

# ATKIN

## ON THE CASE



# Screwcaps - a partial answer

The best way to stifle debate is to pretend that there is no debate. It's a time-sanctioned technique used by dictators and fundamentalists the world over. I wouldn't accuse Michael Brajkovich MW, a skilled and intelligent winemaker, of having totalitarian tendencies, but I am extremely worried by some of his recent remarks at the first International Screwcap Symposium in Blenheim, New Zealand.

Brajkovich told the 260 delegates from Australia, New Zealand, the UK, France, Italy, the US, Chile and India that "in New Zealand and Australia, screwcap use is just about a done deal". I'm not convinced this is true. Seven out of every 10 bottles in New Zealand may be bottled under screwcap these days, but the figure is nothing like as high in Australia.

More to the point, a number of important industry figures, including Brian Croser, have considerable reservations about screwcaps. Croser cellared some screwcapped red wines he made at Wagga Wagga between 1978 and 1982

and still tastes them from time to time. "The wines are developed, but they're tinny and flat; like stale jam. The best wines sealed with a natural cork are better than all the screwcap wines," he told me earlier this year.

And what about the 30 per cent of New Zealand wine that is bottled with traditional corks? Haven't the people who make those wines heard the screwcap gospel yet? Or are they (poor, benighted luddites) just convinced that, all things considered, corks are better closures? There is certainly a lot more debate in New Zealand about the merits (or otherwise) of screwcaps than Brajkovich and the New Zealand Screwcap Initiative would have you believe.

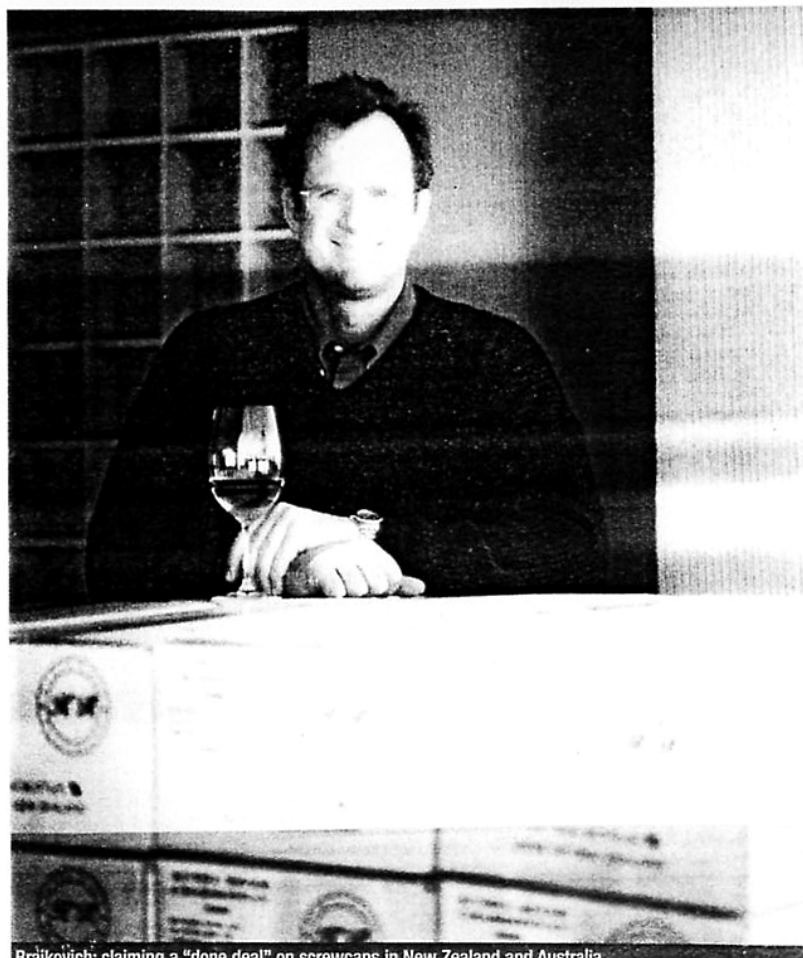
Take the issue of reductive, bad egg-like smells in wines bottled under screwcap. Brajkovich claimed at the International Screwcap Symposium that "if undesirable reductive flavours develop then it is a factor of winemaking and they are as likely to occur under cork".

I'm no chemist, but some of the people who disagree with

Brajkovich most decidedly are. Dr Alan Limmer, of Stonecroft Winery in Hawkes Bay, who has a PhD in chemistry, is a dissenter from the official NZSI line. Limmer is quoted thus in an excellent article by Paul White in the most recent issue of *The World of Fine Wine* ([www.finewinemag.com](http://www.finewinemag.com)): "With Stelvin's lack of oxygen, you have a recipe for further reduction, whereas under cork a small, constant input of oxygen acts as an intermediate barrier to the formation of more intractable and smelly compounds."

In his defence, Brajkovich could quote the famous French academic Pascal Ribereau Gayon, as he did at the symposium: "When a wine ages in bottle, the oxidation/reduction potential decreases regularly until it reaches a minimum value, depending on how well the bottle is sealed. Reactions that take place in bottled wine do not require oxygen. If the cork is no longer airtight, an oxidised character develops."

Which of these two points of view should one believe? And are they mutually exclusive? My feeling is that both of them may well



Brajkovich: claiming a "done deal" on screwcaps in New Zealand and Australia

be correct, depending on who is conducting the trial and what he or she wants to prove.

There is a lot we don't know about screwcaps at the moment, which is why the claims being made on their behalf are a tad premature. Those of us with medium term memories can remember the hype that once surrounded plastic corks, a closure whose popularity has waned of late.

What's my take on screwcaps? I'm basically in favour for young whites and rosés, but I'm not convinced that they are ideal for longer-term ageing, particularly of red wines. We simply do not have the volumes of aged reds bottled under screwcap to carry out mean-

ingful analysis at this point. It's a 10-year project at the very least. There are also unanswered questions about the unsuitability of some screwcap liners for wine.

One thing I am sure of, at least as far as my tasting buds are concerned, is that reductive taints are a real problem with screwcaps at the moment. Having just done a hugely disappointing pre-release tasting of New Zealand whites, I'd say that the percentage of reduced wines was running at around 20 per cent, although the degree of reduction varied. My findings are backed up by recent research and random sampling by the Australian Wine Research Institute (AWRI), which confirmed that reduction is "most

common in wines bottled under screwcap".

I am not, I should add, a diehard defender of traditional corks. I've had enough bottles of corked wine, some of them purchased at my own expense, to be as fed up with the incidence of TCA as the next man. But are advocates of screwcaps making the mistake of demanding that the wine industry switch to a closure that is still in its infancy, with all the attendant teething troubles?

Corks aren't perfect, but neither (for the time being) are screwcaps. Whatever the New Zealand Screwcap Initiative might like to pretend, the debate has only just begun.