

Considering the life of your wine under different closure options

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Over recent times, a lot has been said and written about winemaking practices and winemaking preparation in relation to how that bottle of wine will eventually be sealed.

Most wine companies would now have established methods, and in many cases the jury is still out about the impact of the closure on the wine. In discussion with several winemakers, many still proceed through the early stages of a wine's life, handling the wine the best way they see fit for the style.

My investigations tell me that the closure consideration is the furthest thing from their minds during the winemaking process. However, once the wine enters the stage of pre-bottling preparation, winemakers then give consideration to the life of that wine under different closure types.

Some simply choose to prepare the wine as they always have, irrespective of the closure option, be it cork, synthetic cork or screw cap.

One winemaker I spoke with said he prepares wines destined for life under screw cap with "up to twice the level

of dissolved oxygen than if being bottled under cork". His reasoning is based on "trying to minimise reduced characters" developing in the bottle. He also made the point that SO₂ regimes under screw cap provide a challenge. He noted that theories relating to SO₂ seem to change from week to week, so he now relies solely on his own experience.

He also generally copper-fines both reds and whites just prior to bottling. (This was not uncommon prior to the advent of screw cap, but allegedly the industry now uses more copper than ever before).

SULPHUR-LIKE ODOURS (SLO)

Discussions regarding dissolved oxygen regimes and copper fining pre-bottling when using screw cap inevitably lead to the debate about SLO. Dr Allan Limmer (Limmer, 2005) has written some excellent articles and for those who have not read them, I commend them to you.

In my view, the presence of SLO characters fall under several recognition categories:

- not recognised
- recognised, but accepted (or assumed that the consumer will accept)
- recognised, highlighted and noted as a fault.

I have personally witnessed learned people in the latter category being castigated by others in the first two categories.

This poses the question, "why does the acceptance of SLO characters exist?" In the cases I have experienced, the SLO probably fell into the category of 'trace' or 'slight', but it was still evident. Over recent years, characters associated with *Brettanomyces* have been a source of focus with even 'trace' or 'slight' evidence often being condemned, but it seems that SLOs are more widely tolerated, perhaps a result of investments and decision-making deemed as irreversible.

Just as winemakers do not want their customers to experience faults such as 'Brett', oxidation or even the slightest cork taint, surely there must be equal concern at the presence of SLO?

BOTTLING

Despite all the great work and best intentions of the winemaker, a great deal of this can be affected by bottling practices.

O'Brien and Gibson (2006) investigated oxygen in the headspace of bottles after filling and concluded: "this brief investigation of oxygen in the headspace of bottles after filling shows that current industry bottling practices may not prevent the exposure of bottled wine to oxygen. The extent of the variation that is possible in headspace oxygen content could cause significant bottle-to-bottle variation".

As a lot of criticism is levelled at cork for bottle-to-bottle variation. Winemakers need to be very confident in the integrity of the bottling process, as bad practice (even if unwittingly so) may just as well lead to bottle-to-bottle variability under screw cap also. In the worst-case scenario, and we have heard of some anecdotal incidences, high percentage failure has occurred.

THE FINAL CHOICE

Winemakers are certainly faced with decisions when choosing their closure type. Various closure assessments have shown that the wine in the bottle is impacted by the closure.

It is interesting to hear feedback from the industry in relation to the move away from cork to screw cap and vice versa. One of our famous wine styles, Semillon from the Hunter Valley, may not be developing under screw cap to everyone's liking, to the point that comments are being fielded to devotees about perceived "departure from style" with formerly cork-closed wines now under screw cap. Is a 'back to the future' situation likely?

I know of a winemaker who has chosen to bottle part of his 2006 Riesling under cork, this going against the trend of 100% screw cap.



CONCLUSION

These questions need to be asked of the closures sector and I leave you to ponder the answers:

- Are consumers being dictated to on closure type by winemakers, distributors and price?
- Are consumers truly happy with the ageing of certain wine styles under screw cap?
- Has the closure argument moved beyond the issue of the 'past sins' of cork taint? Is it now more about commercial considerations?
- Has screw cap taken away one of the key points of difference that wine had over most, if not all, other beverages, that being the cork?
- Have we gone too far too quickly in this change from cork to screw cap?
- Has screw cap trended wine toward being a commodity?
- Has the stereotype neck finish for screw cap bottles removed one of the key areas of marketers' flexibility with the package?
- In a time of the need to 'value add' to our wines, are we achieving the opposite using the cheaper closure and image?

REFERENCES

- Limmer, A. (2005) Do corks breathe? Or the origin of SLO. *Australian & New Zealand Grapegrower & Winemaker*. 497a:89-98,
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