

## Look Ma, No Corkscrew: Two New Wine Closures Pop Like Cork, With a Twist

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By Nick Fauchald

..... MetaCork, released this summer by Napa, Calif.-based Gardner Technologies, keeps the cork while still eliminating the need for a corkscrew. Cork anchors are screwed into a winery's existing corks (synthetic or natural) during the bottling process. Twisting MetaCork's entire plastic capsule removes the cork, which then, along with the anchor and the top cap, can be pushed out of the capsule unit. The plastic capsule can be returned to the bottle for drip-resistant pouring, or the cap can be screwed back on for a leak-proof seal. The process isn't entirely intuitive to the uninitiated, so a neck tag containing concise instructions is placed on each bottle. The company is also testing a product called MetaSeal, an all-in-one device that will eliminate the cork stopper, which is set for release next year.

About 2 percent to 6 percent of all cork-sealed wines suffer from TCA taint, which can result in musty aromas and flavors. In the early 1990s, many wineries tried synthetic corks as a way to avoid cork taint. But some synthetics were criticized for leeching a plastic flavor into wines and for sealing too well, hindering wines from aging properly. Recently, screw caps have gained a following among fine winemakers, despite their former association with jug wines. Studies have shown that screw caps preserve wine well; they also allow bottles to be easily resealed. But the cap has yet to gain widespread acceptance among consumers -- largely for aesthetic reasons.

.....The goal of MetaCork is to give consumers a more functional, yet still familiar, closure, said Kerry Manahan-Ehlow, vice president of sales and marketing for Gardner Technologies. "A consistent, reliable experience without having to use a corkscrew takes away all intimidation from opening a bottle of wine," she said.

MetaCork was invented by William Gardner, a retired engineering professor at the University of California, Davis, who already held 11 patents. In 1996, Gardner was hosting a dinner party for his colleagues. When he tried to open a bottle of wine, the cork pushed into the bottle and splashed wine onto his white shirt. A few minutes later, with a clean shirt and a fresh bottle of wine, Gardner's second cork crumbled and broke, and the wine had to be decanted and strained. On his third bottle, Gardner's corkscrew broke in half on a particularly stubborn cork.



The MetaCork's entire plastic capsule screws off, removing the cork; the top can be screwed back on to reseal the bottle.

Inspired by this trio of failures, Gardner went into his garage the next morning and began designing what would ultimately become the MetaCork. "I knew there had to be a better solution and that I should be able to find that solution by bringing modern technology to bear on this age-old problem," said Gardner. "Because of my respect for the tradition of wine and the Old World craftsmanship that lives on in wine, I set my sights at finding the perfect marriage of technology and tradition."

Two major wine companies are already trying out the MetaCork. Brown-Forman is using the closure on Fetzer Vineyard's Barrel Select Merlot Sonoma County 2001, and Allied Domecq is testing it on the Clos du Bois Chardonnay Sonoma County 2002. Plus the closure has been put on the entire production of Amusant, a small Napa Valley winery owned by Manahan-Ehlow. So far, a total of 5,000 cases from the three wineries carry the top.

The MetaCork-sealed wines now can be found at dozens of independent and chain retailers in California and Texas. "I'm seeing really positive response," said Dan Norvine, who owns the Wine Exchange of Sonoma. "My customers like the way it looks and that they can still experience the romance of a natural cork."

The MetaCork is also receiving attention in tasting rooms and restaurants. "We see a lot of people struggle with corkscrews who like how easy it is," said DeAnn Vau, Fetzer's tasting room manager. "And a lot of people have said that it'd be perfect for a picnic or during vacation when you can't carry a corkscrew onto the airplane."

The California Café in Los Gatos, Calif., is one of about 20 restaurants in California and Texas that are pouring the MetaCork-sealed wines. "It's great for bartenders pouring wines by the glass; it's easier for our staff to open; and it's nice to have the no-drip feature," said the restaurant's wine buyer, Tim Gray. "I think it'll be appealing to both cork and screw cap people."

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