

Title: ' The Screwcap Mysteries '

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Subsequent to screwcap advocate Tyson Stelzer's address in South Africa recently, and in the interests of responsible journalism and the right to information, WineNews's Editor shares some research, controversy and commentary of her own.

The title of a recent article on [www.grape.co.za](http://www.grape.co.za) furthering the closure debate – 'Abandon your corkscrews!' – must've been the result of generous editing as it contradicts the author's personal commentary and the article's ultimate conclusion: 'Eventually, the best result all round would be for both closures to prove consistent and reliable in maintaining the wine's quality and that the producer and consumer's choice would be one determined by personal preference only.'

How much further along this debate could the wine industry have been was it not for the sensationalism employed by a grouping preaching the screwcap gospel with a vehemence and totalitarianism entirely baffling to someone of my generation and mindedness?

It was with much anticipation that the local industry awaited Tyson Stelzer's presentation at WOSA's marketing seminar two weeks ago, and a thorough and detailed address it was indeed.\*

When in the presence of disagreeing parties and contradictory accounts of the reason for the conflict, my grandfather used to always remark wryly that there are, in life, three truths: yours, mine and the truth.

It was with relief and vindication that I found evidence in researching this article that some parties out there are in fact in search of the truth, whose ultimate aims are far nobler than exclusive proponents of either screwcaps or natural cork.

Paul White cites in a Harpers article entitled 'Scientifically Speaking' (Dec 2005) that although 70-90% of New Zealand's production is sealed under screwcap, 110 wineries were at the time of writing using technical or composite corks exclusively or were experimenting with these alongside screwcapped wines. 'This suggests a major shift,' Whites writes, 'in some producers' previous belief in screwcaps as "the perfect seal".'

Citing the work of Dr Alan Limmer of New Zealand winery Stonecroft, White launches a ruthless onslaught on the screwcap movement's founders and leaders calling the research offered by the 'Stelvinists' since 2000 'to stem from poorly or incorrectly understood chemistry. Or just plain wishful thinking.'

I am no scientist and will leave the chemistry on which White bases his accusations for the techies, fanatics and winemakers out there, suffice for quoting from White's article as follows: '[O]ne can't help but feel that the leaders of the screwcap movement had not really mastered the chemistry they needed to know before going to market with their product.'

Stelzer's Taming the screw, White states, 'makes significant scientific errors that will lead winemakers into the belief that following this manual will produce the results they hope for in their wines.' White reveals that the book was edited by, among others, the screwcap movement's founding fathers Michael Brajkovich of New Zealand's Kumeu River and Jeffrey Grosset of Clare Valley Riesling fame and Grosset Wines and goes on to suggest that their endorsement of a book containing erroneous chemistry renders them 'underqualified' as participants in the closure debate, at least in as far as the chemistry of it is concerned.

White contemplates, having stated his case regarding the screwcap lobby's flawed grasp on oxygen permeability, why there has been such steadfast silence from within this camp in response thereto. He goes on to suggest something even this writer have, though often privately pondered, never actually been bold enough to broach in editorial: 'Perhaps the profits from the dollar per case to dollar per bottle saved in converting to screwcaps is not easily given up?'

Has anybody ever calculated the enhanced margins British retailers managed to ensure in insisting on screwcaps? And how would this figure compare with the cost in customer come-backs due to cork taint?

I am merely suggesting this (again!): the cork vs. screwcap issue is not as simple as cork is bad, screwcap is good; neither is it advanced by participants who claim that it is.

It is my understanding that the cork industry pretty much has itself to blame for the screwcap movement's momentum in the antipodeans' industries, which came about as a fierce backlash against sub-standard natural cork and an unwillingness by cork producers to address quality issues. For years the cork industry blamed winemaking techniques, cellar hygiene, deficient application of the closure, storage conditions, etc. refusing responsibility for their product's integrity.

Is it just me or did Tyson Stelzer have a lot to say on 'diligent' winemaking, 'careful' dissolved oxygen management, 'controlling' sulphides with 'a comprehensive regime', 'faulty' cellar and bottling equipment and the like?

This article marks what I hope to be my last contribution to the closure debate for some time. It's a tad boring by now and – surprise! - inconclusive, not to mention irresponsible of the local wine community to pursue with fervour given the many more pressing issues our industry faces far worthier of our time, effort and debate.\*\*\*

Let's stop talking closures and start creating brands.