

Branson's Virgin In Vino Venture

[Greg Levine](#), 09.12.05, 5:55 PM ET

Richard Branson



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NEW YORK - He's a bon vivant, in case you didn't get the memo.

So it's natural that British tycoon [Richard Branson](#) joined forces with **Brown-Forman** (nyse: [BFb](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)) (BF) to launch **Virgin Vines**. The latest product to bear the mark of Branson's sprawling empire of mobile phones, air travel and music, it's a wine label targeting the young and hip--and just maybe oenophobic. That's a fear of wine, and the swashbuckling billionaire suspects some Americans are afflicted with it--or at least, with a fear of snobbery, and the elaborate fetishistic lingo often associated with the grape.

Virgin Vines' potent potables came to store shelves across the U.S. on Monday, amid a kickoff celebration in New York City. "Wine, like life, is meant to be enjoyed," declared Branson, as the Gotham bacchanalia began. "All the pomp and ceremony currently associated with wine just gets in the way of enjoying it." An Associated Press report says the product kickoff included a mise-en-scene of damsels dancing on wine barrels.

Under the raucous rubric, "Unscrew it, let's do it," Virgin Vines features a white Chardonnay and a red Shiraz from the California vineyards of BF unit Brown-Forman Wines. As of now, imbibers who favor the deeper cabernet sauvignon or spicy cabernet franc are out of luck.

The wines sell for \$9.99 per bottle, or a four pack of smaller, plastic bottles at \$8.99. Unsurprisingly, a Brown-Forman spokesman said talks have begun for the libations to be served on Virgin Atlantic Airways flights.

And the new venture is in a hot-selling price category. Wines in the \$9 to \$10 price range have had double-digit U.S. sales growth in the first half of the year, one analyst told the AP. Yes, Branson is quite the bon vivant--and no slouch in the dollars and pounds department, either. Small wonder he's ranked No. 170 on the [Forbes World's Richest People](#) list.

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