

Screw Top vs Traditional Cork

By Jon Bonné
MSNBC

Mention Randall Grahm to someone in the wine business and you'll get a knowing look. Grahm, founder of California's Bonny Doon Vineyard, is a breed unto himself -- a slug of Baron Philippe de Rothschild with a splash of William Borroughs. The award-winning winemaker turns out vintages with names like "Cardinal Zin," and while most winery Web sites extol wine flavors and quality, Bonny Doon offers insights from philosopher Martin Heidegger and LSD inventor Albert Hoffman.

Grahm, then, may be the perfect spokesman to argue that metal screw caps -- yes, like those on bottles of Thunderbird -- are exactly the right device to top fine wines.

He's putting his money where his palate is, by slowly converting his entire production line to screw tops. That began last year, with some 80,000 cases of his Ca' del Solo red and white blends. He's currently producing 95 percent of his run in metal caps -- including his Cigare Volant label, which retails for \$30 or more. Late last year, he even arranged a media campaign to announce the "Death of the Cork."

All this was done on a hunch -- no market research, no focus groups. "Our customers are very open minded," he says, though he acknowledged he knew many wine drinkers would balk at the idea. He pushed on, so convinced of his experiment's success that he was willing to stake his winery's future on it. The more time passes, though, the more he appears convinced that the Age of the Cork is over, that wine drinkers must move on.

"We like sound of the cork, we like the ritual," he says. "We have to get over it. It's like the Mass is no longer sung in Latin. Get over it."

ONCE AND AGAIN

To the extent Americans consider things like beverage closures, screw caps don't exactly carry lofty resonances. Juice? Sure. Soda? Why not. But screw caps and wine ... it hints at spritzers and mass-produced sangria and concoctions with a distinct bouquet of lighter fluid. So why would any winemaker, even a maverick like Grahm, put a high-quality product into something that recalls dime-store swill?

Quality, for one. Wine experts have found that screw caps -- if they're properly made and sealed -- often create an airtight seal on a wine bottle that's hard to beat. Oxygen doesn't seep in and there are no fears of the wine-ruining compound known as TCA, or cork taint. And of course, it's easy to reseal. It may not look the way we expect a wine bottle to look but, Grahm argues, "It's the best thing for the wine."

Grahm's conviction hasn't been cheap, either. Caps used by fine wineries -- most often devices known as Stelvin closures made by French firm Pechiney -- can be cheaper than corks, but specially molded bottles made with threads for the caps cost between perhaps \$2 more per case. Special machinery is also needed; so far Grahm has spent \$75,000 to upgrade his production line.

He isn't quite alone in his quest, though. California's Tony Plumpjack label has released several years of its cabernet sauvignon in screw tops -- at \$150 a bottle. In addition, the screw top has been in favor for years among many Australian and New Zealand wineries.

The Australian Wine Research Institute found that screw caps did the best job of preserving some white wines for a year. At least 15 Australian producers of Riesling have switched to the

devices and many New Zealand winemakers are either researching their use or have become vocal advocates -- including Villa Maria Estates, that country's largest private winery. Its screwcapped Merlot and Pinot Noir have both won competitions.

That level of preservation, Grahm argues, is really the key selling point because it can win over often demanding high-end wine consumers: "We knew that the most knowledgeable segment of the wine drinking public was completely behind this."

'I AM NOT A FAN'

Not necessarily. "I am not a fan of screw caps," says Michael Aaron, chairman of New York City wine retailer Sherry-Lehmann. "I think that they cheapen the look of the wine, and they take a lot of fun and mystery out of the wine."

Screw tops remain a conundrum for Aaron and others who sell wine. They acknowledge the devices' ability to preserve wine in pristine form, but even some of the most knowledgeable wine drinkers in the United States get squeamish around screw-capped bottles. Those cultural resonances are sometimes just too strong.

"How do you feel about opening up a screw cap when you have people over for dinner, when that used to be made for junk wine or Mad Dog?" asks Andrew Bell, president of the American Sommelier Association. "You get into an emotional conversation when you don't allow sommeliers to use a wine key to open bottles."

Aaron, for example, points to the Plumpjack effort as an example of the problem with selling screw-capped bottles. Plumpjack released both a cork

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and a screw-cap version of its reserve vintage, and rather than puzzle customers Sherry-Lehmann simply decided not to stock it. "We said, 'This is going to be a nightmare,'" Aaron says.

Wine connoisseurs raise another issue, too: Screw caps may do too good a job. Their airtight seals allow virtually no exchange between oxygen outside the bottle and the inert gases, usually sulfur dioxide, inside it. Grahm sees that as a benefit, actually, and one reason he shunned synthetic corks -- which he used before metal closures and found less effective at preventing oxygen leakage. But many wine sellers worry the lack of oxygen exchange will interrupt top wines' delicate aging process; the wines could lose any subtle flavors created by aging.

Traditional cork makers also dismiss the metal closures. They also cite the same Australian research, but point out that researchers detected a rubbery scent in some screw-capped wines after 18 months storage. "Nothing is perfect," says Jack Squires, vice president of the U.S. division of Amorim, the world's largest cork producer, "and those are things that have come out as time has gone on."

Not surprisingly, most European wine makers have almost uniformly rejected the screw cap. But if aging may be an issue for the small volume of wine sold to be cellared, most wines are still consumed within a year -- if not within days -- after bottling. Outside Europe, the trend even among more expensive wineries is to produce wine that tastes best right after it's pumped out of the barrel.

SELLING AN IDEA

Even if screw caps work well with most wine we drink, it's an open question whether consumers will accept such a radical change in tradition. "The short answer is: we don't know," says wine economist

Robert Smiley at the University of California, Davis.

But Smiley, who serves on the board of Gardner Technologies, which makes a hybrid metal-and-cork closure, sees big potential for wines that can be opened without a corkscrew.

He estimates that perhaps 40 percent of Americans consume wine infrequently, accounting for just 10 percent of wine sold here. These drinkers might buy wine in boxes or jugs, Smiley suggests, but are put off by the elaborate fiddling with a corkscrew necessary to open most bottles. In that case, the container serves as a barrier, not a branding device, he says: "They might drink more if it were a little more customer-friendly." If it were, Smiley argues, premium wineries could move these customers to better wines.

Wine makers aren't convinced. While many have tested screw caps, and appreciate how they work, they're often dissuaded by the added cost -- the caps often require an upgrade of entire bottling lines -- and remain worried about how their customers will react. "Someone like Randall Grahm, who's an iconoclast, it's

probably easier for him to just throw it out there and say, 'Go with it because I said so,'" says Co Dinn, winemaker at Hogue Cellars, who has tested caps but uses synthetic and natural corks. "And that's great. He's very definitely pushing the envelope in this hide-bound, traditional industry."

Tradition or not, Grahm and his fellow screw-cap devotees are slowly gaining new converts. Some restaurants have warmed to the closures and see them as a way to help educate customers about the importance of storing wine. Jake Kosseff, sommelier at Seattle's Cascadia restaurant, serves Australian screw-top offerings in addition to Bonny Doon wines. He has become a screw-top advocate over time, especially after tasting 30-year-old Australian Rieslings sealed with the caps.

Though he occasionally must linger at a diner's table, explaining why their wine has no cork, Kosseff is unapologetic -- and perhaps dismissive of the tradition of natural corks. "This is the romance of the new as compared to the romance of the old," he says.

Randall Grahm would almost certainly agree.