



PUT A CORK IN IT: Screw caps are winning the argument in the world of wine.

Clearing the air

The myth of the cork has been busted, writes Carolyn Swanson.

The Portuguese got a drubbing at this month's 2008 Len Evans Tutorial, held in the Hunter Valley.

Their sin? The state of their leaking corks, which spoiled thousands of dollars worth of expensive wines painstakingly collected from some of the world's best vineyards for the tutorial, and which spoil millions of dollars worth of European wines sold around the world every year.

Importer Gary Steel apologised at the end of the white burgundy bracket of his burgundy master class, because half the white burgundies were "corked", as the industry describes wines that have been spoiled by oxidation or tainted by the compound trichloroanisole (TCA) introduced by the cork.

"I am absolutely devastated by this," Steel said.

"But so many vineyards in France are too small to afford the machinery to use screw tops and they don't want to send their wine off to other vineyards for bottling."

For the entire week of the tutorial, "the Portuguese factor" was blamed for oxidising bottle after bottle of fine wine.

The sommeliers gathered for the tutorial discussed the difficulty of what to do when a client orders a bottle of wine worth \$1000 or more and complains it has oxidised or corked. How many times can a restaurant afford to open another one of these bottles?

"I sold a 1986 Chateau d'Yquem Sauterne for just under \$2000 this week. It was clear the bottle was corked," sommelier at Sydney's Catalina restaurant, Simon Curkovic, said.

"Because I know the source, I can get my money back. But you have to be aware of the Trade Practices

Act. Every case is different.

"I think the cork is the most ridiculous thing to enclose wine with. It is ridiculous to use bark off a tree to enclose such a valuable commodity. It is pure ignorance on the part of the French."

As James Halliday pointed out in his *Top 100 Wines*: "In bygone days, judges in wine shows would automatically call for another bottle if the first or even the second was oxidised. These days, most judges take the view that wine should get only one chance."

At last year's International Wine Challenge, the world's biggest competition, the panel of expert tasters found that nearly one in 20, or 4.9 per cent, of the 11,033 corks pulled from bottles had spoiled or flattened the flavour of the wine they were supposed to protect.

Following this discovery, the competition organiser, *Wine International*, conducted the world's first comparative tasting of wines sealed with natural corks, synthetic corks, screw caps and crown caps similar to the ones used for beer.

The result surprised everyone. Screw caps were judged better wines in 21 out of 40 cases; corks only won once.

The myth of cork's superiority over the crass "nouveau" screw top was well and truly busted.

You can find the full myth-busting story on the Brokenwood winery website at www.brokenwood.com.au. Some of the strongest preferences were for older wines with screw caps. As Robert Joseph points out in his report in the October issue of *Wine International*, the explanation for the success of the alternative closures lies both in the fact that, unlike natural cork, they in no way flavour the wine, and that they far more efficiently protect it from the air.

The widely held belief that wines need to "breathe" through the cork was dismissed by leading Bordeaux authority Professor Pascal Ribereau-Gayon in 2000.

"Reactions that take place in bottled wine do not require oxygen," he wrote in the *Handbook of Oenology*.

