



Can You Charge Corkage On Screw Top Wines?

BY ALAN ACHATZ

While the question of quality with screw top wines will be debated for quite a while and if corks are ever eliminated, I will truly miss my favorite sound that occurs when the cork is removed. My self-education has shown that there are some great wines with screw tops! And there are even some screw tops wines priced in excess of \$150!

Natural Corks: Glass bottles stuffed with corks have been the preferred method to package wine since the 1600s with very few changes occurring over the past few centuries. Cork is produced in predominately in Portugal, Spain and North Africa by harvesting the bark off cork oak trees. Cork (a renewable resource) can be stripped off a tree in large sheets every nine to 12 years. The cork bark is then rated by quality, dried and chemically cleaned.

The major drawbacks to using natural corks are:

- Corks can dry out if not properly stored.
- Cork taint – it's thought that cork taint comes from either the chemicals used in the manufacturing process or possibly even bacteria still present in the bark, causing spoilage. Cork taint can make the wine smell musty or like wet newspaper.

I HATE TO ADMIT THAT I'VE BEEN ACCUSED OF BEING A WINE SNOB. AND FURTHER HAVE TO ADMIT THAT I WAS VERY RUDE A FEW SUMMERS AGO. SURE, I HAVE BEEN RUDE BEFORE, YET (HOPEFULLY) NOT AT THIS LEVEL! I REALLY DIDN'T MEAN IT TO HAPPENED. HERE'S THE STORY:

The soiree at my house was almost at full swing and I was a little behind getting all the food out. I was in the kitchen, French knife in hand, finishing up the fruit platter when I walked my favorite neighbor, who also happens to be a wine salesman.

Salutations were exchanged; another wine bottle deposited on the counter and then ... I noticed that... this "so-called" friend of mine... had brought ... a screw top bottle of wine!

There are just some things in life that are wrong. Stretching my mind on a party day is one of those things. Back then I thought a bottle of wine with a screw top...that was the stuff that the kids drank in the '70s before football games and dances; not some thing you take to an upscale barbecue.

Well, I lost it. I told my neighbor to walk back across the street and bring a real bottle of wine! Hell, with his vocation as a wine rep, I know his wine rack is full and there are plenty of good wines with corks to be enjoyed. (Incidentally, he returned with a bottle of wine.)

Later that evening, his wife shared that he was greatly offended. I did apologize and a few days later he shared various materials on screw top wines. Since that time I've done considerable reading and sampled many of the screw top offerings and share the following.

- Estimates on tainted corks range from two to 12 percent. The eight percent estimate means that one bottle out of every case is bad.
- The life span of a cork in a bottle is 30 years (only a concern for a few wine collectors).

Synthetic Corks: Synthetic corks evolved when a manufacturer touring wineries noted that the bungs (stoppers) being used in the large aging barrels were synthetic rather than the traditional wooden bungs. He thought if these plastic stoppers could work in wine barrels that they might work in bottles.

Benefits and drawbacks:

- One still gets that special sound when the cork is pulled
- The wine can be stored and / or transported upright, making handling and shipping easier.
- The synthetic cork virtually seals out all air and conceptually prevents oxidation.
- This type of cork is more difficult to remove from the bottle and sometimes even from the corkscrew.

- Airport security will no longer have to confiscate any more of my corkscrews

The Thoughts Of Others: In the course of researching and writing this article, I had the opportunity to discuss screw tops with a few Napa Valley wine makers who had some interesting opinions on the entire situation. Pax Mahle of Pax Wine Cellars stated that natural corks should be continued to be used for quality wines; synthetic corks can be used for high volume production wines and if a wine maker wants to go to the extraordinary expense of refitting his production line to use screw tops, let 'em!

When he mentioned the production levels at some of the large wineries, I realized that some wineries might produce six million bottles of wine that is usually consumed within 15 days of purchase. That's a lot of corks being used!

SO CAN YOU CHARGE CORKAGE ON SCREW TOP WINES?

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So can you charge corkage on screw top wines? I've asked this question and the answer? A resounding YES! Corkage is a charge that allows a bottle of wine to be brought into an establishment; the fee underwrites the loss of a sale and the related service costs including washing the glasses. And now, we can even invent a new word for our customer's screw top corkage charge for their wine and call it "screwage!"

Screw Top Wines: Is it the wave of the future? Will wineries invest the major funds necessary to change over their bottling lines to cap screw top wine? (The raw cost for the bottles is the same whether they have the screw threads or are made in the traditional way to accept a cork.)

Will consumers buy screw top wines? Will we now smell the cap? Will we continue to accept 'corked' wines from wine makers? Will the various wine snobs agree there are some exceptional screw top covered wines already available? Can you visualize the sommelier in his tuxedo twisting off the cap and pronouncing this an excellent bottle of wine?

Benefits and drawbacks

- Life be easier for those who are cork screw challenged
- Wines will be able to be 'resealed.'

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And now, we can even invent a new word for our customer's screw top corkage charge for their wine and call it "screwage!" (And if this new word comes to our language, it will have to be attributed to Pamela Mahle.) BR

Alan E. Achatz, CCM, CHE is a former club manager who now assists clubs and CMAA chapters with OSHA education programs and OSHA policy development. Additionally, he is an instructor of the NRA Education Foundation ServSafe® Essentials course. When not working, he readily admits to enjoying a glass or two of wine. Alan may be reached at 716-565-9122 or at www.akaachatz.com