

Coming Unscrewed

WINE
uncorked

Wine industry poised to pull the cork on old closures

By Liz Massey

It's hard to match the pomp and circumstance fine restaurants and wine aficionados give to opening a wine bottle.

A checklist seems to be followed beginning with the check of the vintage, the popping and smelling of the cork and the sample pour of a first glass. All these are handled with such holy regard at some events that you might swear you could hear the swell of angelic music in the background.

The scenario, however, soon could have a new twist, literally. More and more major wine labels are changing part or all of their production to screw cap closures, also known as Stelvin closures. Screw caps are surging in popularity, as more winemakers argue the mystique of the cork must give way

to the improvements in quality and consistency that Stelvin closures offer.

Cork taint

Scientific studies confirm that screw caps offer significant advantages to winemakers. Earlier this year, Hogue Cellars, a Washington-based winery, presented results of a study comparing the performance of wines bottled with two types of Stelvin closures, two types of synthetic corks and natural corks during a 30-month period.

The study involved a panel of Hogue winemakers and trade professionals tasting and analyzing a 1999 Hogue Genesis Merlot and a 2000 Hogue Fruit Forward Chardonnay at six-month intervals. Results were presented in June at the American Society



Two Tone Farms

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of Enology and Viticulture (ASEV) Conference in San Diego.

Hogue Cellars Director of Winemaking David Forsyth reports the study validated what the company had observed for years: Wines closed with natural corks showed low to medium levels of a chemical infection known as 2,4,5 trichloranisole (TCA), or "cork taint," while synthetic corks and screw cap wines showed none.

At 24 and 30 months, wines bottled in screw caps were preferred over those using synthetic corks. The least preferred, were bottles using natural corks.

Forsyth says the study gives his company the confidence it needs to bottle its entire line of 2004 Fruit Forward wines – representing 70 percent of total production – in Stelvin screw caps. "We can now say, 'this is a quality issue, this is the impact, and here's the alternative.'"

Plugging leaks

Screw caps for bottled beverages have been around for more than 100 years, but the Stelvin closure was not introduced until 1971. Early models leaked, says Stuart Devine, North American sales and marketing director for the New Zealand-based Villa Maria Estate, and winemakers expressed concern about the closures' ability to handle vertical stacking of multiple pallets of wine.

As cork taint concerns became more pressing in the late 1980s, winemakers experimented with synthetic corks and

reconsidered the Stelvin, which by now had some of its flaws resolved. One of the first major U.S. wineries to switch to screw caps was the American Plumpjack label, which released its 1997 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon with a screw cap in 2000. The wine retailed at \$135 a bottle.

Since then, scores of wineries worldwide have made the transition to screw caps. Some even have integrated the closure's nontraditional image into their marketing position for new products.

Bill Piersol, director of marketing for Beringer Blass Estates, notes his company's Two Tone Farms label was developed as a wine for younger adults in their 20s and 30s to enjoy with friends after work — and the screw cap closure fits with the expectations of the customer, Piersol says. "This customer is not a collector," he explains. "They're not afraid to think outside the cork."

Ironically, it's no longer wine traditionalists who necessarily are most resistant to Stelvin-closed wines. "The people buying the most inexpensive wines have been the most vocal," says Forsyth. "People who drink more wine and read the wine publications, and may have experienced cork taint first hand, are willing to give screw caps a try."

Cork free zones

Education is a major part of the marketing plan most wineries use in their attempt to shift public attitudes towards screw caps. "You have to put it into context for people," Devine explains.

Beringer Blass developed marketing materials to promote the Stelvin closure for Two Tone Farms. One piece, a brochure entitled, "Holding Your Own in the Cork-Free Zone," teaches wait staff how to handle common customer objections to

screw cap wines and how to discuss with wine drinkers the dangers of cork taint. It also includes quotes from many wine industry writers and critics, including James Laube of Wine Spectator and master sommelier Doug Frost.

Invoking industry luminaries increases the closure's credibility, Piersol says. "We told (wine drinkers) for 25 years that cork was good, and now we're saying something else. We have to explain it."

Kimberly Prince, Director of Catering, Banquet and Convention Service for Southern Wine & Spirits of Arizona, a major wine distributor in the Southwest, reports that her company had provided an educational seminar, led by Devine, in late August for restaurant owners, catering and banquet managers and wine shop owners regarding the benefits of Stelvin closures.

Forsyth and Piersol advise caterers to play up the quality issues the screw caps

resolve, if the issue arises with clients. "Screw caps have to be presented as something that preserves the integrity of the wine," Piersol says.

The winemakers interviewed expect the changeover to screw caps and other related closures to be rapid, but none expects corks to go away completely. Between the current Stelvin closure and new noncork closures, such as the Torque Off Pilfer Proof (TOPP) closures introduced in June on wines produced by R. H. Phillips Winery, screw caps are expected to make significant inroads into the world of corks.

"I'm not telling you every bottle of wine will be in a screw cap, but this is an important new initiative," Piersol says.

Devine adds, "I think within five years, you'll have a 50-50 choice. Right now it's 99 percent cork, but one day it will change, for almost every vintage." ❏