



# Cork may sink yet



with **Ken Gargett**



IT ALL depends on your perspective. In the movie *Annie Hall*, there is a moment when both lead characters are seeing their psychiatrists. The question is the same: "How often do you have sex?" Annie replies: "All the time. Three times a week." Woody's character says: "Almost never. Three times a week."

I was reminded of this when considering the wine bottle cork/screwcap debate. The cork manufacturers believe screwcap manufacturers are getting a free ride while they endure the proverbial blowtorch to the belly.

They believe that if the efficacy of screwcaps was more closely examined, they may not have made such significant inroads into the cork market.

Many people think the battle for closure supremacy in Australia has been fought and won by screwcaps but it is not that simple.

In recent years, some cork manufacturers have made strides in improving the quality of their product, although others still lag.

Alternatives, such as ProCork and Diam, have shown negligible rates of TCA (the taint cork can impart to wine, which destroys it).

There is still debate as to whether certain perceived problems with screwcaps are simply winemaking faults that can be rectified with more experience (I think this is largely the case), or if there

are inherent problems. Many producers who use screwcaps for much of their wines are still wary when it comes to their top reds.

The figures do suggest a strong move to screwcaps. In my own tastings, unless it involves serious reds or imported wines, the corkscrew is rarely unsheathed these days.

*The Wine Report 2006* (edited by Tom Stevenson), a useful and comprehensive look at the good, bad and exciting around the globe by local experts, noted that at the 2004 Winewise competition (an Australian show for smaller wineries), 97 per cent of rieslings were screwtop and 55 per cent of chardonnays.

In 2001, just 3 per cent of reds were screwtop which increased to 13 per cent of 2002's and 29 per cent of 2003's. There is momentum here.

The figures for New Zealand are even more in favour of screwcap but in most other parts of the world, the reverse applies. Pushing the barrow for screwcap in overseas markets are the English supermarkets. They are demanding many of their lower-priced wines with that form of closure.

Portuguese cork producer Amorim says it can not rely on vague claims of tradition or sales inflated by PR pushes. The company has reviewed every aspect of the production procedure from the forests to the final product and made numerous improvements. Had this happened a

few years ago, screwcaps would have had a much tougher time. The very best corks that money can buy are even individually inspected. The problem is that not all producers are following Amorim's lead.

Personally, I believe cork has a few problems. They still have the problem of sporadic oxidation to overcome. We have no real idea if this can be solved and, if so, how long it will take.

Also, Amorim represents only about a third of cork production.

When you buy a bottle of wine, there is no way to tell who is responsible for the cork.

If you assume all problems with corks have been resolved, there are still millions of bottles in cellars from the past that are infected with TCA or suffering other cork-related problems.

There is nothing the cork industry can do about this but it is a reminder, every time and often an expensive one, of problems and alternatives.

There is no doubt that the cork industry was caught flat-footed by the success of screwcaps and the hold they have Down Under. The momentum is with screwcaps. How far that goes around the globe remains to be seen but there is the possibility it will act like a snowball heading down a mountain.

The war is not yet over, even if the battle seems to have been won here.

[kgargett@bigpond.net.au](mailto:kgargett@bigpond.net.au)