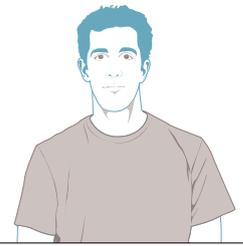
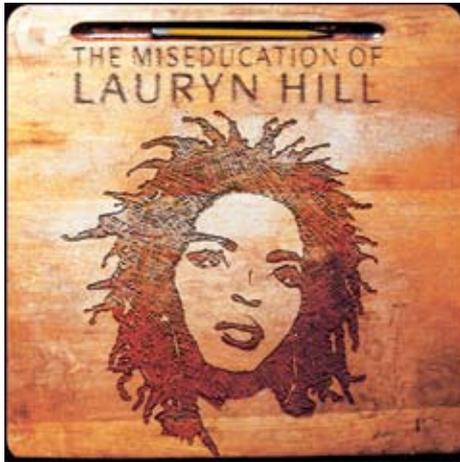


Nick and Choose { NICK ALTSCHULLER }



BOXED IN

How merlot can you go?



Question for Frederick Ilchman What are your guilty pleasures?

Frederick Ilchman is an assistant curator of paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts. Ilchman will be handling the spring exhibition, *Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese: Rivals in Renaissance Venice*.

Sports talk radio. “I listen to WEEL’s *Planet Mikey* show late at night. Especially when something big goes down, like the Red Sox winning the World Series or the Manny Ramirez trade. I tune in to figure out if the callers are tipsy or just enacting their childhood sorrows. They just keep talking and can’t stop. And Mike Adams, the host, can be ruthless with those people.”

Italian Bruce Springsteen message boards.

“I have a strong admiration for Bruce Springsteen, even for his sentimental songs like ‘Bobby Jean.’ Besides going to a lot of his concerts, I’ve followed him on Italian message boards both to practice my Italian and to see how his lyrics, which reference very American things, are received by someone in another country.”

Hip-hop. “For a while I tried to follow hip-hop. In 1996, I was teaching at Columbia University, and Lauryn Hill was one of my students. Around that time she was working on an album with the Fugees. She was really smart but rarely showed up for class. She was killing me softly with her poor attendance. Her next album in 1998 was called *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. I like to think that my class helped inspire that.”

LINH TRAN BRINCAT

A FRIEND WAS HAVING A WINE party on her roof deck. An excellent hostess, she waded through the crowd to greet me and offer a drink, perhaps not seeing that I came bearing gifts. Well-mannered, I had a 2006 California cabernet in hand, four bottles worth to be exact, in a box. It’s not the proverbial turd in the punchbowl, but showing up with box wine is like taking your cousin to the prom. In a Firebird.

Trying everything but rubbing my belly and saying, “Mmm, yummy,” I did my best to sell it, but there were few takers. (Although I did get an “It’s f***ing fabulous!” from the drunkest person at the party, shortly before she left.) As one woman explained, the prevailing feeling is, “I just wouldn’t trust it.” Even late into the night, the two best responses were, “It’s not bad,” and a charitable, “Totally decent.”

Around for decades, box wine suffers a reputation for being low market, mostly because, for years, it sucked. Hooch sullyng swill’s good name. But now, new, better brands are adopting the packaging. One reason: Boxes are lighter than glass, leading to buzzwords like “carbon footprint.” One bottle of wine shipped from Napa to New York generates twice the emissions of a three-liter box. Then for non-hippies, there are important drinking benefits. Box wine stays fresh for weeks, eliminating the “problem” of having to immediately finish every bottle you open. Plus, boxes don’t break when dropped, which is key after quaffing a few liters of shiraz.

At the moment, the problem really isn’t what’s in the box, but the box itself. Oenophiles are traditionalists, and if you’re going to make changes, you have to hide them. Like sneaking your dog’s medicine in a treat, you’ve got to wrap a plastic cork under the foil. With that in mind, I spread out some cheese and crackers and held a wine tasting, keeping the packaging safely out of view.

The guests were my buddy Adam, an aspiring connoisseur fresh off a trip through southern Italy, and my friend John, who will drink anything. First up was the leftover cabernet from Bota Box (\$18.99). When asked for a grade, Adam hemmed and hawed about tannins, while John stepped it up and asked, “With A being Opus One and F being Boone’s Farm?” After the cab was given a chance to

breathe, it moved into the low B range, although Adam didn’t try to hide his grimace when saying, “I guess I could order this with dinner.”

Next was a merlot from Black Box (\$26.99). “It has a cleaner finish, much smoother,” Adam said, before declaring, “B+, but I’m biased because I don’t like merlot.” (Easy there, Giamatti.) Both Adam and John gave the merlot a restaurant price point of \$30–\$35, an amount more than triple the three-liter box’s value. As a qualifier, John added, “I’ve paid a lot more for worse wine.”

Buzzing now, the tasting became more of a slugging, which worked out as the last wine was the loser of the night. A chardonnay from Bandit (\$12) came in tetra packs—basically adult juice boxes. With our professionalism eroded, I labeled the flat and fruity juice “chick wine,” a term quickly met with concurring nods. Somehow finding a less classy way to summarize, John concluded, “If I was trying to get someone drunk, and I was drinking beer, I’d give them this.”

After the reveal, John took one look at the tetra packs and shouted, “That shit is raunchy”—a heady thought to consider when choosing a wine for your next picnic. Adam defined the spectrum with a bit more grace, saying, “I’m not surprised by the chard and very impressed with the merlot.” Highlighting the Black Box victory, John added, “I just poured two more,” and handed Adam a glass. ***

