

Winemakers try to appeal to younger, hip crowd

By Theresa Howard, USA TODAY

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NEW YORK — Winemakers are uncorking a new take on wines with fun packaging and lower prices. The goal is to make wine more "accessible" to be a more popular choice for young, hip palates exploring beyond beer.



Virgin Vines offers a chardonnay and shiraz to attract a younger crowd.

Today, Virgin Group founder Richard Branson will announce Virgin Vines, a wine brand that aims to bring a brash attitude to what has been considered by many a high-brow, rather than hip, product category. The screw-top wines, from a venture by Virgin and liquor company Brown-Forman, are the latest of a new crop trying to woo twentysomethings away from beer and high-end vodka.

"We've got an engaging, edgy, vibrant, fun product," says Virgin CEO Branson. "It may or may not work, but we're going to give it our best shot."

The \$23 billion U.S. wine industry has been on a roll overall — with 2004 retail sales more than double 1994, according to The Wine Institute. A Gallup Poll out in July reported 39% of Americans say they choose wine most often when they drink alcohol, while 36% most often drink beer. It's the first time that beer has taken a back seat to wine.

Winemakers want to squeeze the surge in popularity. Virgin Vines will try with an edgy advertising campaign that begins this week — in newspaper personals columns. The ads take traditional wine descriptions into virgin territory. One personal ad reads, "Full-bodied shiraz desires hookup. No commitments, baggage or corkscrews."

Brown-Forman's Don Freytag says traditional wine marketing didn't fit younger consumers. "Wine is perceived as untouchable and intimidating, and young people are turned off by the imagery of a nose in the glass," says Freytag, brand manager of Virgin Vines. "It was not served up in a terribly friendly way, and we saw that as an opportunity to be different."

Other ways winemakers are trying to be different:

• **Price.** Value-conscious younger consumers have made "a \$10 (per bottle) price point the sweet spot," says Bill Newland, president of giant Allied Domecq's wine division, which also has a new wine label for the younger set, Jakes Fault. "They want to spend enough to realize they are not buying something cheap, but they want something that has good value."

• **Packaging.** Vibrant labels, screw tops instead of corks and even miniboxes of wine are making it more portable and easier to consume. That's key: 60% of U.S. homes don't have corkscrews.

• **Simplicity.** Brands aiming younger are simplifying choices of vintage and varieties. Jakes Fault sells only a shiraz, and Virgin Vines has a chardonnay and shiraz. "Today's consumers are much more interested in a quality wine that they know is going to taste good," Freytag says. "They are much less concerned about where it comes from and the story behind it."