

**Title:** ' An Open Thread on Synthetic Corks: Cellarworthy? '

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The current Wine Spectator (dated March 31, 2005) has an interesting debate between over natural corks between James Suckling (pro-cork) and James Laube (anti). Personally, I've come to believe that Laube is hyper-sensitive to TCA taint. His estimate 15% of wine bottles are tainted is way too high in my experience. Yet, one does encounter enough corked wines to think experimenting with alternative closures is highly worthwhile.

What particularly struck me, however, was article by Daniel Sogg on the science behind various closures. In particular, I was disturbed by his claim that wines sealed with synthetic corks do not age well. According to Sogg (the article is not available on line), wines sealed with synthetic corks tend to oxidize after only about two years in bottle.

Why disturbing? Because a lot of high-end California wineries have switched to synthetic corks. I'm particularly concerned about Behrens & Hitchcock, which uses solely synthetics, and in whose wines I've invested quite heavily. Their wines tend to huge, with obvious aging potential. But will the wines go south too quickly because they've chosen a lousy closure?

A Google search for information on synthetic corks was not encouraging:

"We look at synthetic cork for a wine that's consumed within five years or less," says Ernie Farinias, winemaker and cellar master at the University of California, Davis. "Usually, for wines that are destined to age for more than five years, natural cork is used." (Forbes)

Wine bottled in the synthetic closures was the most oxidized after 30 months, having excessive aged character and lowest fruit. (Hogue)

We are not big believers in the long term aging potential for wines that use a synthetic cork. Many wineries that have used these synthetic closures for more than 5 years are finding that they can start to impart a synthetic taste into the wines. Certainly our own inhouse trials on a chardonnay bottling three years ago reflected that. (Tinhorn Creek)

Synthetic cork permits a faster rate of oxygen transmission into the bottle than real cork, and can age a wine too quickly. It is therefore recommended for wines that are to be consumed within 24 months. (Supermarket Guru)

Wine tends to age faster because of a loss of sulfur dioxide - the anti-oxidant used in all wine. In this respect synthetic corks are thought to be less appropriate for wines that will be aged for several years. Early examples, including Argyl Riesling from Oregon oxidized very quickly; today the problem is less significant, but few producers would use synthetic stoppers for wines to be cellared for 5 years or more. However, most wines are drunk within days of their purchase and 2 years of the harvest, so this is not a major concern. Also, manufacturers claim that current efforts maintain freshness more effectively than the ones that have performed poorly in tests in the past. (Corkwatch)

So should we be drinking up those fine B&H wines right away? I'd be very interested in comments from readers who have personal experience with cellaring wines closed with synthetic corks, so I've opened this post for comments. As always, off-topic or offensive comments will be deleted.