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Screw Cap Closures for Red Wines

Harvey Steiman

Someday we will all wonder what we were thinking, plugging up our wine bottles with chunks of cork.

Tainted corks spoil at least 3 percent of the wines they seal. Already, screw caps have gained acceptance in some quarters for white wines meant for early drinking. But winemakers, worried about how the wines would age, have hesitated to use them for reds.

If a raft of high-profile winemakers and industry insiders quoted in a new book are right, the issue has already been settled. Tyson Stelzer, an Australian wine writer who holds degrees in physics and mathematics, argues in *Screwed for Good? The Case for Screw Caps on Red Wines* that any concerns are largely based on misinformation.

The myth persists, for example, that corks let oxygen into the bottle, helping wine age better. Decades ago, however, distinguished French enologist Emile Peynaud noted that an ideal cork makes a perfect seal.

Few corks are perfect, which is what leads to bottle variation, while screw caps almost always make a perfect seal. The book details dozens of fine Australian Rieslings bottled under screw caps in the 1970s and 1980s that are still drinking beautifully today. Having drunk some of these wines myself in Australia, I can vouch for their consistency and vibrancy.

In those days, only red wines meant for early drinking were bottled with screw caps. The book quotes the manager of a winery who still had a few of those bottles in his cellar. He reported that the screw-capped reds, though never meant to age, were still drinkable. The same wines under cork were long dead.

That kind of anecdotal evidence jibes with the personal experience of several winemakers, such as Jeffrey Grosset of Grosset Wines, who have switched to screw caps for all their wines.

Opponents of screw caps cite a test at Château Haut-Brion in 1969 in which the screw-capped wines badly oxidized within four years. The problem, Stelzer notes, was that those seals used early technology. What seals the bottle in a modern screw cap closure is a multilayer wad of soft plastic on either side of a thin layer of foil. The foil acts as a barrier, allowing no air in or out. The screw cap just holds the wad in place. In the Haut-Brion test, a layer of paper and cork(!) held the pressure of the seal.

"The paper acted as a wick and the cap corroded," a representative of the cap company explains in the book. The newer version, in use for more than 25 years, replaces the paper and cork with expanded polyethylene. The modern seal has an enviable track record – virtually no failures.

Under screw caps, wines age as they would under a perfect cork in ideal cellar conditions. Evaluating bottles of the 1995 Penfolds Bin 389 and Bin 2 wines, both good, mid-level reds, chief winemaker Peter Gago is quoted as saying, "The screw-capped versions had aged in a similar way to wine in a really cold cellar." In other words, everything slowed down and the wine remained fresher longer, but it still developed mature characteristics.

Gago isn't ready to put his most prized wines under screw caps just yet. The earliest vintages of the highly sought-after Grange, such as 1953, are still drinking beautifully under cork. No one knows what 50 years under a screw cap will mean to a great red like that.

A valid concern is that screw caps produce what one winemaker calls "Peter Pan wines," which remain almost too youthful and fresh. Others

point out that the very greatest wines, such as the cache of 19th century Bordeaux found a few years ago in the ice-cold cellar of Glamis Castle in Scotland, preserve their youthful colour and flavour magnificently even a century later.

The wine trade fears consumers won't give up the ceremony of popping a cork. On that point, Stelzer writes: "One must wonder whether any consumer who derives more romance and ceremonial value from the bottle and its seal than from the quality of its contents has missed the point of wine enjoyment altogether."

The swing toward finishing wines with screw caps is nearing a tipping point in Australia and New Zealand, where prominent wineries are adopting the technology in ever better wines. If screw caps win the day worldwide, Stelzer's book will have chronicled a turning point. And I will be standing in my cellar, applauding.

Screwed for Good? The Case for Screw Caps on Red Wines can be purchased from www.cellaringwine.com.

Editor at large Harvey Steiman covers the wines of Australia and New Zealand for Wine Spectator

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