

From: dfmcauliffe@yahoo.com
Sent: Friday, October 14, 2005 9:26 AM
To: don@parallaxcommunications.com
Subject: pe.com article from don

don [dfmcauliffe@yahoo.com] has sent you an article from pe.com.

Story: [Twisting into future of wine](#)

Twisting into future of wine

Nontraditional seal gaining acceptance, preventing mold

11:28 PM PDT on Thursday, October 13, 2005

By JONATHAN SHIKES / The Press-Enterprise

There is an undeniable romance to pulling a cork from a bottle of wine. Whether it's a freshly fermented Sauvignon Blanc or a decade-old cabernet sauvignon, opening the bottle is a tradition.

But the magic dies on the spot if the cork smells like musty cardboard.

In the past four years, a few vintners in California, France, Italy and other countries have started sealing some wines with screw tops to prevent a foul-smelling cork mold called trichloroanisole, or TCA.

South Coast Winery became the first Temecula Valley vintner to experiment with screw tops by adding them to its Elevation Peaks & Valley line this summer.

"We look at it as a closure that, over the next 10 years, is going to become synonymous with California wines because cork taint is very much an issue in terms of keeping wines sound," said South Coast winemaker Jon McPherson.

The mold, which is undetectable before a bottle is corked, affects 2 percent to 6 percent of wine, McPherson said. Other wine experts say it's more like 5 percent to 10 percent.

The smell is a result of a reaction between the mold growing in the trees that cork is made from,

POPPING THE CORK

Natural corks

Corks have been the wine industry's closure of choice for hundreds of years. But they are susceptible to trichloroanisole, or TCA, which forms when cork mold is combined with the chlorine used to clean corks.

Screw caps

Twist off like the top of a liquor bottle and eliminate the chance of TCA. In a four-year study by Hogue Cellars in Washington state, screw caps were determined to preserve the flavor and quality of Chardonnay and merlot better than natural corks.



Kurt Miller / The Press Enterprise

In the tasting room at South Coast Winery in Temecula, Lindsay Randazzo pours screw-top Elevation wine for Brenda Miller, left, of Temecula, Edie Wolfe, center, and Sheila Craipley, both of Alberta, Canada. "Red, white, magenta. If it taste's good, I like it," says Miller.

and chlorine used to sanitize corks before bottling.

"No other industry would tolerate that much product loss due to one of the things involved in the process," McPherson said.

While winemakers welcome the innovation, screw tops face a perception problem -- namely being associated with cheap jugs of convenience-store wines.

Adapting to Change

In a recent survey, 57 percent of people felt screw caps were inappropriate in restaurants, according to Rich Cartiere's Wine Market Report. A poll by Wine Spectator showed that 80 percent of wine drinkers prefer corks.

"I'm kind of divided on it," said Leone Palagi, chef and wine buyer for Mario's Place in downtown Riverside. "It makes sense logically, but emotionally it is strange."

Nothing is more disappointing than opening a special bottle and finding it tainted with TCA, which Palagi described as smelling like wet, musty cardboard.

"It seems funny to go to a table and crack the top," Palagi said of screw tops.

Of the 300 wines available at Mario's, five or six have screw tops, he added.

"I think it is probably the wave of the future," Palagi said. "It's hard for me to adapt mentally."

Paul Bologna, sommelier and wine buyer for The Lodge at Rancho Mirage, an upscale hotel with three restaurants, offers about five screw-top wines.

"A lot of people are still resistant, but they are a good thing in my opinion," Bologna said. "If someone is shy about it, they can decant it and class it up again."

"The only solution so far is to not use cork," said Karen MacNeil, chairwoman of the Center for Professional Wine Studies Program at the Culinary Institute of America in Napa Valley, and author of "The Wine Bible."

Screw tops and synthetic corks are popular in Australia and New Zealand, where wine drinkers aren't as tied to tradition, she said.

"Everyone in the world is experimenting with them and at least thinking about going to them," including wineries throughout California, added MacNeil, who also is a TV-show host and co-owner of Fife Vineyards in the Napa Valley.

Wine experts agree the closures are especially good for white wines, which usually aren't aged by consumers. Screw caps also work well for some red varieties, like pinot noir and merlot, which are meant to be served within months or a few years.

"To some extent, the jury is still out" on screw tops for expensive cabernets that can be aged for 10 years or longer, MacNeil said. It hasn't been determined whether part of that aging process relies on tiny amounts of air let in by corks.

Nevertheless, since the vast majority of wines are consumed within a few days of being purchased, screw tops are perfectly acceptable for most vintages, said Gladys Horiuchi, spokeswoman for the Wine Institute in San Francisco.

"It all depends on the philosophy of the winery, their marketing, the image they want to present and their price points," she added.

Embracing Technology

Most screw top varieties are in the \$10 to \$12 range, though some wineries, like Clos Pegase and PlumpJack use the closures on more expensive bottles.

The Wine Institute doesn't keep numbers on what percentage of California wines use screw tops, but Horiuchi said it still is very small.

The biggest barrier aside from perception is cost, MacNeil said.

"Most small wineries, even if they'd like to do it, don't have the wherewithal to change."

At South Coast, they believe the expense is worth it.

The winery hired a mobile bottler to seal the vintages of merlot, syrah and sauvignon blanc, but it recently spent nearly \$40,000 on its own equipment.

"The whole package was designed around the screw cap itself," said South Coast's McPherson, who uses screw tops on a small percentage of his wines. "The closure is the finishing touch on the design, which is a topographic map of the Temecula Valley. The idea was to create something fun."

Fun certainly is what Temecula resident Brenda Miller and two friends from Canada were having on a recent visit to South Coast's new tasting room. The group was touring the wine country and loved the Elevation sauvignon blanc.

"It's about taste," Miller said, adding that the kind of closure on a bottle of wine doesn't matter to her. "Red, white, magenta. If it taste's good, I like it."

Ranging in price from \$8 to \$10, the wine, the bottle and the screw cap target the 22- to 35-year-old age group, McPherson said. Elevation is sold at the winery and in some liquor stores, supermarkets and restaurants around Southern California.

"It's the cutting edge of the industry. It sets us apart from those in a bottle and cork rut," McPherson said. "Embracing innovation is important. We are teaching consumers that while corks are OK, there are better closures out there."

Reach Jonathan Shikes at (951) 368-9552 or jshikes@pe.com