature variances. This is particularly helpful if a ship is held up in port in the Far East."

In conclusion, on, a mixed bag. I'd never be thrilled to see the words, "bottled in the UK" but it's not always bad news. Below the critical £6 level, shipping savings may mean you end up with a better drink than if the **wine** had made the journey in glass.

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