

SNOW ON WINE

Wine Closure: Century 21 / Decade 3

A Winemaker's View

By Dr. Jeff Snow



Recently a few SES members have asked me to revisit “**screw top**” wine closure. As noted in the September, 2018¹ discussion on cork and available alternatives, the **Stelvin Aluminum Closure** (screwtop) seemed to be the direction most winemakers were headed.

These members were a bit bothered, because that closure was now appearing on high-end reds, and there was concern about how those wines would develop, compared to those with a traditional cork closure.

And indeed, one of Spokane’s top wineries, **Robert Karl Cellars**, now uses the Stelvin screwtop closures on all wines, according to winemaker Dr. Joseph Gunselman.

Joe agreed to answer some questions on his decision to go with the screwtop closure, and his answers tell the story better than I could:

Jeff: So Joe, when did you first consider screw tops as a cork alternative?

Joe: *Well, there was always the concern that our buyers would have their drinking experience spoiled by “off flavor” from a tainted cork.*

Jeff: But can’t “bad corks” be identified and tossed out?

Joe: *It’s not that easy. Bacteria in the bark produce this foul-tasting chemical, 2,4,6 Trichloroanisol (TCA) which may not be evident before bottling. TCA diffuses into the wine after bottling, giving it an “off” taste. Testing of corks is more reliable today but some are missed.*

Jeff: OK, but for 4 centuries cork has otherwise been great for aging wine. Stood the test of time – It’s the Gold Standard isn’t it?

Joe: *True, the cork to glass interface allows just enough exchange of air to allow wine to develop slowly and gracefully during cellaring. Most winemakers doubted at first that the screw cap would allow this. So we first used it in wines unlikely to be cellar aged – whites like our Sauvignon Blanc.*

Jeff: And since 2009 that has worked well for you?

Joe: *It has worked well. And one thing we learned was that the critical factor is the round flat plastic pad inside the cap, not the screw top itself.*

Jeff: And can the pad be made to allow varying rates of air diffusion to match that of a cork.

Joe: *We think so, and that heavily influenced our decision to go “all screw top”.*

Jeff: Did you have apprehension about abandoning cork?

Joe: *Again, we want our customers to have an ideal wine experience, and that goes beyond taste. 400 years of “Cork Tradition”-- a ritual using special tools to extract the cork, the gentle popping sound, corks branded with winery logo and year for souvenirs. It is its own romance. We worried about the screw top, once the hallmark of cheap wine, being*

accepted in our top of the line reds. So we try to educate that assurance of better quality justifies learning new wine handling behavior.

Jeff: But you made the leap.

Joe: *And glad I did. Not only am I more confident that my customers will have a consistent taste experience. Screw caps are more economical and allow Robert Karl wine to be a better consumer bargain.*

Jeff: It sounds like you are really convinced of the advantages of the Stelvin screw top closure. But one thing SES members ask me is **how long to cellar such wine.**

Joe: *It does depend on the insert pad in the cap. Each winemaker has a pretty good idea for his/her products. We are happy to make suggestions for aging and expected outcomes on Robert Karl wines. Now in our 9th year of “all screw top” bottle closure, our knowledge of age ability is pretty good and expands each year.*

Jeff: Thanks so much for sharing your thoughts Joe.

Joe: *It was a pleasure to be able to shed a little light on bottle closure, and to reassure SES members they need not worry about quality with “screw top closure” and in fact can be more confident of a great tasting glass of wine. Cheers!*

- 1) Spokaneenologicalsociety.org, Wine Education, Snow on Wine, The life of Wine, [“Wine Closure in the 21st Century”](#).

