

**Title:** ' Put a Sustainable Cork In It '

9/14/2008

**Publication:** The Daily Green

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Environmentalists urge winemakers to get back to their eco-friendly roots

When it comes to wine stoppers, traditional corks are the greener choice.

Nonrenewable aluminum screw caps, once looked upon with disdain by wine purists, have grown in popularity and use -- much to many a wine lover's chagrin. Once relegated to cheap table wines and those with less than stellar reputations, screw tops can now be found on bottles from hundred-dollar Bordeaux to Pinots. Their use has increased as some winemakers find they thwart the risk of a "corked" or tainted wine that emits smells of wet, moldy cardboard -- a pitfall of cork stoppers and definitely not an odor or taste that's meant to be. But the advantage of a cork wine stopper is its ability to assist the wine in aging; corks allow the wine to breathe and bring you all the flavorful nuances that you might expect and most assuredly search for. The jury on "serving no wine until its time" is still out when it comes to screw tops; no one knows how wines using them will react to long periods of aging. But just as screw tops have gained ground over the past decade, environmentalists are now claiming that the use of traditional corks to top off your favorite bottle of vino is actually the better option for sustainability because they're made from renewable material -- cork tree fiber, actually.

Environmental groups are concerned that the popularity of screw tops, as well as other alternatives, are having a major impact on Mediterranean cork forests, where cork is predominately grown. According to The World Wildlife Fund, "the trees cover approximately 6.7 million acres in the region and provide income for about 100,000 people." The fear is that if winemakers continue to use cork alternatives, "three-quarters of the western Mediterranean's cork oak forests could be lost within a decade, threatening jobs and ecosystems." What are now thriving and sustainable forests will fall victim to neglect and most likely development. The sustainability of cork forests is a serious matter. And for many wine lovers, screw tops take something away from the whole wine drinking experience. There's something infinitely satisfying about using a corkscrew and hearing the familiar pop as you open your favorite vintage. The twist of a screw cap just doesn't compare or hold the same hint of promise of what's to come.