Old glass to new glass,
4000 tons a day

ELLEN WALLACE / HANS-PETER SIFFERT

VETROPACK'S GREEN CONVIVIAL ARMY

Soldiers of glass, with a potential for keeping the peace and encouraging friendly relations: glassmaker Vetropack's assembly lines of bottles march towards a fine new life, carrying wine to our tables.

Last night I held up a flawless bottle of Swiss wine and I saw it in a new light after visiting the Vetropack glass factory: a rich red Pinot Noir was inside, but the outside was a dark green soldier of conviviality. An added note of pleasure was knowing it is 85 percent recycled glass.

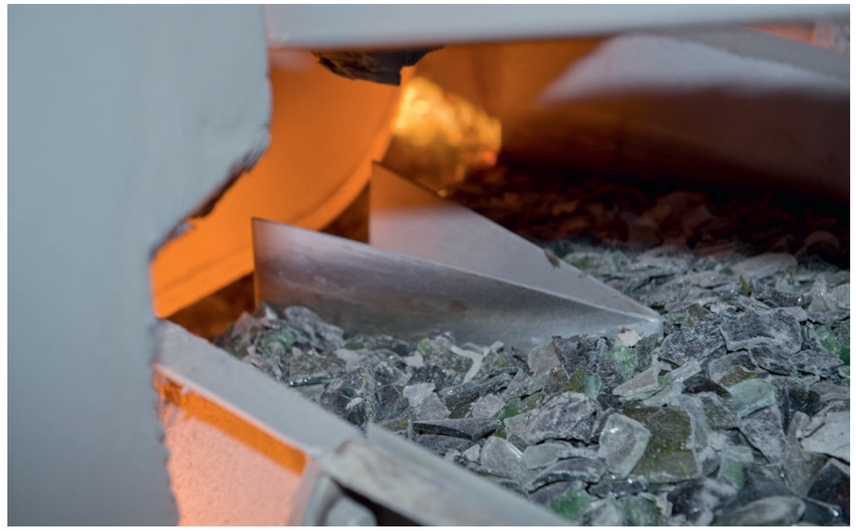
The Swiss are glass recycling champions, with a rate of 94–96 percent (European average, 70 percent). Vetropack, a century-old family-run business whose head office is in Bülach, is to thank for much of this success.

The company was, for 80 years, two sister companies, in cantons Zurich and Vaud. Founder Henri Cornaz drilled in 1911 for water at his farm in Saint Prex, 20 km from Lausanne, came up with sand and asked how he could make a fortune from it. He was standing next to the Geneva-Lausanne-Zurich railway, with vineyards and wine villages on three sides. Glass, in particular wine bottles, was the obvious answer.

It still is. But Vetropack today is listed on the Swiss stock exchange and has expanded steadily over the years into a multinational with gross revenue of CHF 621 million in 2013 and net profit of CHF 56.4 million, with 3000 employees. Sixteen furnaces can produce 4000 tons of glass a day.

I've lived in the old town of Saint Prex for nearly 30 years, and my daily walks take me around the Vetropack factory next to the railway that divides old towns and new. Two days before my first child was born, in 1988, I walked past the row houses where some of the long-time factory workers lived, then past the village gardens some of them kept. A woman gave me a handful of very ripe strawberries, saying with a strong Italian accent that in her homeland pregnant women are offered these right before childbirth. She spoke with pride of her husband's work at the factory. Today her twin daughters run a hair salon nearby, and they cut my hair.

Ellen Wallace
is an international writer, journalist and editor in St Prex.



Old glass, headed for the furnace to be melted and recycled

The row houses are gone, torn down to make way for a large, streamlined bottle stocking area next to the rail line. Fork-lift trucks in bright colours load and unload while 50 metres away rail cars and dusty trucks laden with glass picked up from recycling bins around the country make a deafening noise unloading their goods. The noise pales next to the din made by the giant furnace inside. It used heating oil until 2013 when the gas market opened up. We no longer have smoke belched by the old chimney, replaced at a cost of CHF 14 million two years ago.

All of this is part of a long tradition of investment and change, in step with changes to society and the glass industry, that have seen Vetropack grow into a multinational but that keeps a community profile in the towns where it operates.

Cornaz bought Glashütte Bülach north of Zurich in 1917. Hard times lay ahead. Foreign glass flooded the market after the Great War. The Bülach factory nearly went under, but Cornaz prevailed and the firm grew, despite economic ups and downs. The company flourished when products from the fine glassworks firms in Communist Europe disappeared from the Swiss market – by 1945 its Swiss food preserving jars were so famous they were simply called Bülach jars by everyone's mother.

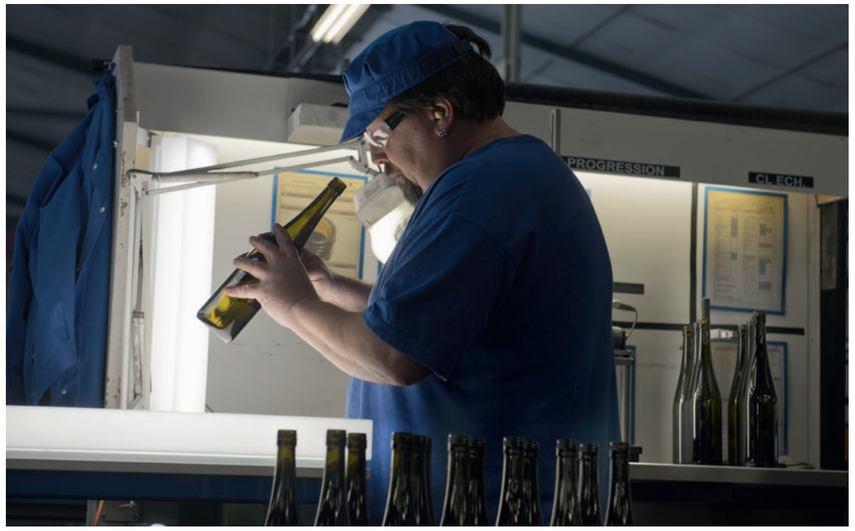
The Cornaz family created Vetropack in 1966 and took it public in 1975, just three years after it pioneered glass recycling in Europe. It kept the majority of shares and management of the two companies but maintained their independence until it merged them in 1995, ending a period of discordant family relations. The Bülach production line was closed in 2002 when prices collapsed. The factory was demolished last year, but the group and Swiss head offices remain in Bülach.

The Swiss subsidiary has invested heavily to make Saint Prex a clean, top-quality glass manufacturing centre, where one-third of Switzerland's glass is recycled. Wine bottles are 14 percent of the group's production, beer bottles 44 percent, although Vetropack Switzerland's mix is about equal at 41–42 percent each, with one-third going abroad, to wine centres such as Burgundy.

Vetropack bought its first factory outside Switzerland in 1986, in Austria. When former Communist bloc countries opened up in 1989, it expanded east and today the company has Vetropack Switzerland and five other glass companies in Austria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Slovakia and Ukraine.

The furnaces still reach 1500 degrees, needed to melt glass, but they are fired with gas today, not heating oil

Seconds out of the furnace, red-hot glass



The history of the company mirrors a century of western European industry. The founding father's vision was of an extended family that included workers and their families. When the first batch of foreign labour, from France, didn't work out, Cornaz bought a glass factory in Fribourg, to harness Swiss workers' expertise. The Catholic Fribourg workers refused to move to Protestant Vaud, so Cornaz built them a Catholic church next to the factory.

It became a second home for waves of immigrant workers, Italians, then Spanish and now Portuguese. Alcoholism was a problem among blue-collar workers everywhere in the early 20th century and the Cornaz family dealt with it by building a community house in St Prex. The murals, repainted by hand nearly a century later, illustrate the owners' fatherly advice: devotion to hard work, honesty and duty to one's fellow man.

St Prex, like so many villages, was a one-factory town until the 1970s but, despite its continuing importance to the local economy and village life, I'd never toured the heart of the business, the glass-making factory, until this year.

I finally learned why it's so important that we separate glass colours and remove metal, plastic and ceramic bits. The latter for safety and glass quality, since no one wants beer bottles that might explode, and colour sorting for environmental and price reasons. Raw materials, energy consumed and price all rise significantly if a glassmaker has to adjust the tint of the glass to obtain a marketable product.

I fell in love with the still hard labour and raw beauty that go into making a wine bottle – the white sand that now comes from near Paris mixed with old glass melted down, the bottle-size drops of liquid glass heated to 1500 °C that shoot out of the furnace, the red-hot bottles that seconds later are shunted out from their iron and bronze moulds. The assembly line that is quickly cooled from rosé pink to one of the four greens made by Vetropack. The army of bottles marching towards pallets – a state-of-the-art machine photographs each from 16 angles for visual flaws and a worker physically measures them for regularity – density, depth, height, regular neck width.

I watch rejected bottles spit off the line and sent back for re-melting. More sophisticated cork- and bottle-making and not just improved vinification are giving us a better and more reliable wine experience than our ancestors had.

Quickly cooled bottles are checked for flaws