

For my second wine topic I would like to introduce you to a war. This isn't a conventional war but a war just as fierce as any fought on the battlefield, the battle between the cork and screw top.

I will now take you back to an interesting and extremely prestigious wine tasting experiment that I was lucky enough to be involved in last year. James Irvine one of the best producers from Australia, famous for his Merlot, was a pioneer who took a gamble at the beginning of what was to be the screw top revolution. Blissfully unaware of how well the screw top would take off, James Irvine agreed to bottle part of his top curve Grand Merlot using both the screw top and the cork in view to compare how the wine will taste 10 years on. His results were fascinating...

As a proud Frenchman a lot of you will think that I prefer the cork. Corks are mostly produced in Portugal and have been used for centuries to keep the wine bottle closed and still account 80% of all closures on wine bottles. What I personally like with the cork is that it represents the same value and prestige that the wine does, its natural, it works in harmony with the wine. If you are looking to keep your wine in the cellar for a few years or even decades then the cork is the best, it will make your wine get better with time. This is because the cork is able to breath like a natural body and let the wine continue to mature and improve with age. James Irvine found this with his older top curve's tasting better with age when they had been corked rather than screw topped. You may ask 'If it is not broken why fix it?' well the problem is that the cork is broken, well slightly anyway. The disadvantage of the cork paradoxically stems from the fact that it is natural. As with everything natural it can be inconsistent so the cork needs to be selected with the same attention to detail and precision that the grape selected for the wine. But the main issue with the cork and everyone knows this is the cork taste problem. Industry estimates show that between 3 and 5% of all wines are ruined by the very object that is meant to preserve them, the cork. This is because corks have a disease called TCA (trichloroanisole) so called by the scientists who still don't have an agreed explanation of why this happens.

Before I talk about the screw top which is the most desirable way to escape from the problems with the cork I would like to mention the plastic cork which for me is an extremely poor substitute. Yes, you do escape from the cork taste but the screw top does this with a number of extra advantages.

The screw top is easy to open and close at any moment; there is no problem with the cork taste or with oxidation of the wine. The fact that the wine doesn't oxidise as much as with a screw top, as James Irvine found out, than it does with a cork means that younger wines taste crisper and fresher with a screw top. It is the small details that make the screw top effective and the fact that the wine in a screw top is filled right to the top is one of them. However the screw top unlike the cork doesn't let the wine age well. After a certain amount of time the screw top wine can become reduced giving a nasty aftertaste which as a problem in itself is less understood than the problems associated with TCA.

Rather than the fierce battle I described earlier I truly believe like James Irvine that there is a place for both the screw top and the cork in world of wine. I would recommend that if you are buying older wines or young wines that you want to age for some decades that you choose the cork. If you want a younger wine to taste the fruit and true expression of the grape variety then the screw top is the answer.

Hopefully I have helped try and solve this problem but I am sure people will still be debating this for years to come.

Next it is harvest time and I will be summarising the 2008 vintage from the most popular wine countries all over the world.

All Votre Sante

Nico