

Snow on Wine

HOW QUICKLY WE FORGET

By Dr. Jeff Snow

Have you seen the You Tube video of two bright 16 year-old boys whose Uncle offers a big “payoff” if they can complete a simple phone call to a 7-digit number within 5 minutes **on a standard desk telephone with rotary dial (ca 1975)?** Their series of errors in using the dial, not lifting the handset, and not recognizing a dial tone are hilarious to anyone over 25. As technology changes many simple skills disappear. So as screw top wine becomes more prevalent, will there come a time when **cork removal becomes a lost art?** Soon it may be only the grand old bottles in our cellars which need to have a cork removed. And **intact** removal of old corks can be a challenge requiring a practiced skillset.

Of course, any fool can remove a new cork with any handy corkscrew. But with age, corks soften and lose tensile strength. And often they are more adherent to the glass with a higher coefficient of friction, requiring more pull to move them. This can lead to corkscrews pulling out, leaving the cork cored and crumbling, or worse, having the bottom part break off and remain deep in the bottle neck, blocking it.

Having broken off, crumbled, and otherwise screwed up more old corks than most people, I developed a plan. You all have your favorite device which works perfectly on bottles less than 10 years old, and will sometimes work on older corks. Great! Improve your odds by being sure the “business end” is a **screw, not an auger.** (see photo #1 & #2). The screw will usually hold onto a soft cork better. Also, some corks are **longer**, and if the screw doesn’t reach the cork’s end, it will often break off and remain in the neck. And of course, steady, smooth, and straight pull reduces the chance of cork crumble and breakage. You get this with various **leavers, jack screws** or mechanical devices. But if signs of cork deterioration such as softness, wetness, or wine stain are seen, consider **Plan B** or “**gasp,**” **Plan C**.

Plan B works by moving the pull-out of the cork center with one of two alternatives: A **two-pronged** opener, sometimes called an AH SO (see photo #3); the two prongs slide down the outside of the cork, then the cork is freed by rotating (breaking adhesion) and pulling up. Another alternative, called “**corkpops**” (see photo #4), pushes the cork out. A needle is inserted through the cork and injected pressurized CO₂ gas pushes the cork up and out. These alternatives will remove most “tricky old corks” intact, but neither work well after the cork has been damaged by a corkscrew.

After damaging a cork, **Plan C** is to push the cork into the bottle using a bamboo chopstick I saved from *Cathay Inn*. Then decant the wine while holding the cork back with the stick. If guests are present, I simply say, “the wine needed decanting,” and smile.

So, there is your plan: 1) make sure your usual opener is a screw, of sufficient length, with mechanics for a smooth straight pull; 2) inspect the cork first, and if it looks questionable go to **Plan B**; 3) if, like me, you screw it up, avoid cursing or gasping, go to **Plan C**, and thank God for the experience you gained, smile, and enjoy that bottle.

PHOTO #1



PHOTO #2



PHOTO #3



PHOTO #4

