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Cork 'pop' still holds most romantic sway for North Bay winemakers

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Why Cork?

Cork enthusiasts insist corks are the best way to age wines because these stoppers “breathe.”

Peter Weber, executive director of the Cork Quality Council, said this metaphor is more apt: “corks exhale but never inhale.”

Weber explained that when a cork is inserted into a bottle, it's squeezed from 24 millimeters down to 18 millimeters. This compresses the air in the millions of tiny cells in the cork, releasing a slow and steady flow of oxygen from cell to cell. This gradual process takes months, with the air eventually reaching the wine. Once it does the tiny amounts of air help flavor compounds to develop and protect against sulfur-like aromas.

Would the romantically inclined take their date to a three-star Michelin restaurant, order the Coq au Vin and then ask the sommelier to bring a special bottling, with a screw cap?

It's possible, if you're wooing an accountant or dating a oenophile, since a variety of closures now grace the bottles of many an award-winning sip. But for true romance, many will tell you that the chivalry of the cork can never be underestimated.

Billions of closures go onto wine bottles each year – cork, plastic, glass, etc. – but a small-but-mighty contingent are bucking the trend and holding the line for natural cork, as a matter of tradition, pride and yes, even romance.

Vintners Ken and Akiko Freeman are consummate cork lovers who are well aware of the voyage that a real cork makes to get to their Northern California winery, and the testing protocol involved in choosing these stoppers for their coastal chardonnays and pinot noirs.

The Freemans have a boutique winery in Sebastopol on a 20-acre spread with an upscale barn, a spacious cave and an enclave of vines.

On this particular day they're hosting a chapter of the Chevaliers du Tastevin, an exclusive fraternity of Burgundy lovers. This is a white-tablecloth affair – pop-up extravagance – amid rows of sleepy barrels aging in their chilly cave. In these pre-feast moments guests are tasting barrel samples while Ken explains why his winery will always opt for natural corks, cut from the bark of cork trees.

"If you have a screw cap wine it's extremely difficult to have your wines served at top restaurants," he says. "The pulling of the cork is part of the fine-dining experience."

While there are those who would disagree, Ken says he's speaking from his experience in working with high-end restaurants. His bottlings are on many wine lists, including the French Laundry in Yountville, Single Thread in Healdsburg and Boulevard in San Francisco, among others.

Ken acknowledges corks have a serious downside and it can make even the most expensive wine off-putting. When a wine is deemed "corked," it means it smells and tastes like wet cardboard, contaminated by a chemical compound called TCA (2,4,6 – trichloroanisole).

To prevent corked wines, Ken says the winery pays a high price for testing and beyond that, Akiko smells every cork before it's inserted into their bottles. The romance of corks, he says, is worth the fuss.

Weighing in on the amour of corks is Norm Bouton, who drove up from San Francisco with his wife Nan for the cave gathering.

"It's definitely romantic when you hear that little pop, especially if it's really a special bottle of wine," he says.

Norm knows a thing or two about extraordinary wine, cellaring 2,800 bottles.

While wine lovers like Norm are quick to talk about the romance of corks, many are unaware of the odyssey a typical one makes.

The lion's share of these closures hail from Portugal's cork forests, according to Peter Weber, executive director of the Cork Quality Council. Dating back more than 150 years, the cork industry in Portugal is based on using the thick bark of this indigenous tree which is harvested every nine years to keep it sustainable, Weber said.

Once the corks are produced into approximately 2 inch stoppers, Weber said, roughly a billion are shipped to the Port of Oakland every year for U.S. businesses.

Most cork companies in the U.S. are based in the San Francisco Bay Area, so Weber said it's more than likely you've passed these stoppers in transit. You see, every week there's an average of 20 truckloads of wine corks leaving Oakland for one of these cork companies in the North Bay. The two largest in Sonoma County are Petaluma's Scott Laboratories and Santa Rosa's MA Silva Corks.

Once the corks are tested at any one of these companies, they're sold to wineries before reaching their final destination – your bottle.

With Valentine's Day in the offing, chances are the chivalry of the cork will play a role in your revelry.

That is, of course, unless you're an accountant.

Nan, an unabashed romantic, perhaps puts it best:

"If you're having an elegant dinner with candlelight, there's something so beautiful about having a bottle of wine that has a cork in it. It's lovely. It's almost part of the ceremony."

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