

On Real Corks in Wine

It used to be tacky to drink wine sealed with a screw cap. Now we can all now happily quaff our New World bargains free of both a corkscrew and fear of *faux pas*. How convenient it all is. But at what price? Certainly more than that two for £15 offer at Oddbins. Choosing wines closed with screw caps can literally cost the earth. Cork, on the other hand, is natural, biodegradable and sustainably harvested and cork oak forests suck up a lot of that nasty CO₂ we modern folks can't help but produce. Can we say the same for aluminium screw caps?

Aluminium is produced at plants such as the one at Ajka in Hungary which in October, 2010 spilled toxic red sludge over 15 square miles, flooding nearby villages, killing 9 people and landing 122 in hospital. Admittedly, alumina plants are not always this polluting, but thus far no cork trees have created anything more destructive than the pure, clean air we breathe. In fact, the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) estimates that the 108,000 hectares of Portugal's cork oak forests – the largest in the world – absorb about 10 million tonnes of carbon dioxide every year. It also adds that each cork tree sustains over 100 species of wildlife, including the critically endangered Iberian Lynx.

In 2002 I was the PR coordinator for a tiny non-profit organisation in Portugal dedicated to saving the Iberian Lynx and although I went into it with the thought of keeping this big cat from the brink, I came out of it in awe of the incredible ecological credentials of the cork oak. The charity estimated there were fewer than 100 Iberian Lynx left in the wild. The decline of this stunning animal is due to fragmentation of its habitat; the cork oak forests of Spain and Portugal. This habitat has been managed by Man for

centuries and it has paid him handsomely for it. Skilled workers strip the bark of the cork oak every nine years and the tree is left unharmed to regenerate its bark to be harvested again and again, for up to 200 years. This bark makes corks for wine by the billion.

Cork prices are now at about half what they were ten years ago and farmers are being forced to abandon cork in favour of more profitable crops such as eucalyptus for the paper industry. According to an August 2010 article in *The Observer* 40 percent of wine sold at Tesco's is sealed with a screw cap. Compare this to 5 percent of all wines before 2000 and the rot is apparent. The wine industry says it is protecting wine from 'cork taint' caused by 2,4,6 – Trichloroanisole (TCA) a harmless fungus that gives the wine a musty, unpleasant flavour. Screw caps are cheaper than cork. I suspect the TCA issue is being overstated by wine producers that want to increase profit. Amorim, the world's largest producer of real corks for wine treats its cork against TCA and its figures show that incidence is now less than 1 percent.

I can live with 1 percent of my wine being 'corked' can't you? I could even live with maybe seven out of 100 bottles – the most pessimistic figure - if it means I can rest easy that my evening glass of *vino* is not costing the earth after all. The wine industry is only what the consumer makes it and if we stop buying wines with screw caps or artificial corks and demand real cork in our bottles, that's what we're going to get.

[ENDS: 598 words]