



WINE NOTES

By Dorothy J. Gailer and John Brecher

SUCCESS WITH SPARKLERS

My wife and I understand that, with natural corks, defective wine should surface nearly 12% of the time. Our "failure rate" is, thankfully, significantly less than that. Our question regards sparkling wine. We drink a lot of sparklers and yet we have never to our knowledge encountered a corked bottle of sparkling wine. Why would that be?

—Edward Robert McGowan,
New Orleans

On the general issue, we don't want to offer any specific percentage of wines that we believe are corked because we'd be struck with that number forever, but the figures that are often thrown around, such as 12%, are way too high. The numbers are overstated for many reasons. First, it is in wineries' interest to overstate the problem because then they can move to far less expensive closures, such as screw caps, while claiming they are doing it entirely for the benefit of consumers. Second, wine geeks like to overstate the number because it's a way of showing how very acute their senses are. If one wine geek says he finds that 10% of wines are corked, another will smile patronizingly and say something like, "You obviously don't have a high sensitivity to corked wines. I find that 25% are corked." It's true that some people are far more sensitive to corkiness than others. However, many people who find a huge number of wines corked are confusing a corked bottle—that is, a bottle that has been ruined by a compound called TCA that has contaminated its cork—with all sorts of other flaws, or are simply confusing bad wine

with flawed wine, and there's a lot of bad wine out there. Sometimes portions of wineries themselves are tainted with TCA, which raises the possibility that even if the bottles are closed with screw caps, the wine will taste corked (and thus smell like wet newspapers or cardboard). All that said, it's also true that even a small percentage of wine ruined by bad corks is too much. While research continues on the effect of alternate closures on fine wines that age for a long time, there's little doubt that screw caps are just fine for the majority of wines, which are meant to be drunk young and fresh.

Many of the lively, lovely Sauvignon Blancs from New Zealand now are packaged with screw caps, for instance, and that makes perfect sense. We still find that many readers equate screw caps with cheap wines, but it's time to get over that (although screw caps aren't perfect, either, of course, and we, like many of our readers, do like real corks). On the specific issue of why the McGowans have not run across a corked bottle of bubbly, we posed that question to George M. Taber, author of the new book "To Cork or Not To Cork: Tradition, Romance, Science, and the Battle for the Wine Bottle." His response: "I think your readers may have just been lucky. It may also be that the effervescence of the sparklers masks low levels of corkiness." Mr. Taber added, by the way, that he'd estimate the percentage of corked bottles at 3% to 5%.

Melanie Grove West contributed to this column. You can contact us at wine@wsj.com.

schino liqueur (not the syrup from a cherry jar), curacao, lemon juice and sugar to the champagne.

If that's not sweet enough for you, try the Merry Christmas Punch, which replaces the lemon juice and the herbal Chartreuse with a bottle of Sautes.

Either punch is delightful and likely to accomplish what "Malemute Kid's frightful concoction" did. No doubt describing a scene he witnessed in his own hardscrabble days up north, Jack London said that in drinking the Kid's punch, "the men of the camps and trails unburnt in its genial glow" and "aliens from a dozen lands, they toasted each

and all." We could do worse, this holiday season, than to follow their lead. After all, as the Kid says, "A Christmas without punch is sinking a hole to bed-rock with nary a pay-streak." Though I do recommend that in constructing the punch, one trade the pepper-sauce for a nice bottle of bubbly.

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ONLINE EXTRA: Eric Felten demonstrates how to make the Bacardi Cocktail at WSJ.com/HowYourDrink.