Aren't screwcaps mahvellous...?

1 Feb 2011 by NZSWSI

10 Feb - And now Paul White sends a long riposte to Bob Campbell's yesterday. I am adding them both in separate comments boxes below, continuing stoppers' inflammatory tradition.

9 Feb - We are republishing this to draw to your attention all the comments it has engendered. I heard from New Zealand's best-known wine writer Bob Campbell MW this morning. I have added his words in a comment box below.

4 Feb - The tendentious statement below was published here in rather unusual circumstances. As I explained in our Members' forum here, I was about to spend an entire day in a plane after 12 days on the road so had no time to add anything of my own, and I thought this offered a pretty interesting overview of screwcap-related issues as seen at present. I thought the headline and introduction might signal the fact that not all of these views are my own, but clearly should have spelt it out more clearly - JR

The New Zealand Screwcap Wine Seal Iniatitive, the world's first national pro-screwcap movement, is celebrating its tenth anniversary with the following announcement. I can feel the vibrations from Portugal already…. JR

As we peruse today's crowded wine shelves, it is difficult to ignore the proliferation of screwcaps. With over 90% of New Zealand wine now sealed this way, the eradication of cork and other closures in the local wine industry is on the horizon. The impetus for change arose from the New Zealand Screwcap Wine Seal Initiative established in early 2001.

New Zealand isn't alone, with global interest in screwcaps also expanding rapidly in the last ten years with wine producers, wine trade and wine consumers unable to disregard the compelling research confirming them as the superior wine closure. Of the seven billion wine bottles sealed worldwide each year, it is suggested the number using screwcaps has grown from an estimated 100 million ten years ago to almost three billion this year. While traditionalists may still be reluctant to embrace them, there is now plenty of scientific evidence that indicates money spent on wine sealed with anything but a screwcap is a game of risk.

The winds of change began in Australia in 2000 when a group of Clare Valley winemakers, exasperated with the inconsistency of cork and how it was affecting their outstanding Rieslings, decided to make the significant move to screwcaps. This was particularly challenging as there was no supplier in Australia for the caps or the right bottles so the group had to commit to 250,000 from Pechiney in France.

Inspired by this bold decision, producers in Marlborough, New Zealand, namely Dave Pearce of Grove Mill and Dr John Forrest and Dave Knappstein of Forrest Estate, undertook scientific research, the results of which confirmed screwcaps as the only viable alternative and in fact far superior to cork, for sealing wine bottles. The New Zealand Screwcap Wine Seal Initiative was formed. The first meeting called by the late Ross Lawson of Lawson's Dry Hills, brought together Dr John Forrest of Forrest Estate, John Stichbury of Jackson Estate and John Belsham of Foxes Island. The group co-opted the late Dave Williams as their facilitator and Rose Prendeville as secretary, followed by Michael Brajkovich MW of Kumeu River as Chair.

At the same time, a study on wine closures by scientists from the Australian Wine Research Institute also proved screwcaps to be the superior wine seal and that cork was inconsistent as regards oxygen ingress. In addition, it was found synthetic closures had the highest permeability and were only suitable for wines destined to be drunk almost immediately. Peter Godden, AWRI's Group Manager said, 'The biggest issue for any form of cork closure is variability - the wines sealed with screwcaps were extremely consistent bottle to bottle and no other closure achieved results even similar.' He concluded, 'Most of the wines sealed with closures other than screwcap were completely undrinkable; some synthetic corks didn't even last 28 months'.

With such a strong, scientific base to work from, the newly formed New Zealand Screwcap Wine Seal Initiative established a number of objectives:

- To encourage and facilitate the use of screwcap wine seals by New Zealand wineries
- To undertake research into screwcap wine seals, for the benefit of the group's member wineries

- To enable members to individually use and develop screwcap wine seals using the research developed by the group
- To provide a forum for facilitating the exchange of ideas, opinions and contributions regarding screwcap wine seals
- To identify and develop project methodologies and best practice in the use, promotion and education of screwcap wine seals

One of the committee's first decisions was to introduce a generic name for this type of closure i.e. 'screwcap' to prevent any potential confusion through the use of individual brand names.

It was at this time that one of the country's largest wine producers, Villa Maria, moved to screwcaps following the lead of a number of smaller producers including Forrest Estate, Lawsons Dry Hills, Jackson Estate, Kim Crawford and Kumeu River all of whom switched to screwcaps to ensure the quality of their wines for the consumer. As Michael Brajkovich explains, 'At Kumeu River we were considering doing a proportion in screwcap and still having cork available for customers who wanted it. But then my brother Paul asked me if I was confident that the screwcap was significantly better. I said yes, and based on extensive tastings of aged Rieslings from Australia, I had no doubt that our wines would benefit over the long term as well. As a result, we decided to put everything under screwcap and communicate with our customers that we were doing it because we knew that the wines would be better - and that has certainly proven to be the case.'

Funded by the original 25 members, the first significant promotion of screwcap closures was undertaken in 2002 at the London Wine Trade Fair. As John Belsham of Foxes Island explains, 'We ran a very simple trial of putting corks into glasses of acidified water. There was a varying degree of colour and flavour taint in all of them, except one - the glass containing no cork.' This simple yet very graphic experiment clearly demonstrated cork's unsuitability as a consistent and neutral wine closure.

Tyson Stelzer - an Australian wine writer and author of two books on screwcaps and their correct application, claims, 'The rate of uptake of screwcaps in recent years has greatly exceeded that of any other development in wine closure technology in any period of wine history. No other country has embraced this development as comprehensively as New Zealand. With Australia, these two countries have been the world leaders in what can only be described as the most important advancement in wine quality and consistency in the modern era'.

Randall Grahm, winemaker and founder of Bonny Doon Vineyard, California, was also impressed with New Zealand's lead. 'The New Zealand Screwcap Wine Seal Initiative has, for some of us, been a sign of intelligent life in lands so very far away. The primary job of the winemaker is to preserve the integrity of the wine and to allow the wine to achieve its greatest potential. For me, screwcaps are the very best technology currently in existence to advance this end'.

One of the main challenges faced with promoting the acceptance of screwcaps was the contentious issue of maturation in bottle. The idea that wine needs to 'breathe' in order to mature (and that cork allows a certain amount of oxygen to pass though to facilitate this) was dispelled by Professor Emile Peynaud, a French oenologist and researcher credited with revolutionising winemaking in the latter half of the 20th century. He explained, 'It is the opposite of oxidation, a process of reduction, or asphyxia by which wine develops in the bottle.' This was echoed by Professor Pascal Ribéreau-Gayon, author of the 'Handbook of Enology', 'Reactions that take place in bottled wine do not require oxygen'.

Jeffrey Grosset of Grosset Wines, one of the Clare Valley winemakers who made the commitment to screwcaps early on, is concerned that there is still a question mark over using screwcaps for some red wines. 'Screwcaps have made it possible for us to enjoy great wine (rather than just great bottles). This is unprecedented in our history. For many consumers, confusion remains about the real role of a closure, in particular the relevance (if any) of oxygen in the ageing of bottled wine.' John Forrest clarifies, 'Various tastings of red wines ten years and older sealed with screwcaps have proved them to be ageing gracefully and exactly as expected. These results should allay any fears of using screwcap closures for wines destined for the cellar.'

James Halliday, one of Australia's leading wine commentators, concurs. 'Looking back over the last decade of the NZSCWSI (and the similarly timed all-important move to screwcaps by the Riesling makers of the Clare Valley) my only regret is that the migration to screwcaps did not occur ten years earlier. Many of the wines in my cellar would be in far better condition had this occurred then'.

Another hurdle was the perception that screwcaps were exacerbating sulphide issues though as Michael Brajkovich explains, 'Sulphide problems did not suddenly appear with the use of screwcaps, but have occurred for years in winemaking. Any closure that seals well and precludes air will exacerbate sulphide-like odours where the precursors

exist.'

A significant milestone was the International Screwcap Symposium hosted by the NZSCWSI in Marlborough in 2004. 180 delegates attended from a number of countries to listen to a raft of renowned speakers including pioneer Jeff Grosset from Australia and Chuck Hayward, specialist wine retailer from the USA, George Fistonich of Villa Maria, Michel Laroche of Domaine Laroche, France, plus wine writers Bob Campbell MW, the UK's Robert Joseph, Ronn Wiegand MW, MS, from the USA and Tyson Stelzer and Marketing Consultant Zar Brooks from Australia. Michael Brajkovich and Peter Godden of the AWRI presented their extensive research while a number of technicians including Jacques Granger of Pechiney presented on operational aspects.

Inspired by the NZSCWSI and further convinced by the symposium, the vast majority of New Zealand winemakers made the commitment to screwcaps. One of France's leading producers, Michel Laroche, also moved away from cork, bottling his Chablis under screwcap. Michel explains, 'I just regret that I didn't start earlier! Over the last ten years I do not remember one of the tastings when the wine with a cork was better than the wine with a screwcap'. This was a bold and pioneering move that sparked much debate among the more traditional wine-producing countries of Europe. However, other renowned French producers are following Laroche's lead with Jean-Claude Boisset releasing wines under screwcap and even Château Margaux conducting trials. Alsace's Albert Mann, Paul Blanck and Gustave Lorentz also recognise the benefits and are now using screwcaps.

With the industry now convinced, the major challenge ahead was convincing the market. Many key wine influencers, particularly in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, took up the cause and much was written in an effort to explain to trade and consumers how wines sealed with a screwcap were risk-free. One of the UK's strongest proponents was leading wine writer Robert Joseph, who comments, 'Among the more memorable moments of the last decade for me, was blind tasting wines under both cork and Stelvin [screwcap] at Kumeu River and Felton Road in the early days. Those experiences - along with some of the old Australian screwcap-sealed wines I tasted, convinced me that there was a valid alternative to corks. The blind tasting I ran for *Wine International* Magazine in 2003 at Vinexpo in Bordeaux at which we sampled wines of various ages and origins under corks, screwcaps and other closures, simply confirmed it - and I believe helped to nudge a few people into experimenting with other closures. The dishonesty of the cork lobby over the years has been breathtaking on occasion, but honesty is now prevailing across the globe...'

Matthew Jukes, author and wine writer for the UK's *Daily Mail* is confident that acceptance is now a given. 'People no longer, thankfully, have that quizzical look on their face when presented with a screwcap-sealed bottle of wine. Even my parents' generation has embraced them and they thought that we'd all gone mad.' He continues, 'Nobody blinks these days in restaurants, even smart ones, when a sommelier unscrews a bottle - and the sommelier is delighted too, because he knows that he won't have to run back to the cellar to get another because the first one's corked!'

Bob Campbell MW, New Zealand's leading wine writer and wine critic, also acknowledges the way in which screwcaps were accepted as well as those producers who were not so enthusiastic. 'The first thing that comes to mind is the incredibly rapid acceptance of what is a radically new closure on a very traditional product. The winemakers who were first to embrace screwcaps were very bold indeed and deserve credit for putting the quality of their wine ahead of potential market reluctance'. He continues, 'However, an issue that rather saddened me was the divisiveness that the new closure created between those who were quick to accept it and those who were not. I recall the unpleasant experience of being shouted at and poked in the chest by a winemaker who thought that my support of screwcaps would imperil the industry. I've also been criticised by one or two wine writers who were opposed to the use of screwcaps. At the end of the day screwcaps have given winemakers more closure options which must be a good thing. The closure revolution promises to make a greater contribution to wine quality than any innovation since bottles and corks were first used'.

However, Chuck Hayward, Australian and New Zealand Wine Buyer for US wine retailer JJ Buckley, is concerned that the uptake of screwcaps in the US is not quick enough. 'Until wine drinkers understand that the move to screwcaps is really an effort to improve and secure the quality of wine in the bottle, the wine industry in the US will not be motivated to change. Only when consumers fully comprehend that the wine business in America has been knowingly selling tainted wines at acknowledged rates of between 2-8% will there be change. In no other industry is such a rate of producing defective product considered acceptable. Unfortunately, for change to happen, it will probably take a class action lawsuit from a consumer rights advocate that accuses the wine industry of acting in collusion while knowingly selling defective product.' He concludes, 'The American consumer deserves better from the wine industry. The wineries, journalists and sommeliers that have not been proactive in their efforts to ensure that wine drinkers get the best wine possible should be ashamed. In the US, I am afraid to say, the list is long'.

On a lighter note but nevertheless an important one, the NZSCWSI were keen to promote that the opening of a screwcap bottle can have as much flair as removing a cork. The committee created a leaflet for insertion into cases of

screwcap-sealed wines with a diagram explaining the best way to open the bottle. This method is not only the easiest, but also the most aesthetic for those worried about the lack of 'romance'. Hold the bottle in your right hand at a slight angle across your body. With your left hand, grip the neck/collar of the screwcap with your hand underneath, thumb on top. Next, simply twist the bottle towards you and you will hear the 'click' as the seal easily breaks. Finally, a swift turn of the cap will remove it.

Another benefit of the screwcap closure is of course convenience - no longer requiring a special tool in order to enjoy the contents, no more broken corks, bits in the wine, or having to donate one's favourite corkscrews to the security personnel at various airports.

In the ten years since the establishment of the New Zealand Screwcap Wine Seal Initiative, the number of screwcaps being used by wine producers on a global basis has increased dramatically. With wine producers dropping cork and other closures in favour of screwcaps, this is undoubtedly the strongest proof that these closures are indeed the most suitable. Eradicating cork taint, having no effect on the wine and forming a perfect seal, this is an incredible achievement for the wine industry, particularly given the resistance from those in the market clinging to the tradition of cork.

In summing up, Michael Brajkovich explains, 'We have found the most reliable wine closure to date. However, winemakers will continue to experiment with closures and if a better one is found in the future I am certain we will embrace it in the same way we have embraced the screwcap.'

For the consumer, the significant efforts of research facilities, wine producers and closure companies, not to mention the huge impetus created by the New Zealand Screwcap Wine Seal Initiative have ensured quality wine has never been easier to purchase. With so many bottles vying for space on those congested shelves and still some uncertainty about how to choose, at least those sealed with a screwcap can provide assurance that the wine is exactly as the wine producer created it.