PlumpJack wine has all the hallmarks of a luxury brand. It was founded by celebrities, Gavin Newsom, the mayor of San Francisco, and composer and philanthropist Gordon Getty. Its home is an historic 48-acre vineyard in Napa, which dates back to the 1880s. And the highly rated wines are prized by drinkers and collectors. Not bad for a screw cap wine.

For 10 years, PlumpJack has been bottling half of its best wines, the reserve Cabernet and the reserve Chardonnay, under screw caps. Its 1997 vintage was arguably the first high-end wine to be bottled without a cork. “We were the first to put our necks out there,” says the brand’s general manager, John Conover. “It’s really changed people’s minds.”

PlumpJack isn’t alone. Around the globe many consumers and winemakers have embraced alternative wine closures. In some countries the switch has been rapid. Australia and New Zealand are leading proponents of this technology and most of the wines consumed in these two countries have caps while in the United States most wine sold still comes with a cork. Over the last year, according to The Nielsen Company, alternative closures made up just under 5% of all glass bottle table wine sales. But that’s slowly beginning to change. For example, the Australian Wolf Blass began using screw caps in 2004 and introduced them to the American market starting in 2006. PlumpJack is currently deciding whether it will exclusively use screw caps for all its wines.

Some stores are also seeing an increase in demand for wines with alternative closures. Last year, 20% of web retailer Wine.com’s unit sales were screw cap wines. That’s quite a robust figure, especially since screw cap wines made up just 12.5% of the site’s entire inventory. What helps is that Wine.com customers can search for just bottles with screw caps. “It’s clear our customers either recognize the benefits or are neutral to its use and are selecting wines based on its merit regardless of whether a cork or screw cap is standing in their way of enjoyment,” says Michael Osborn, Wine.com’s founder and vice president of merchandising.

While some high-end wineries are using screw caps, many of the wines available in
the United States that come with the alternative closure are more modestly priced. The Greene Grape Downtown in New York City’s Financial District offers 160 wines under $20 and over 12% of the selections have screw caps while all of the store’s fine wines that cost more than $20 have corks. The store’s owner and manager, Seth Datz, would like to stock even more screw cap wines. He’s a fan of the closure because he has unfortunately had “many evenings ruined” by corked wine. The problem for the store is finding wines from producers in France and Italy that are using screw caps. While many customers don’t seem bothered by alternative closures, there’s a minority who still perceive screw cap wines as being cheap. According to Datz, they’re the ones who also insist that all rosé and Riesling are sweet.

Restaurant sommeliers have also warmed up to these alternative closures. The Glazier Group, which owns Michael Jordan’s The Steak House N.Y.C. and the Strip House restaurants around the country, has even developed a special presentation for screw cap bottles. The sommelier covers the cap with a cloth towel and slowly twists it off, which minimizes the metal on metal sound. “It adds a little finesse,” says The Glazier Group’s beverage director, Jono Moratis. The only thing that is missing is the inspection of the cork, which most diners don’t mind forgoing.

Even Manhattan’s ritzy ‘21’ Club is now serving wine with screw caps from New Zealand, Australia and France. They’re “perfectly wonderful closures,” says the restaurant’s wine director and sommelier, Phil Pratt. Just five years ago ‘21’ had a couple of wines without corks, today about 5% of the 1,300 bottle cellar has screw caps. And Pratt expects that number to keep on growing. “I was a little afraid at the beginning,” admits Pratt, who used to even warn diners that the bottle they selected didn’t have a cork. But since “we have never had a rejection problem with customers,” he now skips the warning. He still often jokes that it’s “the easy open bottle.”

**Pros and Cons**

For as long as people have been making wine, they’ve been trying to design an ideal container to store it in. From 500 BC to 500 AD the Greeks used giant clay amphorae that were, according to George M. Taber, the author of *To Cork or Not To Cork: Tradition, Romance, Science, and the Battle for the Wine Bottle*, capped with cork and pitch. That was replaced by the invention of wooden barrels with hardwood bungs. “It was the first technical revolution,” Taber says. “It was the standard way to store and ship wine.” Another technical innovation changed the industry. In the 1600s, the English developed a durable glass bottle that could withstand being transported.

**S**crew caps are by definition easy to open and close, and unlike with cork, there’s no chance that the wine will be tainted or oxidized since the screw cap seal is airtight.

“The English model was the forerunner of our modern wine bottle,” adds Taber. It was closed with a cork, which necessitated a new tool: the corkscrew.

Up until the 1950s, the only closures widely available to wine makers were made from cork. Around that time a few companies began experimenting with other materials but the first synthetic corks and screw caps weren’t very well received.

What ultimately helped alternative closures to catch on was the failure of cork. In the 1980s, the incidence of corked wines increased rapidly. A number of factors helped to spread cork taint including the sharp spike in production of wine around the world and the subsequent demand for closures.

Now there are two main alternative closures used by the wine industry: synthetic corks and screw caps. The synthetic corks have some advantages: there’s no chance of cork taint, they won’t deteriorate and customers hear a satisfying pop when they open a bottle. “We prefer to use synthetic corks in our award-winning wines to consistently provide the freshest, highest quality tasting wines possible,” says Jennifer Wall, winemaker for Barefoot Wine. But there are two important problems. “Plastic corks are difficult to pull out and impossible to get back in,” Taber points out.

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