

# Here's the Capper

## No longer seen as *déclassé*, screwcaps broaden the packaging palette

By Jane Firstenfeld

**I**n the past decade screwcap wine closures have been transformed from dubious experiments to an established option accepted around the world. Vastly preferred by New Zealand producers, who've been topping an estimated 90% of their popular Sauvignon Blanc and other wines under screwcap for years, the closure continues to gain acceptance in other latitudes. "In exporting to Europe, a lot of places really want screwcap," according to Bob Swain, winemaker for Mendocino Wine Co., Ukiah, Calif., which exports about 5% of its 150,000-case production across the Atlantic.

Frederic Catteau, general manager at the American Canyon, Calif., manufacturing headquarters for French-owned Amcor Flexibles, which produces various styles of Stelvin-brand screwcaps, commented, "Other parts of the world are switching at a much higher speed" than wineries in the United States. "The latest example is the Chilean market," which, he said, is changing dramatically, led by Concha y Toro, which recently purchased California's Fetzer Vineyards.

Consumer awareness of screwcaps is driving the continuing, slower paced change stateside, Catteau continued. "A new generation of drinkers and winemakers...believe in quality improvement and consistency with this product," and they feel free to bypass traditional closures, he said.

Gisela Cartwright, who manages U.S. sales of MALA Closure Systems, another top European manufacturer, agreed there is a generational difference in screwcap acceptance. "More and more young people turn to wine as a preferred beverage

and jump into a market in transition. For them, a screwcap does not necessarily diminish the quality of a wine."

Cartwright said that winemakers also are driving the shift. "Traditionalists trust in the decisions of their preferred wineries and go along with the screwcap if 'their' winemaker does. It's a symbiotic process, I think. Decision-makers in the wine production process have recognized the benefits of a screwcap... technically and financially."

Recently, Washington state's 570,000-case Hogue Cellars completed a multi-year study of screwcaps (for details, see "Hogue Puts All Wines Under Screwcap" on page 16). Prior to Hogue's release in late June, Co Dinn, director of winemaking, said, "Until now, acceptable wine-aging standards have been defined by the cork closure. However, results from the study...show that wines aged under the *right* screwcap closure over five years were more well preserved, aged well and were deemed the highest quality choice by an expert tasting panel."

While there are no reliable statistics about the exact percentage of wines sold in the U.S. currently topped with screwcaps, "Glass sales are up about 10% over the last year," for bottles that fit classic 30mm x 60mm Stelvin screwcaps, said Kyle Rossler, vice president of sales and marketing at Encore! Glass, Benicia, Calif. Encore does not manufacture screwcaps but provides them as a service to bottle buyers.

### Winemakers weigh advantages

Alternative packaging has taken on many different shapes in recent years: in the box, out of the box, pouches, kegs, plastic bottles/glasses and more. With most wine still sold in glass bottles, and

closure suppliers continually striving to improve natural and synthetic stoppers, fine wine with a screwcap doesn't seem nearly as radical as it once did. Screw-capped bottles fit easily into traditional shippers, display cases and home wine racks; bottle shapes, colors and sizes remain the same, and labeling retains its usual challenges and satisfactions.

This frees winemakers to pair closures with the appropriate wine variety, style and price point. Many are doing just that: matching and mixing among brands, varietals and markets.

Swain at Mendocino Wine Co. (MWC) takes advantage of the new flexibility. His decisions involve both the prospective lifespan of the wines and life on planet Earth: Under the ownership of environmentalists Paul Dolan and Tim and Tom Thornhill, the winery weighs the green aspects of all winemaking and packaging components.

"No. 1, we're a winery: We make wine. No. 2, we're green," Swain said. "If it comes to a quality decision, it's quality before green. You can go back and forth, either using screwcaps or natural corks."

MWC's popular Parducci Wine Cellars line uses both: Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are sealed with natural cork and finished with poly laminate capsules from Maverick Enterprises. Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Gris are screwcapped with printed and embossed Saranex-lined Stelvin tops from Amcor Flexibles, as is the company's whimsical ZigZag Zin. For Paul Dolan's pricier self-named line, Swain buys screwcaps from Modesto-Calif.-based G3 Enterprises; cork-closed varieties are topped with tin capsules from Napa's Ramondin USA.

Swain pointed out that, with breathable Saranex liners, "Screwcaps keep



**MALA Closure Systems screwcaps are placed by hand on bottles of Castello di Amorosa's sparkling rosé. This step occurs in the seconds between the wine fill on the bottling line and closure attachment by sealing machine.**

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## Highlights

- In terms of using screwcaps to seal wine, U.S. wineries still lag behind their overseas counterparts.
- More vintners are testing screwcaps for their red wines.
- Screwcaps work best when the bottle was designed to use with that closure.

wine fresher," so he uses them for lighter quaffs and also for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir wines in 375ml bottles, which have an inherently shorter shelf life.

Debra Charest handles marketing at The Wine Group in San Francisco for Livermore, Calif.'s venerable 100,000-case Concannon Vineyard. Best known for Petite Sirah and other deep red wines, Concannon released Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Grigio wines a few years ago, Charest said. From the first vintage, the two varietals were bottled entirely under screwcaps; 15,000-20,000 cases are shipped each year.

"We plunged right in," Charest said. "Screwcaps are better at keeping the CO<sub>2</sub> in the wine. In the case of the Sauvignon Blanc, we like to use screwcaps because it keeps the wine fresher, allowing the CO<sub>2</sub> that's naturally found in the wine to dissipate at a slower rate than if we used corks. The Sauvignon Blanc has a slight effervescence, keeping the fresh fruit flavors crisp and refreshing."

Meanwhile, Concannon, founded in 1883, will continue to bottle its other wines using traditional cork and capsule. "Cork works very well on the rest, allowing the correct amount of oxygen to get to the wines as they age," Charest said.

Founded in 2000, Napa-based Don Sebastiani & Sons has quickly grown to 1.3 million-case annual production of popular brands including Pepperwood Grove, Smoking Loon, Aquinas, Screw Kappa Napa and Used Automobile Parts, among others. The company has promoted itself as a packaging innovator: Its newest brand, Project Paso, launched in January and has already expanded from its original 50,000-case goal to a projected 100,000 cases this year. All Project Paso wines, sourced in the Central Coast's Paso Robles AVA, are sealed with Zork closures.

Recently acquired by bag-in-box behemoth Scholle, Zork is a one-piece, re-

sealable, “zip-off” closure. “It’s cost-effective, easy to apply, a complete package in itself,” said Don & Sons winemaker Greg Kitchens. “It’s a cool concept, a cool design. The package really pops. We shipped some to Canada and will be trying out the European market.”

For that reason it was somewhat surprising this spring to note that the widely available Smoking Loon Sauvignon Blanc is bottled with cork and capsule. (Formerly sealed with synthetic cork, since the 2009 vintage Smoking Loon has been using “with great success” an agglomerated natural cork stopper from Amorim, topped with “almost tin” polyam capsules from Maverick.)

Why is such a seemingly conservative package being used for a popular-priced (about \$7/bottle) line from a consciously edgy producer? “We discussed it,” Kitchens recalled. “The owners wanted to keep things streamlined, keep the packaging consistent and the packages (for all varieties) matching on the shelf.” Smoking Loon sells some 800,000-900,000 cases per year. Of these, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Gris, the most prevalent varieties to carry screwcaps, account for about 30,000 cases each.

**All Project Paso wines are sealed with Zork closures.**



Another reason to eschew screwcaps for this mass-market brand: bottle color. Smoking Loon uses “sea green” glass, which is less available for screwcap than the ubiquitous flint bottles—and more expensive.

#### Counterintuitive image issues

Don & Sons maintains its innovative image with other brands. Its Screw Kappa Napa—Napa Valley-sourced and retailing for around \$16 per bottle—is bottled entirely with screwcaps, as is Il Donato Pinot Grigio, imported from Italy and bottled in California. The higher priced brand in screwcaps? Say, what?

“More educated wine drinkers understand the concept of the screwcap,” Kitchens suggested. “The less sophisticated look at the screwcap as cheap.”

Don & Sons will back up that concept this year, when it releases a new line of Sonoma brands, Sivas (an old Sebastiani family name.) Sivas production will total

about 10,000 cases, including 2,200 cases of Sauvignon Blanc. That varietal wine, bottled in late May, will retail at about \$16, Kitchens said, and again, this higher end wine will be in a screwcapped package.

Kitchens said that it’s a practical approach to the kind of wine he wants to make. “I want my wines clean. We treat the wines with just a little copper to keep it that way, keep the reductive nature out of the bottle. We’re California, not New Zealand, and we want to keep it a California Sauvignon Blanc. We want the right package at the right price point.”

Swain at MWC agreed with this seemingly topsy-turvy assessment of wine packaging in the market. “At the lower price point, there starts to be a question” about wine quality with screwcaps. By now, acceptance at higher

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price points, he contended, “is kind of a non-conversation.”

Tim Keller, CEO of VinPerfect, a new Napa company that this fall will launch a screwcap liner with an oxygen transmission rate (OTR) similar to that of an “average” natural bark cork, is a viticulture/enology graduate of the University of California, Davis, who since 1998 has made wine in Napa and Sonoma. A long-time fan of screwcaps still trying for the “perfect closure,” Keller said, “We have done a lot of market research, and for the most part, the consumer really doesn’t

care about the closure. Once they learn that the screwcap is there because of wine quality issues—and because corks are actually quite unreliable—they develop a preference for capped wines.”

MALA’s Cartwright commented about continued options available to winemakers who go screwcap. “We have a great opportunity to beautify a technically well-accepted piece of packaging, so it can represent the beauty/value/quality of the content. Along with the label, it can make a bottle of wine a piece of art. That might do its service when it comes to

pulling customers toward a bottle with a screwcap—persuade them to take the first step, then let the wine do its magic and speak for itself.”

#### Must it always be white?

Fresh white and rosé wines designed for early consumption are the most obvious ambassadors for screwcaps. However, as Screw Kappa Napa and others have proved, bigger, age-worthy reds can also handle the treatment.

“White wines are a no-brainer for most wineries, as the wine is quickly consumed,” and oxygen transmission is not an issue, according to Catteau at Amcor. “Freshness of aromatics go very well with Stelvin. Most of our customers began with white and rosé, to go later to Pinot Noir or even bigger reds.” Catteau noted that Oregon and Washington producers have been more open to the option than those in California.

Cartwright seconded the potential: “I do know many high-end wine producers who are using screwcaps on other varietals. Some winemakers tell me they want the wines to remain in taste and in freshness just as they made them.”


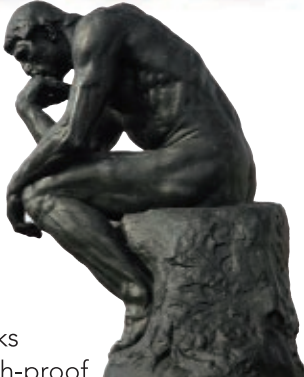
Light wines without barrel age or *sur-lie* fermentation need very little oxygen, said VinPerfect’s Keller. “We think that once screwcaps start working for reds... then you will see the same changeover happen for all varietals. The early adopters will give ‘permission’ in the market for the rest of the industry to follow suit.”

#### Lining up and applying options

Stability of taste is largely a function of the screwcap’s liner. In New Zealand, Swain said, producers who prefer the island nation’s characteristically more reductive style tend to use tin liners. On North America’s West Coast, the preference seems to be for Saranex, which allows some oxygen to permeate the bottle.

Other options and combinations are available, depending on style and price requirements. Mike Williams, sales director for Benicia, Calif.-based Cork Supply USA, specified: “We offer Saranex and Saran/tin. In addition, we have three levels of Tri-Ox liners, which are all approved for wine use and offer various oxygen transfer rates (OTR) that fall between the Saranex and Saran/tin levels.”



“I have always been a fan of screwcaps,” said winemaker/inventor Keller. “Despite their current drawbacks, they are the highest quality way to seal a wine bottle, but I hate to have to choose

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Crosby & Baker Ltd.	crosby-baker.com	●		●		Pfefferkorn & Co. GmbH	pepco.de	●	●	●	●
Custom Molders Group	packagingwow.com				●	Phoenix Packaging International Corp.	phoenixpackaging.com	●	●	●	●



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between the lesser of two evils.” Thus, the birth of VinPerfect, an oxygen-control liner that he hopes will be quickly adopted by the companies that produce the actual aluminum screwcaps.

“Customers will order caps from their current supplier and just ask them for a VinPerfect liner,” he said hopefully. Although unwilling to name wineries that are testing the product, Keller stated, “I can say this: We have yet to talk to a single winemaker who was not interested.”

Winemakers opting for screwcaps face other challenges: Bottles become an issue because, as Swain noted, “Quality control becomes more difficult than corking.” Applicator torque is vital, and the quality of glass in the bottle neck is more critical, he said. When bottling in screwcaps, “We are checking every capper head for torque every hour.”

With oxygen such an important variable, “Headspace oxygen is probably the last remaining part of the process that really needs focus,” Keller said.

“If you take a bottle designed for cork and then just put a thread on it, you can fill that bottle to 750ml and have well over an inch of headspace over the wine. That is a problem. Screwcap bottles should have their own molds that deliver the right volume without so much headspace.

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Scott Laboratories Ltd. (Canada)	scottlabsltd.com	●	●	●	●
MA Silva Corks USA	masilva.com	●			
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AO Wilson Ltd.	aowilson.ca	●	●	●	●
Rich Xiberta USA Inc.	xiberta.com	●	●	●	
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"If you do have a large headspace, it might contain more oxygen than you want that wine to consume in a year, so it needs to be purged effectively. I think nitrogen drip-dosing systems have a lot of potential, but they are not yet in widespread use from what I have seen," Keller said.

Many mobile bottlers are now equipped and versed in screwcap application, especially for Stelvin. "More glass suppliers are bringing good bottles following the right specification," Catteau noted. "We offer the service of testing a few bottles before the run. Testing is mandatory if the bottle or supplier is unknown on the market. In other words, we will not sell a Stelvin for a wrong bottle."

Just as wine consumers enjoy their endless array of choices on the shelves, winemakers may now take advantage of diverse but practical packaging options.

"We are in time of transition, and there is enough space and there are enough consumers for both cork and screwcap," Cartwright said. "I think neither cork nor screwcap lovers have to stress out about their preferred choice of closure."

"You're pairing a closure to the wine," Kitchens said.

Keller concluded, "In the wine business, the quality argument will always win." <sup>W&V</sup>



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