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UpFront

Wine News From Around the World

Screw Caps Gain Acceptance

Alternative closures top wines from Napa to Burgundy

A screw cap was once proof positive that a bottle's contents were low-end. No longer: The metal closures now seal wines sold at all price points from diverse producers. While consumers expressed resistance at first, they now seem to be accepting that good—even great—wines can come under metal closures.

According to ACNielsen, an international marketing firm, U.S. sales of wines with screw caps increased almost 25 percent in 2006 (total U.S. wine sales increased about 11 percent). And in a 2006 Wine Market Council survey, 34 percent of wine drinkers who have a glass or more per week said they had bought a wine with a screw cap in the past month. In 2005, that figure was 27.6 percent.

"Screw caps are very well accepted here," said Tom McKnew, wine manager at Washington, D.C., wine retailer Calvert Woodley. "One out of 100 people might have a negative reaction, and those are the old-guard people who associate [screw caps] with Wild Irish Rose."

Some winemakers began to shift away from natural cork due to a series of associated problems. Chief among them was contamination with the



Restaurants and retailers are letting consumers know that high quality wines don't necessarily need to be sealed with cork.

chemical TCA, which imparts offensive mustiness, as well as cork's inconsistent oxygen permeability, which impacts aging potential.

The groundswell began in 2000, when 14 Riesling estates in Australia's Clare Valley switched to screw caps. Now 90 percent of New Zealand's wine and more than half of Australia's wine are sealed with screw caps.

Leading California Pinot Noir estates—including Loring and A.P. Vin—have also made the move. Even Maison Jean-Claude Boisset in Burgundy used screw caps on half of its 50-case production of Chambertin 2005, which retails for \$200.

But until now many wine consumers have resisted the change. As recently as March 2005, a *Wine Spectator* poll

found that 80 percent of respondents preferred cork to screw caps. Just two years later, however, that predilection no longer seems absolute.

Part of the reason might be that many retailers and restaurants have tried to educate consumers. At Gaia Restaurant in Greenwich, Conn., it was as simple as putting the wines with screw caps on separate pages of the wine list.

"At first we had the [screw cap wines] mixed into this list, and no one wanted to order them," said Olivier Flosse, Gaia's wine director. "Now, people ask about it and we explain it to them, and they really start to understand that [a screw cap] doesn't mean

the [wine] quality isn't there.

At the Napa Wine Co., a custom-crush operation that bottles 1 million cases per year, screw caps now account for 15 percent of production, said general manager Sheldon Parker. With consumer acceptance on the rise, mobile bottling operations, which serve small and midsize wineries, have also had to adapt to meet demand. Napa-based Select Mobile Bottlers just added a line with a screw-capper last year, as did Ryan McGee Bottling, also in Napa. "We'd been getting inquiries, so it just made sense," said Mary McLaughlin, co-owner of Ryan McGee.

White wines make up the majority of bottlings sealed with screw caps, since some winemakers still have reservations about the capacity of red wines to age in bottles sealed with metal closures. But as wines sealed with screw caps become more common, those attitudes may change.

"Could we be doing 25 percent of our bottlings with screw caps in the next couple of years? Yeah, I could see that," said Parker.

—Daniel Sogg

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