

## **Oliver's Market Newsletter – March - What's in a cork**

It's an all too familiar scene, you're all settled in at your favorite restaurant, the entrées and the wine have been ordered. The waiter arrives, opens the bottle, and pours a splash into your glass for you to taste. Before the glass even reaches your lips, you are hit by a smell that overwhelms all others, a musty, unpleasant odor that is highly reminiscent of a cork.

Welcome to the world of “corked wine”, chemically known as TCA, or 2,4,6 - Trichloroanisole, a contamination most commonly emanating from the cork itself, but also less frequently from the barrels, or even the walls or beams of the winery itself.

In larger percentages, causing the knee – or – neck jerk reaction as the wine is smelled, this “corking” renders the wine completely undrinkable, but even in smaller, barely detectable quantities, it diminishes the quality and can turn a superb wine into something you're not sure you even want to leave on the kitchen counter for cooking.

It's bad enough to have to negotiate with the waiter, convincing him that the wine is flawed, as he will then have to negotiate with his manager that the customer is indeed right, but worse yet, if you have brought the bottle from home, a treasured wine held on to for a special occasion, you're stuck, now at the mercy of the wine list, hoping that something of equal style and cost is in the offering.

So what's the answer to preventing this odoriferous occurrence? Corks are treated repeatedly throughout the cutting, drying, and forming process with any number of methods, from boiling water to bleach, ionizing radiation, and sulfur dioxide, and yet problems still persist. Some believe that the bleaching actually can cause the problem in the first place.

The past couple of decades have seen dozens of alternatives to hold that stuff in the bottle, some very novel, some almost impossible to extract. Probably the most effective and logical solution to date is the Stelvin Closure, commonly known more traditionally as the good old screw cap. Anything but glamorous, and standing poised to do some major damage to the corkscrew and Portugese cork industry, it is still guaranteed to provide you with a wine free of that unpleasant surprise.

So why hasn't the wine world embraced this solution whole heartedly? Well, a couple of things hold it back. The first and most obvious is that this method is less than sexy, and has connotations of “cheapness”. As whole regions of the world seem to be converting to screw caps, however, not only here in California, but to the north in Oregon and Washington, as well as the majority of the wine producers in Australia and New Zealand, and even some Burgundian producers, it is becoming a more accepted way to deal with this age old problem.

There has been a lot of discussion of how wines destined for aging fare without the natural benefit of interaction with the outside air which is only possible with the traditional cork, (at least at this time), but one answer to this has been to restrict the usage

of screw caps more often to white wines, rosés, and young reds, meant for early consumption. The fact that statistics tell us that the vast majority of wine purchased the world over is consumed within eight hours is also giving added credence to this non-cork solution.

Nothing will ever replace corks entirely, and Portugal, the country responsible for half the world's cork, although losing some of that revenue, is now gaining recognition for its superb wines. It's doubtful, however, that we'll see many of those wines with screw caps.