

Cork has always had a hallowed place in the wine world. There is a ritual to opening a wine bottle sealed with a cork—cutting the embossed foil, turning the corkscrew, pulling it out with a flourish and that satisfying ‘pop!’ Then the wine-stained cork is often nosed to check for faults and finally, the wine is poured. This is a process that to some is relaxingly familiar, and to others, it marks the celebration of a special occasion. Whatever the significance, we must face the fact that there’s a certain grandeur associated with corks that a screw cap can never represent.

The cork conundrum

A cork stopper, being natural, has been seen as more in tune with the earthiness of wine. It absorbs the wine and expands within the neck of the bottle, forming a seal that is largely airtight, yet breathable. The slight exchange of oxygen prevents the build-up of sulphides within the

wine and supports many wines while they age. But then there are the problems of cork taint and oxidation, which often make cork-sealed bottles unreliable when it comes to consistency.

These are a few reasons why, outside the realm of fine wines (and outside the geographic demarcation called the Old World), the screw cap wasn’t so easily dismissed. Even though no serious wine connoisseur even today would like his prized stock to be capped, logically speaking, the screw cap makes more practical sense as a form of closure than the good ol’ bark of a tree. Many wineries and wine drinkers have seen the merits of this metallic closure—no musty cork taint that can spoil a wine, easy to open without having to master the use of a corkscrew, safe to reseal and preserve a wine, no leakage and no necessity to keep a wine on its belly. Sure, it deprived

A new twist to the old cork

The wine world gears up for a paradigm shift with the new cork solution by Helix.

*Text: Karina Aggarwal
Images courtesy: Helix*

wine drinkers of that oh-so-loved 'pop' sound, but it didn't deter the screw cap from becoming a phenomenon to be reckoned with.

Over the years, screw caps have dominated the fast-moving, everyday-wine segment. While it must be said that the quality of cork has improved over time, the ease and efficiency of a screw cap was never matched. Other forms of closure—rubber/plastic corks, glass tops—have never quite



caught on and the screw cap remains unparalleled in its appeal for the mass-consumed wine.

But there is more to this battle than just old school vs new age. Cork is a major industry being one of the most traded commodities for Portugal.

The fall of cork meant more serious repercussions than just the loss of a 'pop' sound. Thus, research has always been rife among cork producers looking

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for new and ingenious ways to bridge the divide—a way to preserve the sanctity of the cork while being able to incorporate the ease and practicality of the screw cap. Many inventions have come along but nothing stuck. Until now, perhaps.

The Helix concept


Recently, the joint effort between the world's leading cork producer Amorim and the world's largest glass container manufacturer, Owens-Illinois (O-I), was unveiled at the biannual wine fair, Vinexpo, in France. Christened the 'Helix', this is a two-fold solution involving the wine bottle and the cork. The mushroom-shaped stopper, made from cork agglomerate, is moulded with spiral grooves, which fits snugly around the mirrored thread at the neck of the bottle. This allows for a twist-to-open bottle cork, banishing the formal constraints of cork screws. More so, the snug fit creates an airtight closure—one that is impermeable and also makes that delicious 'pop' sound when twisted open. The makers have said that Helix targets the popular premium, fast-turnaround still wine segment between \$8 - \$13 range but it will be a while before it appears on shelves.

Helix is being lauded as a breakthrough in the field, mostly by the makers for now but time will tell how it catches on. For the moment, there are many things that Helix has going for it. For one, it is 100 per cent renewable, and made by removing the bark

without felling any trees, thus reducing the stress on a natural resource. Second, it has been put through extensive testing which involved examinations of still white wine bottled and stored horizontally at 35° C (95° F) for 30 days. Other

tests done with bottles for over 26 months showed no decline in taste or loss in flavour or aromas of the wine. Most of all, it is easy to use, allows resealing a bottle, and yet, doesn't reek of "cheap."

For now, Helix promises a

compromise between cork and screw cap. What problems it will bring with it, we'll just have to wait and see. 

In an interview conducted with Carlos de Jesus, Amorim's Head of Marketing & Communication, this is what he had to say:

What do you think is the most appealing aspect of the Helix solution?

For the first time, we are able to deliver all the sensibilities of the premium aspects of wine, while introducing convenience. Helix will give the benefits of both the screw cap and cork. It has been tried and tested for years and will leverage all that we have known before.

Can you give us an estimate of how long a bottle of open wine can be stored with the new cork?

We conducted tests where the wine bottles were stored both horizontally and vertically. The results to both were encouraging, so it is up to the consumer to store the wine in the direction he chooses. However, it is still necessary to store the wine under the right conditions. In terms of resealing, tests have shown that between three and five openings and resealing, there were no adverse effects on the wine. Once again, when stored right, this could even be across three to four days.

What packaging specifications will be required to ensure proper closure?

A capsule over the cork will be required to prevent tampering. The area of the cork outside the bottle is wide enough to allow for branding options, thus giving instant visibility to the brand name. Since it is a new product, it will also have an advantage in terms of shelf positioning once it enters the market.



Which are your focus markets and how soon will we see Helix on the shelves?

Helix bottles will be prominent on retail shelves by 2014. The priority markets for us right now are France, Italy, Spain and Portugal. If any winery in these countries is export-oriented, who knows, we might see a Helix-sealed bottle in Mumbai as well.

How much of a change at wineries will the implementation of the Helix solution require?

The Helix system can be used by wineries with only a minor adjustment to existing filling lines. While wineries

with older bottling machinery will require about four hours to implement the necessary changes, the newer wineries will just need a small adjustment of the orientation of the corks, which can be installed in 30 minutes.

And in terms of an investment?

Over the four years of development of Helix, the purpose has always been to create a product that did not imply a huge investment from the wineries. The Helix system is that of a lock and key—the cork and bottle work together as a combined package. The price points of both will be competitive with existing products, or else there will be no point for wineries to make the change.