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VINO

When is a cork not a cork?

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Jerry GREENFIELD

vino@floridaweekly.com



The days of the venerable wine cork may be numbered. A few weeks ago, I opened a bottle of very fine (expensive) white Burgundy and was caught by surprise. Trusty corkscrew in hand, I peeled off the foil and was confronted not by a cork or plastic stopper, but by some kind of high-tech multi-level thing I'd never seen before. Obviously, I had to know more.

Ever since people discovered how to make wine, they've had the problem of keeping it from dribbling out of the container. Before bottles, wine was stored in earthen jars or jugs and sealed with tar or resin. The effect it had on the taste of the wine is unknown, but back then they used to mix wine with seawater, so chances are it didn't much matter.

Then came the glass bottle, and some genius figured out that the bark of a certain kind of oak tree would be a good closure. They've been using cork for centuries, for several good reasons. First, it's compressible, so it expands in the bottle's neck making a tight seal. Second, it's just a little bit permeable, allowing tiny amounts of air to get in and develop the wine. Third, it's pretty much all they had.

Problem is, as we've noted before, corks can break down and leak. They're also subject to a fungus called TCA that spoils the wine it touches. Winemakers have been using twist-off caps for lower-priced wines for a very long time, and they've recently been adopted by makers of very fine, highly-rated wines. Fortunately, consumers in general are starting to get over the previous association of twist tops with low quality jug wine. Trust me, it's not that way anymore.

The new space-age stopper I encountered is called an ArdeaSeal, and it's made by an Italian company. The main thing I wanted to know was whether the seal was permeable – that is, would it allow those tiny amounts of air into the bottle to help mature the wine. That's pretty much the main idea behind corks, and why we lay down certain wines for long periods in dark moldy cellars.

The company's brochure promises that the stopper will not chemically interact with the wine and has "the right oxygen permeability so to store the bottle as long as required with no alterations." They might need a little help with their grammar, but I got the idea. Well, we shall see. I have two cases of this ArdeaSeal-stoppered white

Burgundy and will be enjoying it over the next few years, so I'll let you know how it holds up.

Meanwhile, I'm keeping tabs on the wine world's eternal battle to find new ways to keep the juice in the bottle until we're ready for it.

As always, here are this week's discoveries and delights. **French Bar Gold Dust**

