Down with synthetic corks!

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Wine producers of the world, please, please, please stop using plastic corks. They are utterly infuriating.

There is something rather bizarre anyway about continuing to sell a commonplace consumer product that cannot be enjoyed without recourse to a special implement. Even sardine cans nowadays can be opened without a key but the majority of wine bottles require their purchasers to own, and find, a working corkscrew. So making a synthetic copy of a natural stopper which already has this considerable disadvantage seems perverse to me.

Then there is the question of the damage wreaked on the corkscrews of this world by said plastic corks. In my experience synthetic corks are much more reluctant to leave bottlenecks than their natural counterparts, and they regard my lovely and extremely expensive Leverpull corkscrew designed to extract the most recalcitrant of corks with two simple movements as a natural foe to be injured and preferably vanquished if at all possible.

Synthetic corks will respond to a remarkably narrow range of items in my drawer-ful of corkscrews, and have broken several others.

The other day I helped organise a charity wine tasting

at my 15 year-old daughter's school. Most of the eight wines to be tasted were stoppered with plastic corks; infuriatingly, you can't tell what sort of cork has been used until you start to open the bottle. The girls found it impossible to extract them so my husband and I crouched over the bottles doing battle with the most powerful of our corkscrews. We weren't sure exactly how many parents and teachers would turn up at the last minute, nor how much they would want to drink after the tasting, so decided we had better pull the corks out of all the bottles, arguing that we could always give away or sell off the bottles that remained.

In the end however, we had to pour the contents of about 20 spare bottles of wine down the sink. We had only those horrible plastic cylinders to re-seal them with and not one of them would go back into a bottleneck. An open bottle of wine deteriorates in hours and cannot be transported.

I'm sure that some synthetic corks are more flexible than others – I am told that Nomacorc is better than most – but those we encountered that evening came from at least four different sources, and they were all equally obdurate.

So why do wine producers use plastic corks anyway, you may ask? The ostensible reason is that they avoid any possibility that the wine will be tainted by a contaminated natural cork. The high incidence of wines spoilt by some degree of TCA (trichloroanisole) taint, still widely estimated at somewhere between three and four per cent, has indeed driven producers to look for an alternative to what has most commonly been associated with TCA taint, natural cork.

Badly TCA-tainted wine smells mouldy and too unappetising for anyone other than the most serious toper to contemplate drinking it. But the real problem for wine producers is the more common one of slight TCA taint which simply suppresses the fruit and makes the wine taste dull and hard. Only someone who knows what the wine should taste like can know for certain that the problem is low-level TCA rather than the wine itself, which is what has driven the world's wine bottlers to look for alternatives to natural cork – even if the cork industry, based in Portugal, has been working hard to introduce new techniques which minimise the incidence of TCA taint in their products, and to demonstrate that TCA can arise not just from corks but other sources such as wooden pallets.

It is all very laudable that wine producers should want consumers to enjoy a wine exactly as they put it into the bottle but economics probably play a part in the choice of synthetic stoppers too. A plastic cork costs considerably less than a natural one – well under 3p each when a good quality cork can easily cost more than 10p.

The other, increasingly favoured, alternative to a natural cork is of course the metal screwcap which is much, much better at keeping harmful oxygen out of a wine bottle than a plastic cork, and more effective in this respect even than a natural cork. The first serious scientific comparative study showed that plastic corks started to let in harmful air after only 18 months.

I had another highly embarrassing experience of this recently when presenting a 2002 Chablis from the cork-o-phobe Michel Laroche. Like the talented Burgundian Jean-Marie Guffens of Verget, he has now offers screwcaps even for his grandest wines, but in 2002 he was still using plastic and by early 2006 this particular lot of wine was practically brown and had lost all Chablis' characteristic freshness. It could have been storage conditions, but I suspect it was those horrid plastic corks.

If screwcaps are good at keeping air out, and their unit cost at around 3p (and no need for a capsule or foil over the top at around 0.8p) is low, there are two major problems with them. Firstly screwcap application requires the installation of a completely new set of machinery from the old cork insertion kit. This has discouraged many smaller producers from adopting the screwcap, or Stelvin as it is known in many markets after the market leader, and has made plastic corks seem a much more attractive alternative.

Synthetic corks, incidentally, have several more major drawbacks that I have not even mentioned yet. Unlike natural corks, they are non biodegradable. Furthermore, as the World Wildlife Fund, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Prince Charles keep reminding us, the ecosystem of southern Portugal depends on our continuing to buy natural corks – an argument that I find less than compelling since the cork oak forests were created specifically for the cork industry, and anyway worldwide demand for natural corks is still rising since there has been such a marked shift towards selling wine in bottle rather than bulk.

Against screwcaps there is also the question of how we consumers feel about them. In Australia and New Zealand there is near total acceptance that this is the preferable closure. In the UK they are now commonplace in mass market wines; UK wine bottlers report that the proportion of all wine they stopper with a screwcap has risen to 85 per cent in the last three years. But in much of mainland Europe and certainly in the US there is still considerable consumer resistance.

Americans perhaps haven't looked carefully enough to see how silly the plastic copies of natural cork look, or perhaps like me they are waiting for the next big thing in their bottlenecks. Can screwcaps really represent the end of the road?