

Food & Wine

Breathing new life into your wine glass

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Drinking can be hard work.

Browse the wine corner of any good kitchenware store and you'll appreciate the challenge. There are decanters for aerating astringent reds and softening their gritty tannins, funnels with shower-like nozzles for doing the same job, fancy stemware in myriad shapes to focus flavours to precise regions of the mouth.

The truly obsessive can even buy a bottle coaster called Wine Cellar Express purporting to align gritty tannins into a smoother, suppler configuration, like metal filings in one of those Grade 5 magnetism experiments.

Now add another Ripley's-worthy "breakthrough" to your wine appreciation arsenal: Breathable Glass.

Eisch Glaskultur, a German company, has launched a sensational line of stemware the company says vastly accelerates the contact between wine and oxygen. No swirling, shower nozzles or decanters necessary.

Simply pour your wine into the glass and, in two to four minutes, your harsh young cabernet will supposedly taste as soft and multilayered as a wine that's been aerating in a decanter for up to two hours.

Launched several years ago in the United States, the line was introduced to Canada earlier this year.

If it sounds like hocus-pocus worthy of Kreskin, you can be forgiven. But consider this: Eager customers include Thomas Keller's famed French Laundry restaurant in California's Napa Valley, the Sheraton hotel in San Francisco, the illustrious Hotel Hassler in Rome and the Westin hotel in Beijing.

"I think the wine just opens up faster in the Eisch," said David Bernand, food and beverage director of the Four Seasons Hotel in Washington, D.C., which recently bought the glasses for use in its two private dining rooms adjacent to the Seasons restaurant.

Mr. Bernand, a trained sommelier, speaks with conviction. He said he arranged a controlled tasting about a year ago with several Washington hotel and restaurant colleagues, testing a number of the same high-end wines out of comparably shaped glasses, including those of famed Austrian wineglass maker Riedel. "We had a bright room and the wines were at the right temperature," he said. "We did everything right."

The entire group of tasters found the wines in the Eisch glasses to be softer, more complex and fruitier, with less-astringent tannins.

Another convert is Susan Julian, director of winery retail and hospitality at Niagara's Lakeview Cellars, who recently began selling the Breathable Glass line after her own taste test.

She likens it to a sort of iPhone of wine gizmos. "You know how your cellphones used to be just phones but now they're cameras and radios and e-mail pagers and all that stuff? It's almost like that, where you don't need a decanter any more, the funnel or the aerator-type gadget."

Canadian sales of the line have exceeded expectations since it was launched in March, says Bishu Mukherjee, president of Mississauga-based B&M Marketing (Canada) Inc., which imports the brand, priced at \$25 to \$30 a stem and available at Pepper Mill stores in Toronto and other high-end tableware retailers.

Although Eisch closely guards the secret to its manufacturing process, theories abound. The best I've heard comes from esteemed U.S. wine critic Robert Parker, who became impressed after testing the glasses at an event held at the Culinary Institute of America in California. He guesses there are microscopic holes in the glass that trap and aerate the wine. It wouldn't be a big stretch; fine crystal is slightly porous, after all, which is why decanters tend to stain if not rinsed quickly.

Oxygen's influence on wine is well known. Once exposed, the wine behaves like any other fruit stripped of its protective skin. Eventually, it bruises like a sliced apple, but along the way its flavour evolves in sometimes wondrous ways. Aerating most wines is almost like adding salt to soup or tenderizing a tough cut of meat. That's the reason many wine experts prefer to decant young wines in particular - because they tend to contain more tannins. Even fuller-bodied whites, however, can benefit from a little aeration.

I tried a controlled test myself, using an Eisch glass with the breathable technology against an identically shaped Eisch glass made of traditional glass. Using indistinguishable glasses enabled me to perform the comparison blind - in other words, I didn't know which was which until I checked for a little hash mark in the base of the Breathable Glass.

Wearing my skeptic's hat and tasting from a freshly uncorked bottle of Peter Lehmann's Clancy's, a \$20 Australian blend of shiraz, cabernet sauvignon and merlot, I came to this surprising conclusion: a very discernible difference after just three minutes.

The conventional glass had a bitter edge that was significantly less pronounced in the Breathable Glass, while the latter exposed more fruitiness and complex layers of earth and spice. I'm talking subtle differences here, though. A casual taster would not have noticed a difference without paying attention. Still, it's the kind of difference someone paying \$20-plus a bottle is likely to be paying attention to.

After three hours, I was still easily able to correctly identify the glasses and preferred the Clancy's out of the Breathable Glass (save for some cloying prune character on the nose of the latter). That was a surprise, since I'd expected the traditional glass to catch up, so to speak, with its Breathable counterpart after extended exposure. Even a bit of vigorous swirling with the traditional glass didn't close the flavour gap.

Mr. Mukherjee stresses the lead-free Eisch glasses are dishwasher-safe and don't introduce foreign flavours to the wine; you taste the same changes that would happen in any other glass, only much, much more quickly.

The product of five years of research, the Breathable Glass is the latest shot across the bow of Riedel, the innovative company that started a revolution in wine appreciation with its now-vast family of big-bowled glasses, specially shaped to enhance the qualities of each major grape variety. Arc International, a French tableware company, also recently introduced a conventional glass line called Open Up from its Mikasa subsidiary, which have sharper angles and contours than most Riedel glasses but purport to do a similar job.

Owners of handsome Riedel stemware won't, of course, ditch their beloved stems. But I suspect there's a substantial niche market for the Eisch glasses. What's that saying? Build a better golf driver and rich boomers will beat a path to your door? It's the same with wine lovers and their paraphernalia.

"I have a problem drinking even a bad wine out of a plastic cup," Mr. Bernand says. "I'm going to try to do anything I can to have a better experience. I'm going to put all the chances on my side."

But, he sagely adds by way of a reality check, "I don't think it's going to make the Mouton '89 taste better than the '88."