

All About Corks



Pop! The note of percussion that marks the opening of a bottle of wine is one of the most pleasant sounds on earth to me. And getting to that pop with a minimum of cursing and frustration makes it sound even sweeter. A wine bottle is one of the most difficult consumer product packages to open—right up there with Barbie dolls (I have a 4-year-old daughter) and cat litter (two 4-month old kittens). To get the genie out of the bottle you need a tool (a good corkscrew) and a brief primer on how to use one.

Primitive or refined?

Any corkscrew will work if you know how to use it. The simplest form consists of a “worm” (the spiral piece of metal, or screw) embedded in a handle, and no moving parts. Along the Mosel and Rhine Rivers in Germany, winemakers take pride in the primitive, using this type of archaic corkscrew with a gnarled chunk of wood for a handle. They twist in the screw, stand up, put the bottle between their knees and yank out the cork with sheer force. That’s OK in a gravel-floored wine cellar, but for the kitchen or dining room a different tool and etiquette is usually called for. I prefer the more refined waiter’s corkscrew that looks rather like a pocketknife with lots of foldout parts, or one of the many Screwpull models.

Levering the worm:

First, remove the foil capsule or plastic wrap that covers the cork. You can simply rip the whole capsule off if you like, but if you have a metal foil it usually looks neater to cut it around the lip of the bottle with the knife attachment you’ll find on most corkscrews. If there’s no foil, only a wax seal, you don’t have to remove it. Put the point of the worm in the middle of the cork or wax. Push and twist till the worm is totally buried in the cork, and pull or lever it out.

Problem corks:

Most newly released wines have physically sound corks, but older bottles that have been aging present special challenges. Even a new cork will sometimes crumble or break as you try to pull it. It’s not a real worry, because the crumbs won’t hurt the wine. If the cork disintegrates on pulling, however, you may want to filter the wine through a tight sieve or coffee filter, for aesthetic reasons, before serving it. Wines older than 10 years often have corks that are either stuck too tight and won’t budge before they break, or have become weak and crumbly with age. On one of these it sometimes works best to use an “ah-so” cork puller, the two-pronged, non-worm type that doesn’t penetrate the cork itself. Still, there isn’t any foolproof way to loosen them or keep them intact other than proceeding slowly and gaining hands-on experience. (May we all have the opportunity to practice on some 1989 Bordeaux!)

Wood or plastic?

The classic wine cork is made from the bark of cork-oak trees. These grow mostly in Spain and Portugal. The bark is harvested once every several years and then grows back. The corks are bored out of the bark. Artificial or plastic corks are on the upswing, however, in response to the seemingly intractable problem of cork taint in natural bark corks. Cork taint is a condition in the cork that can spoil the wine by infecting it with a musty odor and stripping it of some of its flavor. Wines so affected are called “corky” or “corked.” Despite industry efforts to control the problem, I still find more than 2 percent of natural-corked wines are “corky.”

Listen to the cork:

Well, not really. But look at it before you buy. If it has been pushed up and out of the bottle, forcing a bulge in the foil or plastic, don’t buy it. Heat usually causes this movement, and too much heat can spoil a wine, just as coffee spoils after too much time on the warmer. If wine has leaked out around the cork and capsule, it’s probably also a heat problem. This is fairly common with Port and other sweet wines, however, and doesn’t necessarily indicate spoilage.

Keep your cork wet:

Be sure to store your wine bottles on their sides if you are planning to keep them longer than a couple of months. This keeps each cork wet, and a wet cork is a happy cork. Because a cork absorbs a small amount of wine, it becomes slightly swollen with it and forms a tighter seal against the glass than if it was dry. The tight seal keeps air from leaking in, and exposure to air can ruin the wine.

Don’t smell the cork:

When a waiter or wine steward presents you the cork after opening a bottle, you don’t need to sniff it. The odor of the cork tells you little, because corks can smell corky even when the wine is fine. Just look to see that the cork carries the same winery name and vintage as the bottle. If not, you may have a dishonest restaurant or supply chain, and that’s a worse problem than a tainted cork.