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Reusable Wine Bottles Slowly Gaining Ground

Creating a Smart, Reusable System

For a few retailers, that system is already here. Lowell Jooste is one such entrepreneur. A South African native who studied at UC Davis, Jooste founded LJ Crafted Wines in San Diego as a growler-only wine business.

Jooste buys grapes in Napa and Sonoma counties; winemaker Alison Green makes the wines in a custom crush facility. When it's ready to sell, the wine is trucked in barrels to San Diego.

When a customer wants a bottle, Jooste uses a patented piece of stainless steel equipment his company developed that works something like a Coravin. It replaces the bung hole of the barrel; and when a liter of wine is extracted, it fills the remaining space with nitrogen and CO₂.

"We've done 365 barrels and sold all in growlers and by-the-glass," Jooste told *Wine Business Monthly*. "Ninety percent is in the growler. We don't do big volumes by-the-glass. The quality depends on getting high-end grapes. Your wine is only going to be as good as your grapes."

Jooste started using traditional 750ml bottles, but the shop has switched to 1-liter bottles with a swing top. "We told people, 'Do you want the 750ml bottle or do you want a growler with one-third more wine?'" Jooste said.

Customers pay a refundable \$6 deposit for each bottle, and between 90 and 95 percent of the growlers are returned for a refill.

"Our core business is leapfrogging everything from the bottling line and any distributors and the cost of the packaging," Jooste explained. "We're not really building a brand. We're building a community following. Everybody comes for their refill."

With a single-store operation like Jooste's, two of the most vexing problems for reusable bottles—removing the labels and cleaning the bottles—are easily solved. "Our labels are just little static cling labels that stick to the growlers," Jooste said. "We get label approval from the TTB. The labels cost about 10 cents, and you just peel them off by hand."

As for washing the bottles, the store uses a dishwasher, the same as for the store's wine glasses. Occasionally, a growler needs a touch-up and is cleaned with a bottle brush connected to a drill.

Jooste's operation is not the only wine shop making its own producer in reusable glass. Acheson Wine Company in Sacramento, currently closed due to a licensing issue, does the same thing with grapes from Lodi, the Sierra Foothills and Amador County.

"For us it's all about saving the extra glass. A lot of bottles don't get recycled," owner Lorraine Scott told *WBM*. "We are able to offer really good wines at an affordable price. People are really into reusing, the eco aspect of it. The majority of our clients are regular clientele. The only way you can purchase wine from us is in an Acheson bottle."

There are obvious advantages to this kind of system at the retailer level—beyond the ecological benefit, it brings customers back to the shop. But scaling it up is a challenge.

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