

Title: ' Beyond the Cork '

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Michele McCormick of Folsom, Calif., recently played host to some business colleagues at a fancy restaurant and ordered a bottle of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc that cost \$27.50. The waitress brought the wine -- and screwed off the cap. "I was horrified," Ms. McCormick wrote us. "This was not the business impression I wanted to make. Once the bottle was open, I didn't feel comfortable sending it back. The wine was not very good -- acidic, sharp, overly lemony.

"I suggested to the waitress that they ought to alert customers that a bottle is a screwtop before opening it. My husband says I am wrong, that screwtops are a trend in New Zealand, that they preserve the wine just as well as a cork, plastic or otherwise. All I know is that one little twist wrecked my enjoyment of both the gathering and the wine. I don't mind plastic corks at all, but screwtops? I just don't think I can go there."

People often ask us what we think about the trend away from real corks to plastic corks and screwtops. We've never written about this because, frankly, we haven't felt strongly either way. Most wine bought in the U.S. is young and consumed almost right away, so anything that keeps air out for a while is all right. Cork? Screwtop? Plastic? They're all fine with us, though we do find those plastic stoppers hard to get off of our corkscrew sometimes. And while bags in boxes also keep out air, we're not big fans of them. A wine with an expiration date gives us pause.

Part of the Pleasure

On the other hand, wine is a sensual pleasure. Part of that sensual pleasure, for many of us, is the gentle opening and pleasant feel of the cork. The way the label looks doesn't have anything to do with the taste of the wine, either, but it matters, in its own way. And the pleasant pop of the cork gives the ears something to do while the other senses are enjoying themselves. In the classic "The Taste of Wine," Emile Peynaud writes: "The noise of a cork popping or being drawn, the gurgle of wine being poured, the clink of the glass, and the effervescence of sparkling wine, are a discreet accompaniment to winetasting."

It's interesting that the geniuses behind Charles Shaw wine -- that's the \$1.99 "Two-Buck Chuck" wine made from surplus grapes that's all the rage in some states -- use real corks. We figured they did this to convince consumers that they were getting good wine for the money. To check our theory, we called Bronco Wine Co., the wine's producer. "For sure," replied Harvey Posert, a company spokesman. "This is a phenomenon and it has certain basic principles. The thing that gave people permission to pay \$1.99 is that this was good wine, treated like good wine with a cork and foil and a traditional label. So it worked."

Because of high interest in this subject, we thought it was time to weigh in. Again, none of this means that we're either for or agin' screwtops or plastic corks, but here are some things to think about.

We're always skeptical when any business says, "We're cutting our costs to serve you better." This isn't about you. It's about money. One large wine company broke it down this way for us: A high-quality bark cork can cost more than \$1 each (lesser grades cost less). Synthetic corks are as much as a tenth the price of a good cork (although, again, synthetics' quality and price also vary). Screwtops can cost maybe half of a synthetic cork (although there are obviously initial production costs). And corks need an additional topper, such as foil; screwtops don't.

There are many caveats, of course: Some fake corks cost more than some real corks and even screwtops can cost more or less, depending on things such as the amount and quality of metal that's used. Indeed, wineries are sure to be outraged that we'd suggest they're moving away from corks at least partly to save money and some will surely argue that they're actually spending more on alternative stoppers. Maybe that's true in some cases -- there are cheap corks out there -- but, in our experience, wood generally costs more than plastic. And, face it, the cheapest wines in America didn't sport screwtops for decades because their producers were concerned about their fine wine getting ruined by corks that had been tainted by TCA, the compound that causes a wine to smell moldy.

On the other side, cork manufacturers and entire countries, especially Portugal and Spain, stand to lose big-time if wineries move to synthetic corks or screwtops, so they're arguing that, if there were problems with corks, they're being solved now.

Screwtops have been a public-relations bonanza for some wineries. Three years ago, one small winery put them on a tiny number of bottles and, aided by an aggressive PR push, got a million dollars worth of publicity. Since then, others have tried to replicate that coup. So are screwtops a long-term trend or a short-term publicity gimmick? We'll see.

Some wines are indeed spoiled by bad corks, but the number of "corked" wines is dwarfed by the number of wines that are simply bad -- poorly made, throwaway wines. It is in the interest of wineries to convince you that bad corks are rampant both because of the possible cost savings and because this is an all-purpose excuse for bad wine. In addition, there are many reasons why a wine might be tainted beyond a bad cork. One large California winery blamed tainted wine on bad corks until Wine Spectator magazine, in a nifty feat of enterprise reporting, recently proved that the taint was in the winery itself. The winery then traced the problem to a specific cellar that had been contaminated by TCA. Sometimes wine goes bad because it's shipped or stored badly. Sometimes wine can be exposed to ruinous air by accident. Winemakers sometimes speak darkly of "VA" -- volatile acidity -- ruining specific lots of wine.

A British trade group called the Wine & Spirit Association initiated an extensive examination of 13,780 bottles in 2001 and found 0.7% to 1.2% tainted, though it's impossible to know for sure if it was by bad corks. In any event, the group said that a higher percentage was harmed by oxidation. Others scoffed at those results and, indeed, there are so many conflicting studies that everyone can claim support for any position, much as all politicians can cite some poll that supports their position on Medicare, whatever it may be. One winery owner, the Chalone Wine Group, in a brochure on corks, reports: "Depending on whom one asks, between .06% and 25% of all

wines produced may be infected with TCA." That huge variation should tell you how little about this is definite. The bottom line: If every wine had a screwtop, there would still be tainted wine, and a lot of just plain bad wine, too.

To the Point

We open hundreds of bottles a year, and we know that there are corked bottles out there. And we feel terrible for some winemakers who say whole vintages have been spoiled by bad corks. Our point is simply this: Keep this debate in perspective. There are many vested interests and in our many years of experience as journalists, we know that, in situations like this, truth often suffers.

Will screwtops take hold in the long run? Wine producers say acceptance has been good. But that brings us back to Ms. McCormick. What we'd tell her is that the screwtop on her wine was no indication of a lack of quality and that maybe she just doesn't like the aggressive tastes of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc. Or perhaps there was something wrong with the wine. On the other hand, it's possible that her discomfort with the screwtop made her predisposed to not liking it. As a sensual pleasure, wine is subject to all sorts of subjective reactions and external stimuli. Ms. McCormick's reaction is important, and even if her feelings about this soften over time, it's an indication of the hurdles that alternative closures face.

It has become conventional wisdom that bark corks are on their way out. Indeed, there seems little doubt that alternatives are here to stay and will probably grow more popular over the years. But corks are here to stay, too. In fact, our guess is that some wineries that have moved to screwtops will move back to some sort of cork at some point -- but they won't hold a press conference to announce it.

THE LOWDOWN ON STOPPERS

Cork is made from the thick, spongy bark of an oak tree called *Quercus suber*. More than half of all cork comes from Portugal and about a further third from Spain. About 13 billion bark corks are produced every year, and about 900 million are used in the U.S.

The way a cork looks can offer various hints about a wine. For instance, as Jancis Robinson says in "The Oxford Companion to Wine": "A short agglomerate cork suggests that the bottler had little regard for the aging ability of this wine, while a particularly long cork is indicative at least of ambition or optimism."

There are several types of corks as well as other stoppers used to seal wine bottles:

BARK CORKS. Punched corks are punched whole out of a solid piece of bark that is pressure-washed to remove mold and other substances that might contaminate it. About 40% of all harvested bark is used to produce punched corks, because they require high-quality bark. There are various grades of cork and various standards of quality. To see the Natural Cork Quality Council's Visual Grading Standards, go to www.corkqc.com/grades.htm.

TECHNICAL CORKS. These are made from pieces of cork bonded together. There are several different kinds of technical corks, among them the agglomerate corks Jancis Robinson referred to. Technical corks are generally bonded with heat, glue or pressure.

SYNTHETIC CLOSURES made from plastic. There are three main types: extruded (pulled like taffy and cut), molded and PVC (the kind often used for inexpensive sparkling wine).

SCREWCAPS OR SCREWTOPS. These are also known as ROPP (Roll On Pilfer Proof) and ROTE (Roll On, Tamper Evident).

Sources: Natural Cork Quality Council; Chalone Wine Group.