

Back to Back to the Future: Reusable Glass Bottles Lead the Way

By Chris Benz

For Napa residents committed to reducing plastic waste, one tidy solution is also a blast from the past – reusable milk bottles. Straus Family Creamery, one of the region’s premier organic dairy producers, has been selling milk and cream in reusable glass bottles since launching in 1994, with kefir joining the lineup more recently. Straus Creamery products are widely available in Napa at independent, regional, and national grocery outlets.

Studies show that reusable glass bottles achieve greenhouse gas reductions compared to single-use in just a few cycles. Moreover, glass can be reused many times.

A custom-made bottle washer at Straus’ production facility in Rohnert Park processes milk from thirteen local certified organic family farms. Joseph Button, Straus’ Vice President of Sustainability and Strategic Impact, explained how the system works.

“Reusable bottles are distributed to stores in milk crates,” he said. “Customers pay a \$3 bottle deposit, refundable upon return. Stores collect the empty bottles in crates, which are returned to the Straus warehouse for inspection, then back to the Creamery for a second inspection, washing, sanitizing, and refilling.

“The reusable red milk crates are the ‘secret sauce’ that makes the program work. They are the most effective way to stack and store empty glass bottles. You’re not going to lose a crate, like you might an empty bottle.”

According to Straus Sustainability Specialist, Kendra Bruno, customers return nearly 3.5 million bottles each year, with an overall return rate of about 70% and an average reuse of three to five times per bottle. Straus is aiming toward a 90% return rate through social media campaigns, in-store signage, updated packaging language, and retailer education – supporting its zero-waste vision where all packaging is reused, recycled, or composted.

“Our reusable glass bottles reinforce what customers already care about – locally-sourced, minimally processed, premium certified organic milk,” she said.

Local Refilleries

One venue carrying Straus Family Creamery products is Good Pantry, Napa’s newest refillery, on Old Sonoma Road. The store carries grocery staples, household cleaners, and locally-produced foods such as pasta sauces, salads, and desserts – all available in reusable containers.

“Glass containers are available for customer use for their dry goods, oils, vinegars, and household items,” said Good Pantry co-owner Kelly Stetins. “We also use containers for prepackaged food items, with a deposit. By bringing back that empty jar, customers get a

dollar off their next purchase. When jars are returned, the labels are removed, and the jars are washed, sanitized, and reused.”

Good Pantry developed an easy-to-use “tare” system with RFID tags enabling customers to weigh their own containers. Stetins reported that response to their plastic-free, reusable container system has been very positive.

“It’s a different way of shopping,” she explained. “People tell us that they plan to start stocking their pantries with our items, so they can reduce the amount of plastic they’re bringing home.”

Co-owner Ryan Stetins added, “We want to help people reconnect to their food.”

Napa’s other refillery and mercantile, Juniper Station, located on Main St., has a wide selection of eco-friendly personal care products and household cleaners available in bulk.

Coming to a winery near you?

Revino, based in Oregon’s Willamette Valley, set up a reusable glass bottle ecosystem for wineries in 2024, and has distributed more than a million bottles across the West Coast. This involved designing a standardized wine bottle, creating removable label options, setting up empty bottle collection points, building out a bottle-washing facility, and developing a reverse logistics network.

“Wineries are trying to be more sustainable and reduce their carbon footprint, but packaging remains one of the most emissions-heavy contributors to the winemaking process,” co-founder Adam Rack explained, “A Revino bottle can offset the initial energy cost of its production after only three refills.”

Additional benefits for participating wineries include increased customer loyalty and tasting room traffic, and fewer supply chain problems, he said.

Napa Valley’s Silver Oak Cellars is working with Revino to pilot a reusable bottle program this year. To learn more, visit <https://www.revinobottles.com/about/>.

Upcoming Events (info at <https://napa.350bayarea.org/events>)

March 22, 2-4pm: Green Screen Film Series: Buy Now! The Shopping Conspiracy, Napa County Library, FREE

March 26, 3-6 pm: Napa Climate Summit: Resilient Napa, Napa Valley College Performing Arts Center, FREE

Chris Benz is a retired winemaker and co-founder of Napa Climate NOW!

Napa Climate NOW! is a local nonprofit citizens' group advocating for smart climate solutions based on the latest climate science, part of 350 Bay Area. Info, napa.350bayareorg

Photo credit: Chris Benz

Photo caption: Ryan and Kelly Stetins, owners of Good Pantry, featuring Straus Family Creamery products and others in reusable bottles.

