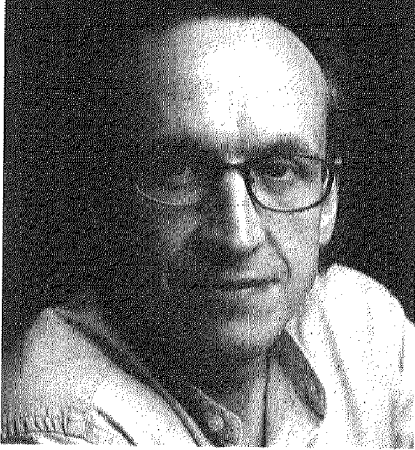


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		Âmbito: Nacional	Área: 18,86X8,38 cm2
		Perid.: Diária	Corte: 1 de 4



ANDREW JEFFORD

Whither cork?

YES, I APOLOGISE: this is yet another column about closures. I know it's not the first or even the hundredth; I'm sorry to tell you that it won't be the last. I hope, though, it will be slightly different from the rest. Meaning?

Meaning that I'm not particularly interested in arguing for either side of the cause. Costive yet paradoxically slimy plastic corks are horrible, but they're moribund anyway: the future is screwcap and real cork. And I like both. I like crisp young whites under clicky, snappy screwcaps. I also love whatever it is that happens between a beatifully fresh, clean, stud-length cork and a bottle of Pauillac or Hermitage over a 30-year period. I love the gentle, controlled, aroma-blossoming oxidation it provides; I love the sensual symbiosis between the cork's waxy suberin and

the wine's fragrant fruit and fine snow of stone.

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TCA-affected wines are, of course, deeply irritating. Either this problem will be overcome, or – the worst case – we will all have to live with it forever. To decide whether we are prepared to do that or not, we need 30-year-old samples of all the world's greatest red and white wines aged under both screwcap and cork. I would urge those running Bordeaux's first growths and leading growers in the Rhône, Burgundy, Tuscany, Rioja, Barossa, Napa and everywhere else

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to begin such trials immediately. Then let's all settle patiently down for the long wait. With open minds.

Which leads me to what this column is really about, which is the emotionally one-sided nature of this debate in the British wine-press so far. The ayatollahs of screwcap have made it seem morally defective for anyone to speak up for cork, though most consumers still prefer it, despite all its failings. It reminds me of the 'debate' about Europe in the UK, which has also been wildly one-sided so far thanks largely to non-European ownership of Britain's key newspapers. Many Britons love Europe and its culture deeply; recognise that Britain's most progressive recent legislation has come from Europe; can't wait to dump the pound in favour of the admirably sensible euro; and consider that the more

European Britain becomes, then the more civilised, intelligent, healthy, efficient and congenial a place it is likely to be to live in. Yet few dare say so, since anti-European sentiment has become the rigid dogma of popular culture, the political right and the media establishment. If you do say so, it won't get reported anyway.

When I was judging in Sydney in January, I was struck by the rumblings of discontent coming from the judges about submitted samples of screwcapped wines producing reductive characters. This has been widely written about by Paul White in New Zealand, but little reported in the UK. When Australian winemaker Brian Croser criticised the incidence of cork taint at a seminar for the Circle of Wine Writers held in London in February 2004, trade magazine *Harper's* wrote it up as a news story. Mysteriously, though, the same news story entirely omitted Croser's misgivings about screwcap. He is one of the few to have carried out long-term trials with both systems of closure, and he said on that occasion that he 'hated' his own red wines when they had been aged under screwcap. You could hear the creak of jaws dropping.

The last trump of the eye-rolling anti-cork brigade is usually to call cork 'tree bark', and to chortle sarcastically at the anachronism of using 'tree bark' to stopper wines in the 21st century. I love tree bark, and I think it's gratifying that we're still using it. It also strikes me as odd that the same screwcap propagandists don't object to the fact that most great wines are aged and often fermented in split tree trunks. Nor do they mind their wines being bottled in, and drunk from, an emulsion of melted sand. Wine itself, after all, is just plant juice, made of dirt, rain and sunshine. The avant-garde even use cow shit and sheep shit to manure those plants. We're going to drink it with dead burnt fish or cow and more plants, boiled or fried. What's wrong with a bit of tree bark?

The fact that bottle stoppers lie at the top of the cork-use

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pyramid and therefore prevent many of the dappled, restful and biodiverse cork forests of southern Portugal and Spain being bulldozed to make way for yet more cereal prairies is usually dismissed by screwcappies as 'irrelevant'. That's a point of view, the same kind of point of view that doesn't mind objecting to the felling of the Amazon margins to provide beef pasture for the world hamburger trade or seeing Antarctica mined for its mineral wealth; but it may not be yours or mine.

Anyway, what's the hurry? Why the hype? Bottling everything in screwcap, until we've carried out those 30-year experiments, would be insanely precipitate. Let's enjoy both, enjoy the wait, enjoy the fun of seeing how it all turns out – without foaming at the mouth and demonising natural, biodegradable, renewable and miraculously complex cork.

Andrew Jefford is the author of award-winning book *The New France*.