

Coldstream Hills, corks and Stelvins

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You will have read about the dramatic rise in the popularity of the Stelvin screw cap, twenty years after it was first tried and abandoned because of consumer resistance.

Then and now it is a superior closure in terms of its technical performance, and in particular, in preventing the ingress of air into the bottle (in this context, read oxygen for air). Although some argue otherwise, I also believe it does not of itself taint the wine in any way.

Next, contrary to commonly held belief, the Stelvin does not put the wine into suspended animation. Sure, wine under a Stelvin closure will develop more slowly than wine sealed with a cork, be it natural or synthetic. But all wine has a certain amount of dissolved oxygen in it when it is bottled, and will use that oxygen over a period of time. Moreover, a number of changes in the ageing process are anaerobic; that is, they do not rely on the presence of oxygen to take place.

But there is little doubt that if you were to use a Stelvin capsule, and store the wine at a constant 10°C, its development would slow to a snail's pace. Assuming normal levels of sulphur dioxide at bottling, I would expect that after 20 years it would look and taste like a two to three year old wine.

On that formula, to reach the maturity of 10 years with a cork and average storage conditions would take a century or so, and unless you are a museum or a philanthropist, there is not much point in achieving that outcome.

Natural, one-piece cork has been the closure used with wine since the early seventeenth century. When it came into general use, it replaced wooden pegs wrapped in oiled cloth or ground glass stoppers, and was a momentous technical revolution. Over the years, I have been privileged to either myself draw the cork or been witness to the removal of corks from table wines over

140 years old. In at least some of those cases it was certain the cork was the original one inserted in the bottle.

At this level, there is an extreme magic in drawing the cork. But at less stratospheric conditions, the ritual involved in opening a bottle with a corkscrew is part and parcel of the pleasure of drinking fine wine.

If it is a cheap and cheerful wine, selling for around \$10 and designed to be drunk immediately, it will probably have a synthetic (commonly called plastic) cork. In contradistinction to Stelvins, these are not technically superior. Large-scale experiments show the wine commences to oxidise after a year or so in bottle.

The one halfway house is the twin-top, with a body of granulated cork, and a disc of natural cork at each end. At this early stage, twin tops are performing as well as Stelvins in preventing oxidation, or the precursors of oxidation. However, caution suggests longer-term trials are needed before we can be sure there will be no taint from the glue which holds both the agglomerate pieces together and the disc at either end of the cork.

Even then, it would be a great shame if Coldstream Hills were to move away from natural, one-piece corks. I believe the Portuguese cork industry is deadly serious about reducing, and ultimately eliminating, cork taint. The incidence (around 3%) should reduce sharply over the next few years; whereupon the benefits of natural cork will far outweigh the disadvantages.

So keep those corkscrews handy.

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