TECHNOLOGY IN OUR LIVES

Plastic Corks: Popping Up All Over The Place

(NAPS)—You've been saving a premier bottle of wine for just the right occasion, but when you finally open it, you find that it's been "corked." That's oenophile terminology, meaning that the wine went bad because of a bad cork in the bottle.

Cork is a natural product derived from the bark of certain oak trees native to the Mediterranean. It takes nearly 30 years for a tree to produce a suitable layer of bark that can be harvested for wine corks, and it takes nine more years to develop another layer after that.

Various industry organizations estimate that between two and five percent of bottles are affected by cork taint each year. Natural corks are rinsed with chlorine to kill mold and lighten the color. If the cork isn't rinsed well enough, the natural mold could interact to form 2,4,6-trichloroanisole, or TCA, resulting in a wine with a musty, rotten smell and taste.

Many wineries are turning to plastic corks made from a thermoplastic elastomer, first used in medical applications and later tested and allowed for use in wine bottles by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Plastic corks look, feel and perform just like their wood counterparts—they can be removed with a corkscrew, complete with the satisfactory "pop" one hears when the cork is extracted; they will not crumble or break when removed; and they can go right back in the bottle with ease. Plastic corks don't change the taste of the wine either, since they don't break down in contact with the wine's acidity or alcohol.

The idea for plastic corks is not new. Companies have been experimenting with synthetic corks for years. Wineries have been involved in product design and development—one plastic cork manufacturer is financed by five leading California wineries.

Put a cork in it! Especially if it's a plastic cork, which helps keep wine fresher longer.

While plastic corks currently hold only five percent of the market, they could become the standard for wine drunk within a week of purchasing, which accounts for a majority of the market. Plastic corks are widely used in Europe, Australia, South America and South Africa, and use in the United States is growing.

Consumers can also expect to see more plastic corks appearing in bottles due to a decline in natural cork availability, resulting in an increase in price. Vintners who use plastic corks like them because they are sterile, dust free, consistent in terms of specification, easy to introduce into bottles with a standard vacuum corker and usually form a perfect seal.

Plastic corks may also provide a bit of fun. They can sport bright colors and witty logos, and wineries have been quick to use plastic corks as a means of additional advertisement. Meanwhile, traditionalists can take comfort in the fact that some synthetic corks look almost identical to the real thing. Public acceptance of plastic corks is growing, too, since they are easy to open and store.

So the next time you open your favorite vintage and find a plastic cork, thank the vintner for taking steps to help ensure you'll always have a perfect bottle of wine.