



## Screw caps catching on?

*Industry experts say Coppola not alone in seeking different closure*

A beaker-shaped bottle designed to hold a special collection of wines by Francis Ford Coppola Presents was unique. The company's decision to go with screw caps rather than cork, however, is gaining wider acceptance in the wine industry.

Screw caps remove the risk of cork taint ruining the wine in the bottle, and may prove more accessible for the consumer who is not a wine connoisseur, industry experts say.

Yet the common thought is they don't allow wines to age like a cork, whose mottled texture allows for tempered exposure to the outside.

For the Encyclopedia collection, which is no longer in production due to problems in creating its custom look, the screw cap was part of the "design vision" for the wine, said Kathleen Talbert, a spokeswoman for Coppola.

The wine was made from grapes in various regions of the world and was targeted toward a "new generation who has just begun to travel the world of wine glass by glass," according to a company statement.

Some in that demographic could see a cork as intimidating, Talbert said.

Had it made it to market, it would not have been the only one in its price range — at about \$12 a bottle — to have a screw cap.

Some winemakers, however, have started to adopt the alternative closure for higher-priced wines.

In 1997, PlumpJack Winery bottled half of its \$125-a-bottle reserve Cabernet Sauvignon from Oakville with screw caps, said John Conover, the general manager and partner for PlumpJack and CADE wineries. It did an internal study to see how the wine has aged by holding a blind tasting about a year ago.

There was no consensus as to whether one was better or worse, Conover said. Some people tasting the wine noticed no difference. Others felt the wine bottled with a screw cap had retained more of its freshness and was less evolved, he said.

Meanwhile, it gave some to University of California, Davis to track it at a chemical level.

At first, some, including its New York distributor, resisted the idea. The distributor requested screw-capped only for the order of Pumpjack's latest varietal, Conover said.

Now, PlumpJack is bottling portions of other varietals using screw caps — including 100 percent of its Sauvignon Blanc. It's taken a similar approach at CADE, which it recently acquired.

The goal is to give customers more options. For those who may not live in the wine culture, screw caps also allow them an easier way to enjoy PlumpJack and CADE's wine without having to "master a tool to open it," he said.

"I'm actually kind of surprised how much progress screw caps have made in the market in a relatively short period of time," Conover said.

In general, industry experts say roughly 5 percent of all bottles of wine end up tainted with 2-4-6 trichloroanisole, said Terry Hall, communication director for the Napa Valley Vintners.

"(Cork is) essentially tree bark that you're stuffing into a bottle, so inherently you're going to have flaws," he said.

Corks can also allow too much air into a bottle, so the wine might become oxidized and take on a vinegary or flat taste.

That same air, when allowed to enter at a microbial level over long periods of time, is thought to help with a wine's evolution resulting in "bottle bouquet," Hall said. Fruit flavors drop off while oak and other flavors remain the same.

Cork carries with it a rich tradition of the pop of a bottle being opened at restaurant, though that mystique is changing, he said.

"People are less caught up in the romance than they were a few years ago," Hall said. "Now they look at it and say, 'What's the best for my wine?' "

Abroad, the screw cap trend has caught on much more readily, said Mike Wangbickler, account manager at Balsac Communications, responsible for marketing a variety of wineries in the Napa Valley.

“There’s still a perception here in the U.S. that screw caps are for cheap wine,” he said.

The perception likely stemmed from wines produced in the ‘60s and ‘70s in jugs — with screw caps.

Even now, screw caps are often used on white wines or light reds meant to be drunk young, he said.

It offers a convenience and keeps a wine fresher for longer, he said.

Still, the “pomp and circumstance” that comes with opening a bottle of wine is part of a wine’s enjoyment, Wangbickler said. And for premier wines meant for aging, the cork is still preferred.

“Putting a screw cap on Mouton Rothschild would be a frickin’ big step,” he said of the \$200-a-bottle wine.

Many more producers may be moving toward a screw cap, but “I still think that we’re a long way off from the death of the cork.”