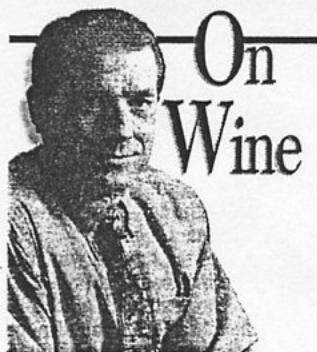


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What is it about wine that discourages nonwine drinkers?

While answers might be as varied as the wines on your favorite store's shelves (and fodder for, oh, a year's worth of columns), some folks in the wine industry believe a major hurdle is the perceived struggle to open a wine.

Or at least how those bottles still using cork stoppers are opened. The current move to use twist-top openers on better-quality wines, while apparently a success for front-runner Bonny Doon Vineyards, still smacks more-traditional consumers of being too reminiscent of the days when screwcaps topped low-rung *vin ordinaire* carrying such labels as Ripple, Annie Green Springs and the ubiquitous gallon-sized jugs of unremarkable "Burgundy."

We've all watched uncomfortably as someone struggled to open a wine and if we were as open as we'd like to think would admit to having spent an awkward moment or two ourselves trying to casually open a wine while sweating bullets.

We've had to face the indecision of how to remove the foil seal. (Do you casually twist it off or do you use the miniature blade on the cork screw to slice at the foil with the vengeance of Alex Dumas' Three Musketeers?)

That's followed script-like with the uncertain fumbling with an unfamiliar wine opener, and trying to figure out some way get the pointy end of the pig's-tail corkscrew inserted into the cork without the screw folding over and stabbing us in the hand.

Then there's the twisting of the screw, trying to get it straight into the cork without chewing bits off the cork or pushing the cork entirely into the bottle, which usually results in jetsam floating accusatorially on the first glass you pour.

And finally, the actual act of getting the cork out of the bottle, without shattering the cork and hopefully without the attention-getting "pop" that assures everyone within hearing that your last bottle of wine was one weird Uncle Harry filled out of the large zinc tub in the basement.

If you still struggle with the traditional corkscrew-type wine openers, haven't opted for some of the other types of openers on the market, and remain an unconvinced traditionalist who insists on the romance of a real cork, a new closure might be the God-send you are seeking.

Gardner Technologies, a Napa, Cal.-based technology company dedicated to improving wine closure quality and the overall wine experience, recently introduced two new closures, MetaCork and MetaSeal, the latter a typical screwcap closure.

Designed by retired engineering professor William Gardner, himself a wine drinker puzzled that the tradition-steeped wine industry didn't offer modern packaging, MetaCork "maintains the romance and tradition of cork without the hassles of a corkscrew," according to GT spokesman Jim Caudill.

MetaCork is a twist-off cap that holds a built-in corkscrew already inserted into the cork. A few twists of the cap and the cork is out. Remove the cork and the anchor, twist the cap back on and you get a tight seal and a drip-proof pour.

And you still have a cork to show anyone who asks.

"You cannot tell it is not the traditional cork closure," Caudill said. "And you can do it all in your kitchen."

Caudill said wineries interested in the MetaCork closure include Fetzer Vineyards, which plans to bottle 1,000 cases of its 2000 Fetzer Barrel Select Cabernet Sauvignon with MetaCorks fitted with Fetzer's own composite corks.

Other wineries include Clos du Bois, the cult winery Amusant and possibly Chalone. The Olive Garden chain of restaurants also is interested in the MetaCork closure, Caudill said.

"This is going to make enjoying wine easier for anyone who has struggled to open a bottle of wine," Caudill concluded. He expects MetaCork-capped wines to show up on store shelves by fall.

Wines to try:

- Ravenswood 2000 Vintners Blend Zinfandel, \$12.
- Bogle 2001 California Petite Sirah, \$10.
- Charles Back 2002 Goats Do Roam (South Africa), \$10.