

Title: ' CORK GETS A BAD RAP FOR TAINTING WINE '

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Writer Bill Van Ollefen

The battle of the cork is heating up again.

There is growing concern about the viability of cork as a medium to stop wine bottles. Cork is a contributing factor in a particular wine problem commonly referred to as cork taint, a substance sometimes found in cork, called TCA. The presence of only 10 or so parts of TCA per million can play havoc in a wine. It can "kill" a bottle of wine.

Sometimes it is very easy to spot, especially in an extreme case, where the overpowering smell of either wet cardboard or old funky sneakers virtually jumps out of the glass. In a more subtle case it might only kill the fruit. Or, it could kill the nose or the nose might be reduced while the flavor is shot or lifeless.

The proposed replacement is either a metal screw cap or a synthetic cork.

I don't believe the level of cork taint claimed by so many people. I read a letter to a magazine in which a reader suggested that more than 10 percent of the wine he opens show cork taint.

In a good year I taste 5,000 wines; 3,000 is more typical. That would mean 300 to 500 bottles of corked wine! Not in my worst nightmare has this ever been the case.

Well more than 300 bottles a year I have tasted were useless plonk, but the problem wasn't cork taint. I've had many wines that were cooked until they were dead as a doornail. This is a far more common problem. I'm appalled at how many liquor stores have cases of wine cooking in their windows. How many of these abused bottles will be labeled with cork taint?

I've also tasted many wines that were stored improperly and did not match the same wines in my own cellar.

The reality is that many people I've had over for tastings often confuse bad wine or otherwise spoiled wine with cork taint and frankly can't tell the difference. It took me a really long time to understand the subtleties and multiple causes of bad wine.

My experience with cork taint is less than 1 percent. The worst occurrence was a single case from a single vineyard that showed 25 percent of the bottles tainted. Once. One year. The previous and following years were back at less than 1 percent and I continue to buy and cellar this wine.

If, and that being a very big if, there is a prevalence of cork taint, instead of changing to screw tops why not figure out the underlying problem? I think the presence of cork taint has dropped considerably in the past 10 years, corresponding to better understanding of the problem and appropriate measures to preclude it.