



Reserve Club

Closures - more than just a popping cork

Ten years ago I conducted an informal, email poll of how many consumers preferred cork to other closures such as screw caps or synthetic stoppers. The results at that time were overwhelmingly in favor of cork, with some very strong opinions about the alternatives. The reason at that time for the study was I was in the process of bottling some private label wines and we were trying to decide what closure to use. I had just read a report that wine faults, due to poor quality corks, were estimated at almost 5% of all bottles and I wanted to know what customers thought. As it turned out, while our customers were strongly in favor of traditional cork closures, the industry was already moving toward alternatives and we could not even buy bottles designed for screw caps due to high demand. Now alternative closures make up almost 40% of the market, up from only 20% a decade ago.

Since that time the options for closures has grown beyond the synthetic corks and screw caps. There are all sorts of options for materials and even a few that attempt to replicate the experience of popping a cork. One of the most interesting is the vino seal, which is used to close one of the selections this month. Since a lot of customers wonder why cork has fallen out of favor with so many winemakers I thought I would address the issue this quarter.

Since the mid-1600's cork has been the preferred closure for wine bottles. Cork has a number of advantages that allowed it the competitive edge for almost four hundred years. At the time it was one of the few malleable materials man had, it allows for a

small amount of oxygen transmission into the wine and it's modern advantage is that it is a renewable resource. But since it made up of millions of hollow cells it also can harbor bacteria and can be very hard to sterilize. The cork industry did not address this issue as late as 1995 and this caused many corks to be used even though they were infected with bacteria that caused the formation of trichloroanisole 2-4-6. TCA imparts the smell of wet cardboard or wet dog in the wine, a decidedly bad consequence. When the Wine Spectator reported in 2002 that over 7% of their

samples were infected with TCA, this gave the industry a wake up call. At that time only 5% of all super premium wines (\$9 a bottle and up) were closed with screw caps. In 2008 that number grew to 46%. But many consumers still lament the lack of satisfaction in screw caps so many producers are experimenting with new technical closures. These closures include Zorks from Australia and Vino Seals from Alcoa.

The Vino Seal was developed in Europe (under the name Vin Lock) and was purchased by Alcoa in 2000. It is made up of a glass stopper and an inert, silicon ring that does not come in contact with the wine. This lack of contact is important because a number of winemakers feel that synthetic closures "scalp" aroma from the wine. It has a number of other advantages, including low oxygen transmission, complete sterility and the feel of pulling a cork. I like

it because it is fantastic for resealing a bottle if you don't finish all the wine. The two biggest disadvantages are they are expensive, at seventy cents a piece (compared with pennies for most synthetic corks and twist offs) and most have to be hand inserted due to a lack of installation equipment. This brings up another issue of how much oxygen is introduced into the wine at bottling but that is a topic for another newsletter.

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2005 Whitehall Lane Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

\$59 per bottle

Winery Owner: Tom Leonardini

First vintage: 1979

Location: Napa, California

Production of this wine: 3050 cases

The Whitehall Lane winery holds a special place in my heart because their former winemaker, Ray Courson, was the first "Napa" guy I met, way back in 1989. At that time Whitehall Lane was a small operation, owned by a Japanese investor, and Ray functioned as their winemaker, director of national sales and I think he also cleaned the toilets. Ray left in 1993 and launched his own winery, Elyse, when Tom Leonardini purchased the property. As much as I like him, the wines have improved dramatically since that time.

The Whitehall Lane Winery was founded in 1979 by two brothers, whose name has been lost to history. They called the winery Whitehall Lane, a historic name for the property and the road directly to the south. Originally only 25 acres, the property produced competent but lackluster wines until the Leonardini family upgraded the winery starting in 1994. They also have purchased a lot of additional vineyard sites, now 110 acres total, including significant holdings in Rutherford, Oak Knoll and St. Helena. For this wine most of the fruit came from the Leonardini Vineyard, attached to the winery, and neighboring Morisoli Vineyard. They also used a small amount of fruit from the Fawn Park Vineyard on the eastern side of the valley, to help add structure in this slightly low acid vintage.

2005 was an easy growing season, from bud break all the way through harvest. The spring was cool and wet, providing plenty of water in the soil for the summer growing period. After flowering the weather stayed cool, but not cold, with plenty of sun. The growing season stretched out ten to

fifteen days longer than normal, but not as a detriment to the grapes. The real surprise came at harvest, when most wineries reported that the crop yield was twenty to twenty-five percent larger than expected. Most winemakers count their clusters at veraison (the half way point in the growing season, when the grapes turn from green to black) and calculate the yield of fruit at that time to order barrels and other supplies. Nature threw Napa winemakers a curve in 2005 with almost every winery telling me they

harvested significantly more fruit than expected. While you may think that the fruit would have been dilute, winemakers told me that the potential alcohol, acidity and tannins were all in perfect balance. For the Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon the Leonardini's prefer to make a wine that is 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, using the character of different vineyards for developing complexity. This wine was aged in a combination of French and American oak barrels for 25 months before bottling in the Vino-Seal discussed on the front page.

When you pull the stopper you will see a wine with deep color that stains the tears as it runs down the glass. The nose is an

inviting combination of black cherry pie filling, vanilla, coconut macaroon, bourbon, pipe tobacco, star anise and milk chocolate. In the mouth this wine is seamless and smooth, with a deep sense of fruit that runs from the front to the back in one, almost complete wave of flavor. There are some well integrated tannins that appear deep in the mouth but they are so hidden behind fruit that they are hardly dry at all. Serve this wine over the next three to five years.



2003 St. Helena Road Winery Cabernet Sauvignon "Roy J. Maier" \$45 per bottle

Winery Owner: Richard and Patty Maier

First vintage of this wine: 2003

Location: Spring Mountain, Sonoma, California

Production of this wine: 500 cases

I purchased and sold this wine a couple of years ago, at that time as one of my "put this in the cellar" picks. Recently I had the chance to re-taste the wine and I was impressed with how balanced and ready to drink it is now. Fortunately I was able to buy quite a few cases and make it a Reserve Club selection.

Although hard to find on the label, the property name for this producer is the St. Helena Road Winery. The property sits at 1800 feet above sea level on the Sonoma side of Spring Mountain. If you ever travel to visit Pride Mountain, Switchback or Behrens and Hitchcock, this is the next winery traveling down the other side of the mountain. The Maier's planted the vineyard in 2000, all to Bordeaux varieties and their first harvest was for this wine, in 2003.

The Maier's dedicated this wine to Richard's grandfather, Roy, who was a member of the Paul Whiteman Orchestra in the 1920's. (Their vocalist was a young man named Bing Crosby.) When the depression came Roy concentrated on instrumental reed making as a way to pay the bills, developing equipment for mass producing the pieces. For fifty years the Maier name would be synonymous with high quality musical instruments until his death in 1981. By that time

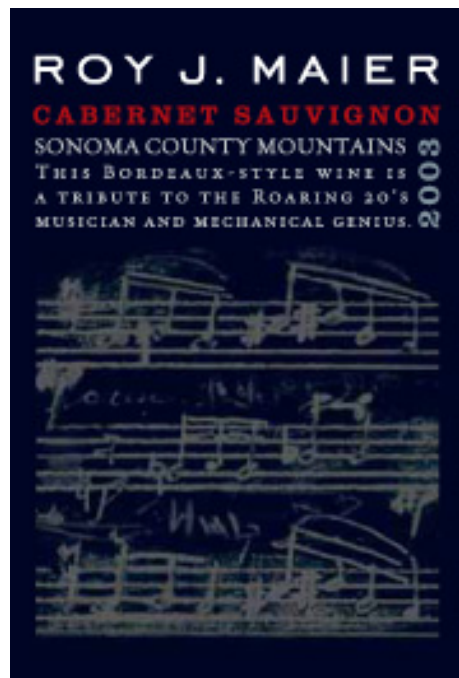
the family had diversified from growing the reeds all the way through controlling their packaging and distribution. In 1996 the family decided to sell the business and Richard and his wife Patty started looking for the next chapter of their life.

Always fans of wine, they found a perfect place to plant their own vineyard and they also have a guest house that is available to rent for those interested in getting a taste of wine country.

For this wine the blend is 80% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot, 5% Malbec, 4% Cabernet Franc, and 1% Petite Verdot. The wine was aged in French oak barrels for twenty months, of which 70% were new.

I think this is a very good opportunity to taste the difference between a mountain fruit wine and one from the valley floor, such as Whitehall Lane. You will see the color of this wine is a darker shade of ruby and the tears are not quite

as thick as they roll down the glass. The nose offers up a spicy quality with a big sense of blackberry, currant, sage, vanilla, worcestershire sauce and peppercorns. In the mouth this wine shows a density that is the core of mountain grown fruit, with lots of fruit framed by slightly higher acidity than the Whitehall Lane and also more obvious tannins. As I wrote in the opening, this wine has really come around but you still see a sense of structure that valley floor wines rarely display. You can age this wine for another three to five years and drink with a serious piece of meat, like a standing rib roast or smoked tenderloin of beef.



2005 Pininfarina Rosso \$65 per bottle

Winery Owner: Aaron Heck and Paolo Pininfarina

Founded: 2005

Location: Napa Valley

Winemaker: Mia Klein

Production of this wine: 1125 cases

I have to admit I am not really into cars, which is apparent to all of you who are, because I absolutely butcher the pronunciation of this name. In fact, I had no idea who this was when I tasted the wine, my only comment being, "cool bottle." For those of you also ignorant of Italian sports car designers, Paolo Pininfarina is the chairman of a family business that has contributed to the production of Ferrari, Alfa Romeo, Maserati and Lancia since the 1930's. He met his partner Aaron Heck, who's father owns several Northern California wineries (including Kenwood and Korbel) and they decided to forge a partnership to produce world class wines.

Their goal is to produce an ultra premium wine from many regions around the world, using the Heck resources and the Pininfarina

reputation. (At this point I should also tell you this wine sells for \$120 a bottle on the winery website, so I am not sure the where they are in this business plan.)

When I had the chance to taste the wine I could not help but be amazed by the bottle, which is shorter than usual and slightly concave in the center. This custom designed bottle must have cost at least ten dollars to produce, a hefty price tag and it helps explain the wine's cost. The wine was made by Mia Klein, one of my favorite Napa winemakers who is also responsible for Selene (her label), Dalla Valle and Fisher. I have tasted with

Mia many times and I think she is a very talented winemaker who understands how to get the most out of every vineyard. (She also must have a thing for car designers, as the previous generation of the Fisher's also designed car bodies.)

Despite the very Italian look and name, this wine is all Napa Valley. The blend for this bottling is 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 29% Cabernet Franc, 6% Sangiovese (there is the Italian accent) and 5% Petite Verdot. The wine was aged entirely in new, French oak barrels for twenty months before bottling. I would bet that the strong Cabernet Franc

influence is the work of Mia, who likes that variety for blending into softer wines.

When you pull the cork on this wine there is a deep garnet color to the wine and it displays a smokey,

espresso roast sort of smell that intermingles with the classic cooked cherries and milk chocolate of Napa. There is also a subtle, slightly herbal quality, between mint and Thai basil. The feel in the mouth is initially structured and slightly firm, with the fruit fleshing out mid-palate and stretching into a long, very complex finish. For this wine consider serving it with a big T-bone, rubbed with garlic and olive oil the charred on the grill. Slice like you would a roast serve with wild mushroom risotto. Good now, this wine should age well for up to ten years.

