

Posted on Fri, Feb. 07, 2003

PIONEER PRESS

New wine bottles boast hassle-free tops

BY LINDA MURPHY

San Francisco Chronicle

Do you hate the tools yet love the tradition of pulling corks from wine bottles? Ready to say goodbye to corkscrews, foil cutters, broken and crumbly corks, chipped bottle lips and linen-staining drips? Not a fan of screw caps?

If so, meet MetaCork, a new wine closure introduced last week at the Unified Wine and Grape Symposium in Sacramento. It promises the romance and tradition of cork with great ease of opening the bottle.

Five or six twists of the capsule that tops the bottle and the cork is out. Remove the cork and its anchor and spin the capsule back on to reseal leftover wine and create a drip-proof pour. The recapped bottle fits on the refrigerator door, and everything goes into the recycling bin.

Consumers should see MetaCork, the invention of retired UC Davis engineering professor William Gardner and his company, Gardner Technologies in Napa, on bottles of wine within a few months. Fetzer Vineyards and Clos du Bois will begin selling small lots of MetaCork-fitted wine in California and Texas by early summer, about the time when Amusant Wines, a small producer in Napa, will release its entire production — 600 cases of cabernet sauvignon (\$30) and 550 cases of chardonnay (\$20) — in the MetaCork closure. Kerry Manahan-Ehlow, Gardner's national sales and marketing manager, is also a partner in Amusant.

If Gardner Technologies has read the market correctly, MetaCork and its sister product, MetaSeal (a fancy screw cap) will find acceptance from those who are intimidated by the tools and techniques necessary to open bottles of wine.

MetaCork does not directly solve the problem of wines ruined by cork taint (TCA, short for 2,4,6-trichloroanisole), because wineries use their own natural or synthetic corks with the capsule. For producers who favor taint-free screw caps, Gardner has created the stopperless MetaSeal, which will be available late this year and is removed with the same twist-off action as MetaCork.

"No one is arguing over wine quality issues with screw caps," says Gardner Technologies CEO William Borghetti. "The argument is they're ugly. MetaCork offers a transition from cork to screw cap for those who want the more traditional closure; MetaSeal has the safety of a screw cap and the appearance of a foil-finished wine."

If MetaCork catches on, life will be simpler for picnickers, those with arthritis, restaurant servers and flight attendants. The new closure will add anywhere from 3 cents to 30 cents to the cost of producing each bottle of wine, but vintners declined to say whether the extra production costs will be passed on to consumers.

A proponent of MetaCork is Bill Edwards, director of beverage marketing for the Olive Garden chain of restaurants. He's charged with training some 33,000 servers who work at



more than 480 Olive Gardens in the country.

"We want to make wine as accessible as possible to our guests," Edwards says. "Servers will embrace this because there is nothing more uncomfortable for them than to have a bunch of strangers watching while they struggle to remove a cork from a bottle."

Tom Meyer, vice president of marketing for Fetzer Vineyards, bottled 1,000 cases of the 2000 Fetzer Barrel Select Cabernet Sauvignon (\$20) with the MetaCork closure fitted with Fetzer's own composite corks.

"MetaCork has potential for a consumer revolution on how people view closures of wine," Meyer says. "It's a unique option for those who want to continue to use cork and eliminate the requirement that the consumer use a corkscrew."

Sonoma County wine producer Clos du Bois will put 1,000 cases of a still-to-be-decided MetaCork-finished wine on the market, also in early summer. Brown-Forman, owner of Fetzer, and Allied Domecq, which owns Clos du Bois, will work with Gardner Technologies to collect and analyze consumer response to the no-tool technology.

Harry Bird, general manager at Beltramo's wine shop in Menlo Park, has seen more than enough cork-tainted wines and relishes the opportunity to try an alternative.

"We'll see how comfortable people are with them," he says.