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NEWS

SCREWCAPS NOT SUITABLE FOR QUALITY WINE

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Trinity Hill says screwcaps do not support quality winemaking.

Leading New Zealand wine producer has moved away from screwcaps after experience has revealed that the technology does not support their quality winemaking techniques. Proprietor, John Hancock, who has been making leading Chardonnays in New Zealand for 25 years, told writers at the launch of Trinity Hill's prestige Homage range, "Our experience with screwcaps is, frankly, that they reduce the quality of our better quality wines."

Trinity Hill shifted to screwcaps after a surge in the incidence of TCA spoilage in their wines obliged them to hold back the very good 2000 Chardonnay. For the 2001 vintage they used screwcaps and found a 'murkiness' in the character of the 2001 Chardonnay that was not apparent in the previous vintages, and has not recurred with the return to cork in 2002.

"I think there are process that start during lees contact that continue after bottling," explained winemaker, Warren Gibson. "Under screwcap these don't seem to get the oxygen they need to continue evolving."

"Screwcaps really slow down the evolution of wine in bottle," added Hancock. "And our wines are already slow maturing, so for us screwcaps are no longer an option."

"We still have problems with cork. Not just TCA, which is not the biggest problem to be honest. Our issue with corks is their variability, so that any case will have as many as 12 wines at different stages of development. That is not good enough, so we are still working on the problem," he continued.

"All I know is that screwcaps are not the answer for us."

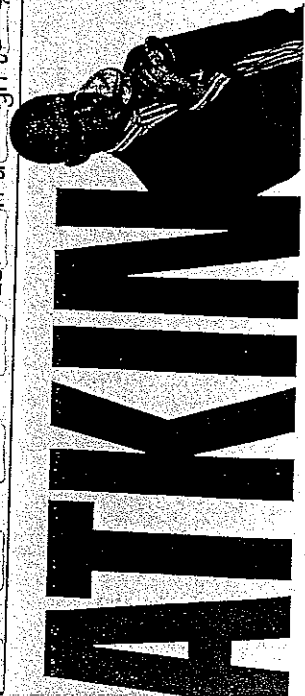


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Trinity Hill



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New Zealand





ATKINSON ON THE CASE

Screwcaps - a partial answer

The best way to stifle debate is to pretend that there is no debate. It's a time-sanctioned technique used by dictators and imperialists the world over. I wouldn't accuse Michael Kovich MW, a skilled and diligent winemaker, of having human tendencies, but I am awfully worried by some of his recent remarks at the International Screwcap Symposium in Biebrunn, New Zealand.

Kovich told the 260 delegates from Australia, New Zealand, the UK, France, Italy, the Chile and India that "in New Zealand and Australia, screwcap is just about a done deal." I'm convinced this is true. Seven of every 10 bottles in New Zealand may be bottled under screwcaps these days, but the figure is nothing like as high in Australia.

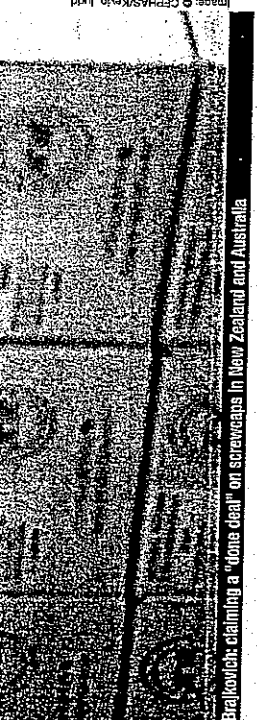
At the point, a number of important industry figures, including Brian Croser, have considerable reservations about screwcaps. I set out some screwcapped wines he made at Waienga between 1978 and 1982

and still tastes them from time to time. "The wines are developed, but they're limy and flat, like stale jam. The best wines sealed with a natural cork are better than all the screwcap wines," he told me earlier this year.

And what about the 30 per cent of New Zealand wine that is bottled with traditional corks? Haven't the people who make those wines heard the screwcap gospel yet? Or are they (poor that, all things considered, corks are better closures? There is certainly a lot more debate in New Zealand about the merits (or otherwise) of screwcaps than Braikovich and the New Zealand Screwcap Initiative would have you believe.

Take the issue of reductive, bad egg-like smells in wines bottled under screwcap. Braikovich claimed at the International Screwcap Symposium that "if undetectable reductive flavours develop then it is a factor of wine-making and they are as likely to occur under cork."

I'm no chemist, but some of the people who disagree with



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Braikovich claiming a 'done deal' on screwcaps in New Zealand and Australia

be correct, depending on who is conducting the trial and what he or she wants to prove.

There is a lot we don't know about screwcaps at the moment, which is why the claims being made on their behalf are a tad premature. Those of us with medium term memories can remember the hype that once surrounded plastic corks, a closure whose popularity has waned of late.

What's my take on screwcaps? I'm basically in favour for young whites and roses, but I'm not convinced that they are ideal for longer-term ageing, particularly of red wines. We simply do not have the volumes of aged reds bottled under screwcap to carry out mean-

ingful analysis at this point. It's a 10-year project at the very least. There are also unanswered questions about the unsuitability of some screwcap liners for wine.

One thing I am sure of, at least as far as my tasting buds are concerned, is that reductive taints are a real problem with screwcaps at the moment. Having just done a hugely disappointing pre-release tasting of New Zealand whites, I'd say that the percentage of reduced wines was running at around 20 per cent, although the degree of reduction varied. My findings are backed up by recent research and random sampling by the Australian Wine Research Institute (AWRI), which confirmed that reduction is "most

common in wines bottled under screwcap."

I am not, I should add, a diehard defender of traditional corks. I've had enough bottles of corked wine, some of them purchased at my own expense, to be as fed up with the incidences of TCA as the next man. But are advocates of screwcaps making the mistake of demanding that the wine industry switch to a closure that is still in its infancy, with all the attendant teething troubles?

Corks aren't perfect, but neither (for the time being) are screwcaps. Whatever the New Zealand Screwcap Initiative might like to pretend, the debate has only just begun.