

THE POUR

Eric Asimov

A Hiccup in Screw Tops' Acceptance

GRANT BURGE, an Australian winemaker, is no fan of screw caps. This puts him in something of a minority position in Australia and New Zealand, where the vast majority of wines that sell for \$25 and less have forsaken corks for screw caps.

He has done that for his less expensive wines, he said, mostly because restaurants told him they would not sell his wines otherwise. But he doesn't have to like it.

"I'm actually a traditional cork person," he said over lunch recently in New York. "I didn't really want to go to screw caps, but I'm not blind, either. My top six red wines, I refuse to go to screw caps at this time."

With that, he applied his corkscrew to a bottle of 2004 Grant Burge Filsell, an intense, polished Barossa Valley shiraz that sells for about \$35. He poured a glass, took a sip and grimaced. It was corked.

Given the maddeningly random problem of wines contaminated by cork taint, it's easy for consumers to wonder why the entire industry has not moved to screw caps. Sure, some people will always prefer corks for aesthetic reasons and because of tradition. The ceremonial flair of uncorking a bottle has yet to find its counterpart in an unscrewing. And while it's not yet clear how age-worthy wines will evolve under screw caps, the question remains: Why would anybody want to risk corked wines?

Screw caps are effective antidotes to cork taint, which is caused by a compound called 2,4,6-trichloroanisole, or TCA, a result of fungi that occurs naturally in the cork tree. Corked wines take on a moldy, musty aroma resembling wet cardboard. Sometimes the aroma is obvious to all, while other times only the most sensitive noses can detect it. Either way, it is an irreversible problem that dooms what many experts estimate to be about 5 percent of wines that use cork closures.

But screw caps, it turns out, have their own issue. It can be summed up by this forbiddingly opaque bit of wine jargon: reduction. Please bear with me as I try to explain what that means.

Winemakers battle endlessly with air. In general, they want to protect their wine from too much



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exposure to air in order to prevent oxidation. That is why wine bottles are filled nearly to the brim and then sealed.

Yet a little bit of air can be a good thing. A chardonnay, for example, can be protected from air by covering it with inert gas and aging it briefly in steel tanks. When bottled, it will mostly likely be a straightforward wine, juicy, fruity and crisp. But chardonnay aged in oak barrels will be exposed to the minute amount of air that penetrates the wood, which can add pleasing elements of complexity. It's all a matter of the winemaker's goals and the quality of the grapes.

Depriving a wine completely of air can produce the opposite of oxidation, reduction. Broadly speaking, reduction is a kind of catchall term for the bad things that can happen in what scien-

tists call anaerobic conditions. Those bad things involve sulfur chemistry and can ultimately include aromas of burned rubber, cabbage and rotten eggs.

Yes, screw caps, the good guys in the battle against corked wines, have been implicated in reduction problems.

"With the widespread use of screw caps," Jamie Goode wrote recently in *Wines & Vines*, a trade publication, "some technical issues have emerged, surrounding the post-bottling sulfur chemistry, known more commonly as 'reduction' in the trade."

It's not just Mr. Burge and other anti-screw-cap winemakers who are pointing out the issue. Even Randall Graham, the impresario of Bonny Doon Vineyard in Santa Cruz, Calif., acknowledges this problem.

As you might remember, Mr. Graham with great fanfare pronounced the cork dead five years ago in a series of events staged around the country. "I would like to thank you for attending this very heartfelt wake for the old stinker," he announced in 2002, in Bonny Doon's typically antic mode of marketing its decision to use screw caps exclusively.

Today Mr. Graham is a little

more equivocal. No, the corks have not risen up like some B-movie vampire. The screw caps are still in place. But Mr. Graham today concedes that using screw caps requires winemakers to be extra careful during winemaking and bottling.

"Screw caps are great — they're really great — but they're challenging," he said. "They shorten the runway. They're unforgiving."

The good news, Mr. Graham says, is that unlike corked wines, problems caused by screw cap reduction are often reversible by giving the wine a little air. "All you have to do is learn how to use a decanter," he said.

Decanting, actually, can improve a lot of young wines, red or white, regardless of the reduction issue. While the addition of air that comes from pouring wine into a decanter — it can be any kind of glass container, nothing fancy necessary — can help dissipate aromas from reduction, it can also help open up young wines that are reticent with their aromas and flavors.

Unlike cork taint, screw cap reduction is not always noticeable, particularly to casual consumers. But that may be little comfort to winemakers, who have a right to expect that the wine they make is essentially the wine people will drink.

In his *Wines & Vines* article Mr. Goode cited a British report estimating that 2.2 percent of wines with screw caps had this problem in 2006.

Not every winery using screw caps sees a problem. Since 1997, PlumpJack Winery in the Napa Valley has bottled half of its high-end reserve cabernet sauvignon with corks and the other half with screw caps. John Conover, PlumpJack's general manager, says all has gone smoothly so far.

"We allow our grapes during the winemaking process to be exposed to oxygen, and most who have this problem do not," he said. "So it's primarily a production and winemaking issue and not a screw-cap issue."

Maybe so. In any case, nobody is giving up on screw caps yet. Mr. Goode cautions against interpreting the issue as "screw caps taint wine" and suggests that producers continue to press for alternatives, if only to keep pressure on the cork industry to do all it can to reduce cork taint.