

## VIDON Under Glass

My experience opening a bottle of wine the other night motivated me to write this month's newsletter. After successfully extracting half the cork (leaving the other half firmly in place in the bottom of the neck to be retrieved only after a great deal of wrangling), it occurred to me that nearly every disappointment I have ever encountered with wines has been because of cork. Though there is much hand-wringing in the industry about cork taint, in my experience a far greater problem exists: the inability of cork to perform its single function...sealing a bottle of wine from the environment and allowing rapid access to the wine when desired.

When I look back on my most memorable experiences with wine, they are not always great bottles shared with friends, but are peppered with ruined bottles resulting from flawed closures. Ironically, it is usually the most treasured wines that hold the greatest peril. I can't remember the last time I encountered a failed cork on a \$20 bottle of Chardonnay, but I have held my breath with every 20-year-old Bordeaux, Burgundy or even California Cabernet. Will the cork come out in one piece? Did it shrink and brown the wine? It seems mad that something that can cost as much as a car would be capped with a piece of bark that costs less than a dollar.

Why do we continue to use a medieval technology on our thoroughly modern product? In a word...air. Cork has been touted over the centuries for its ability to allow minute quantities of air to pass through and allow the wine to mature and evolve magically. However; the amount of air allowed to pass, the oxygen transfer rate (OTR) in science-speak, is different for every cork. The OTRs can vary more than 20-fold from cork to cork. The real problem with cork is variability. Since it is a living thing, no two corks are alike and this is the real Achilles' Heel of the cork closure. Peter Godden of the Australian Wine Research Institute once said that they had made a single wine and bottled it using 19 different types of closures and what they found was they got 19 different wines. That is, the closure was instrumental in determining the final wine. With cork, that experiment is being repeated with every single bottle. If you were to open a case of aged wine sealed with cork, a blind tasting would almost surely reveal that there were 12 different wines in the tasting. Effectively, we have turned over the final winemaking decision to the cork industry.

So what other options are available? The beverage industry long ago discovered another way to seal a glass bottle using a piece of metal with an inert surface on the side facing the liquid: the bottle cap. I know that purists would be aghast at wine stewards pulling out a church key to open their Chateau Ducru Beaucaillou, but it is a viable option. I recently had a bottle of Greenhill sparkling rosé from Adelaide, South Australia that was sealed with a crown cap (think large beer cap) and I did not miss the pomp and circumstance of popping the cork because I was immediately rewarded with an entrancing wine. The Stelvin, or screw cap closure is the natural progression of the bottle cap applied to the wine industry, but it remains weighed down with the "cheap wine" stigma from its initial usage. This is slowly changing as more and more wineries adopt the screw cap for their finest wines, including almost all the wines coming from Australia and New Zealand, but progress is slow. The low-end perception of screw cap closures is not the only drawback of the system. These wines are effectively hermetically sealed. Thus they have the opposite problem from cork closures. If oxidation is the bane (and salvation) of cork, reduction is the gremlin with screw caps. That is, no air is allowed to pass and the natural evolution of wine is inhibited. There is much work in the industry dedicated to screw caps with different OTRs, but this has yet to work itself out.

We think there is a third way. The ground glass stopper has a long history in laboratories for sealing glass containers. Having spent an entire career in a laboratory, I am fond of proven technologies. Lately, a special glass stopper has been developed for the wine industry. We think that this stopper solves several of the problems with traditional closures. The Vino-Seal™ system looks like a miniature jewel stopper from a decanter. Thus, it offers an elegant and visually appealing closure option. More importantly, it appears to solve the problem of variable OTR that plagues the cork system. The Vino-Seal™ functions similar to a cork in that it relies on outward pressure against the neck of the bottle to hold it in place. The neck of the stopper has a “collar” of inert resin that provides the seal. The OTR for this system falls at the lower end of the cork range. More importantly, the OTR is uniform, returning the final winemaking decision to us. Finally, the Vino-Seal™ can be recycled with the glass bottles (or can give the bottles a second life as a re-sealable liquid container), making them an eco-friendly alternative.

There is always uncertainty in pioneering a technology, so we were gratified to learn that several of our peers have switched to Vino-Seal™ as well, including our neighbors at Sineann and Josh Jensen at Calera whose Pinots I have long admired. Perhaps most satisfying is that Stephen Henscke has bottled his “Hill of Grace” Syrah (one of the rarest and most expensive wines in Australia) with Vino-Seal™ since 2008. In fact he has commented that he feels the 750ml bottles under glass stoppers age similar to their magnums, which he thinks is ideal. We anticipate that Vidon wines will have a similar aging profile under glass and look forward to many years of popping the stopper.

*David Bellows, Assoc. Winemaker*