

Straight from the Rack

# Un passion por la vin

By Michael Lang & Brian Kofke

Ahhh... the argument continues over the enclosures of wine bottles... the screw cap vs. the cork. What is the age old saying... "Go with what you know?" We are so used to opening bottles with a cork that some folks just can't accept the screw cap or any other substitute. Is there a right or wrong answer to this conundrum?

The fact of the matter is that 85% of the wine purchased in the United States is consumed within 45 minutes of purchase. Meaning... most folks go to the wine shop or liquor store, buy the bottle, then go somewhere and open it. In realizing that point, why use the cork ever?

Well, this subject has had the wine industry researching for years to determine whether the plastic enclosure or the screw cap work as well as the cork for aging. So, after years of study, the wine industry has come to a conclusion: use the cork for a wine worthy of aging and use the screw cap for the rest. What has been learned from the screw cap research is that once the fastener has been put in place, wine will keep fresh for about ten years. If a bottle is stored properly, at a consistent temperature, when it is opened, even years later, it will have the same characteristics as the day it was bottled. An added feature to the screw cap is that if

only part of the bottle is consumed, it can be recapped, stored in the refrigerator and will taste just as good the next day.

The subject of the cork is a keyhole view to yesteryear. The discovery of the cork was once a worldwide sensation. Before its discovery, rags were soaked in oil and stuffed into the openings of clay and ceramic containers to keep the wine. Actually, cork is the bark of the "Cork Oak" tree used originally in Spain and Portugal where these trees grow plentifully. In fact, more than half the world's cork is produced in Portugal. Now you say to yourself... produced? Yes, cork is a huge cash crop that can only be raised in certain climates, in particular parts of the Mediterranean. These trees are also found growing in Sardinia, Sicily, Algeria, Morocco and Corsica. The tree must be at least 25 years old to begin harvesting its bark. Once the tree is mature, it can be harvested every 9 or 10 years. These trees can live for 200 years, so you can see the sustainability of the cork industry.

The production of the tiny cork from these huge trees is a lengthy process. The bark is stripped from the tree in long planks, which are stacked and allowed to dry and season for about 3 or 4 months. The planks are

then boiled in large pots to remove bacteria and create elasticity. Strips are cut to the actual width of the cork and then hand punched at a right angle to the growth of the tree to finally create the product that will be forced into the bottles. Because of the great variation in the quality of this product, it is graded into 8 levels. Once graded, it is the quality of the cork that dictates the price and potential life of the cork. It is evident cork production is a very labor intensive, ancient industry. At the other extreme, the modern screw cap is an aluminum alloy product, which can be mass produced quickly at a very low cost...and even recycled.

The decision of using cork or screw cap is up to the winery and /or the winemaker. It can be a matter of economics or quality. When a wine is made from a fabulous vintage and the plan is to lay these bottles in a controlled environment to create something very special in 7 to 15 years, the high quality cork is part of that plan. Connoisseurs, collectors and traders of fine wine have a unique appreciation for the quality of the wine which can only be achieved through the aging process. On the other hand another winery and/or winemaker may decide to use the screw cap in order to guarantee quality of the wine for the next 10 years.

Yet another consideration in this controversy is the ritual of pulling the cork. It adds to the romance of opening a bottle. It makes it a special occasion...well, more special. This ritual reaches back to antiquity. Does it add to the celebration? Is there a right or wrong answer to this question?

And so, dear reader, I put the decision in your capable hands. Are you buying this wine as an investment or for a special occasion where ritual is important? Are you buying this wine for a dinner party? Are you buying this wine to accompany a fine fish dinner? Are you buying this wine to enjoy a glass each night this week?

You see how capable you are. So, next time it strikes your fancy to make a wine purchase, realize that the enclosure does not dictate the quality in the bottle. It has to do with what you have planned for your wine experience.  
Cheers



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