

Mourning the cork in New York

2 Oct 2002 by JR

Trust Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon Vineyards in California to come up with a novel approach to the Big Stopper Debate. On 2 October in New York he brought Grand Central Station to a halt (well, slowed a few commuters down for a few seconds) by parading a coffin containing the corks (sic) of M Thierry Bouchon (1585-2002) plus a group of mourners on their way to an All- Black Dinner to mark the death of the cork.

This dinner had nothing to do with rugby football and much to do with Randall's desire to recreate Huysmans' decadent Parisian black banquet (minus the bare-breasted black waitresses) described in his 1884 novel *A Rebours*. The modern New York version ran to Black Mustard- Scented Uni, Black Squid Ink Risotto, Miso- Glazed Black Cod, Black Mole- Roasted Venison, Dark and Bitter Greens with a Chocolate Tortoise, Diverse Dark Trifles and Black Nectarines. Thirty- three wines were poured, including 16 vintages of Bonny Doon's Le Cigare Volant and seven vintages of Old Telegram.

I was asked to deliver the eulogy to M Thierry Bouchon (*bouchon* being French for cork and Thierry being Randall's nod to the French for corkscrew *tire- bouchon*) and here it is - though bear in mind it was written to be said rather than read.

Eulogy for the cork

Oh Cork. Oh Cork. Oh Corky, Corky Cork.

How we shall miss thy cylindrical barksy majesty. Thy uniquely obstructive presence in the bottlenecks of our favourite drink. Thy utter damed ridiculousness as a 21st century stopper.

Stopper is a good word, of course - as the French, who use the word 'bouchon' for a traffic jam, know well. I quake to think how many potential consumers of a bottle of wine you have in your time stopped from bothering to open the blessed thing when fewer than 30 per cent of households in the United States own up to owning a corkscrew.

And I positively spit with rage when I think of how many waitpersons have carefully steered their diners away from ordering a bottle of wine, for fear they will be publicly humiliated in their lack of proficiency with one of these strange tools, so provocative in their defining action, so prone to disaster.

Did you, oh dear Corky, come to fear the ingress of the corkscrew? The sharp point at the end of the helix (so much more painful than the blunt one on the end of a moulded screw that simply crumbled rather than pierced you - so beloved of photographers and tacky houseware stores). Perhaps in this fair land, you knew a sweeter existence once the waiter's friend had been invented. Two strong arms to envelop and extract you, leaving you whole and unsullied - ripe for fakery and re- use.

And how did you feel about the Liverpool, the high- speed Screwpull? Did it feel like violation to be yanked out of the bottle so efficiently and with so little ceremony? We wine writers blessed the Texas inventor whose wife made him turn from the oil industry to getting a cork smoothly out of a bottle, but perhaps it was the bane of your amazingly long life.

For you've had a jolly good run, Monsieur Bouchon. Even the Ancient Greeks and Egyptians knew you could seal their amphorae. But the blackamoors invaded the land of the cork, Iberia, so that our medieval forebears had to content themselves with wooden bungs for their wooden barrels. 'Twas the widespread use of the bottle (heavy, breakable but usefully cheap and suitably neutral in contact with wine, so not about to be overthrown - for the moment...) that inspired the need for a long- lasting, light, elastic, inert, impermeable, INEXPENSIVE material that would fit and expand into a glass bottleneck, capable of nestling there for many a long decade. (And as soon as the corkscrew had been invented, it could be pushed way down into that bottleneck, eventually to be smothered by the foil or capsule, all too often till modern times poisoned with lead.)

In fact, it's well nigh amazing that you've lasted this long. A cylinder of tree bark, punched out of a plank, left humid and exposed in Portugal's cork forests, then taken for soaking at one of that country's Dickensian cork processing plants.

Of course these are rapidly being modernised, the cauldron replaced by the computer. But it's all Too Late. The cork vendors may bleat and moan. They may have banded together for the first time in their monopolistic lives to employ wondrous tricks and stupendous advertising budgets. They even managed to persuade our own Prince Charles that every plastic cork bought represented a nail in the coffin of the Alentejo ecosystem and one less vulture or short- toed lark in the sky (when any fool knows that ever since Gallo switched to cork- finished - and note that past participle - wines, world demand for wine stoppers has been soaring continuously every year and the total area of cork forest in Iberia is growing at a rate of four per cent per annum).

But all this effort on the part of the cork industry will be to little avail. The great big supertanker S S Screwcap has set sail and there will be no turning back. (Though strangely, the cork industry - never the most up- to- date - still believes it's fighting plastic corks and the petroleum industry of which they are a by- product rather than the much more effective and better- loved- by- wine- producers screwcap.)

You have been marvellous, Corky. Verily a marvel. I love your smoothness, your ineffable lightness of being, your ability to float (though strangely, that's not particularly useful to us wine drinkers), and your incomparable squidginess. Who would have thought that the simple fact of your 14- sided cells would provide wine drinkers the world over with salvation and unoxidised wine for more than four centuries? And your apparent wholesomeness - positively brown rice and sandal image - should really have saved you. Who wouldn't rather have their wine drinking heralded by a [pop] than a [screw]?

The technocrats, that's who. The world's wine drinkers and, more particularly the world's wine producers, have become sniffers- out of faults rather than wallowers in pleasure. They approach a wine with lowered head, like a bull in the ring seeking out a fight. Who goes there? A matador in a cloak of TCA. The wine must be gored, gored to social death by publicly decrying it as 'tainted' or 'corked'. The whisper goes up around the room. Even those who were thoroughly enjoying the wine in question are cowed. They must have been wrong. The bull smelt a whiff of TCA. The wine is unclean. Not fit for human consumption, and certainly not a fit ambassador for the guy who put it in the bottle.

Now that we are all introduced to wine via super- clean, technically perfect specimens, it's all the easier for us to pick up the merest whiff of a fault. The wine world is piled high with rejected bottles, each one representing a failed sale on the part of the producer. Each one the remains of an unsavoury conversation involving distinctly dirty words.

No wonder then that the producers of the world, well the New World anyway, have gone in search of a stopper a little more modern, a little more technically reliable than a plug of tree bark.

So we had that flirtation with the plastic cork and, apparently superior, the neo cork. Have you ever heard of anything sillier than a plastic copy of a wholly natural but thoroughly inconvenient object which requires a special implement to make it work? It was when I first espied my first plastic cork, old Corky, that I realised your true worth: disposable, ecologically impeccable - and puttable back in the bottleneck!

We will continue to celebrate your charms. We will gather together over great old bottles and marvel at the quaintness of pulling you gently from your bed. Corkscrews will flood garage sales and antique shops across the land (or they would if more Americans had them in the first place).

We loved your stencilled messages. From the evocative poetry of 'Mis en bouteille au château' to the rather more prosaic 'Agglo'. What will we stick our winkle pins in now? What will Martha do with her leftover screwcaps?

But we will not mourn the social posturing you have - perhaps unwittingly - given rise to over the past centuries. The sniffing of the cork. How ridiculous is that when the most hideously tainted wines can be topped by perfectly sweet- smelling corks, and the most divine wines emerge from under a stink- bomb of a cork?

Oh Corky, Oh Bouchon. We will miss you but not what you have given rise to.