

Title: ' [George Taber, to cork or not to cork,](#) '

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Vintners have never been at a loss to find something to disagree about, whether it be hangtime and high alcohol, terroir and trellising, or new-world wines vs. old-world. George M. Taber, the award-winning author of Judgement of Paris found that the choice of wine closure is a major controversy throughout the wine world and has written a book about it.

Because the argument was literally breaking up friendships, Taber said he decided to pursue the issue. Intriguingly titled, "To Cork or Not to Cork: The Billion-Dollar Battle for the Bottle." The new book will flip the lid on the closure issue and presents a comprehensive and readable account of the debate. It is scheduled for release in October by Scribners (\$26).

"I got the idea while doing my book on the Paris tasting," Taber said. "While the tasting was an accepted fact, it seemed that wine people, everywhere, wanted to talk about closures. One Australian winemaker compared the issue to the wars of religion and said some feelings are so deep, he lost friends over it."

For two years, Taber, who journaled the pivotal 1976 Paris tasting, where two Napa Valley wines bested French wine icons and changed wine history, scanned the world to find the story. He conducted over 125 interviews from California, Chile, Argentina, France, Switzerland, Germany, Portugal, Australia and New Zealand, South Africa and Spain to get his account of the debate.

Taber said the issue started its rise in the 1980s with the discovery of the chemical compound trichloroanisole (2,4,6-TCA). "It was discovered in 1981 in Switzerland by Hans Tanner, a researcher who lived just outside Zurich," Taber said. "Swiss wines are quite light in flavors and aromas, and very sensitive to off odors. While most people can't detect the aroma until it goes above 6 ppt (parts per trillion), some can pick it up at levels below 2 ppt. Some wines at the time, were actually testing out to be as high as 60 and even 100 ppt."

Even though 1 ppt compares to one second in 320 years, even such low levels of TCA can make a \$400 bottle of wine smell and taste like a wet newspaper, said Tabor.

"For a long time the cork producers were in denial," Tabor said. "Because they had a virtual monopoly of the market, they did nothing about it. Now they are fighting a pitched battle to save what is a multi-billion dollar industry. Over seven billion gallons of wine are produced each year. Each year 20 billion closures go onto wine bottles, and, increasingly, they are not corks. Air is wine's biggest enemy, and an air-tight closure is vital to its existence."

In some areas, Taber believes the battle may be lost. "In New Zealand, 95 percent of all closures are screw cap, and in Australia it's 50 percent. The Germans and Austrians are now replacing corks in high-end wines with glass closures."

Taber noted that the United States is still partial to corks, using them in 80 percent of the wine produced.

"Americans still like the romance of the cork, and even low priced wine like "Two-Buck-Chuck" uses a cork, even if it is a one-on-one, (made of compressed ground cork, with a thin cork cap fitted on both ends)."

He added: "However, in France, Italy and Spain, and, of course, Portugal, corks are holding onto their position." Taber said France still seals virtually all of its premium wines with cork. He also pointed out that Italy, Spain, and Portugal have laws in place that require the use of cork in high-end wines. It should be noted that these countries along with France, produce approximately 4- billion gallons of the 7-billions gallons of wine produced each year, or over 57 percent.

"There now are completely new methods for processing corks," he said. He noted that the original TCA link to corks was generally associated with the small, independent producers, who lacked quality controls.

Taber believes the cork will survive this controversy, and remain as the world's favorite wine closure.

"Clearly, I believe the cork is here to stay," he said.