



## WINE NOTES

By Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

### A PARTNER FOR A PRESENT

I need to pair a Royal Tokaji 2002 that was given to me as a present. Your comments are appreciated.  
—Helmuth Rueckert,  
Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico

Tokaji Aszú is the great sweet wine from Hungary that has enjoyed a resurgence over the past few years. Dessert wine is served more often around this time of year, when people are entertaining, and we are often asked about food pairings. Truth is, when it comes to something as special as Tokaji, we feel it deserves to be served on its own because it's so rich, luscious and complex. The best pairing is simply with friends and loved ones. In terms of food, though, when serving fine sweet wines such as Tokaji and Sauternes, we'd suggest ripe, fleshy fruits such as peaches and pears, or perhaps juicy and acidic baked apples. Sauternes and foie gras is a classic pairing and we once had a terrific match of Tokaji and foie gras, but, personally, we prefer these for dessert, on their own, or maybe just with some roasted nuts.

### QUESTIONING A LEAK

While browsing the close-out bin at my local wine store looking for under-priced gems (a favorite activity of mine), I found a magnum of Clos Des Papes Châteauneuf-du-Pape, marked down to a very nice price. I've had this before and it was spectacular. The prospect of bringing it to a party next weekend, which will be attended by friends who enjoy wine as much as I do, is very enticing. The rub: There is a leak—a small ooze which has emanated from the cork and run down the side of the bottle, slightly staining the label. Is this a good gamble?

—Tim Callahan, Boston

If the price were great and we were buying the wine for ourselves, we might think about taking a chance, but certainly not for company. The problem is that the ooze could be an indication that the wine was abused, causing the seal to be compromised. That means the wine inside could have been cooked and/or exposed to air. If you're a gambler and you really, really want to share it with friends, we'd strongly suggest you have a back-up ready in case the first sip you take, privately in the kitchen, proves that it's a goner. Still, we wouldn't immediately pour it out. It might pull itself together, at least for a time.

### OPENING UP A CONTROVERSY

We have run into a persistent problem with BYOB establishments (whose commonness is a reason to love much-maligned New Jersey). We will bring an older bottle of wine from our own cellar to a restaurant and watch in horror as the well-meaning waitstaff inserts a "waiter-style" corkscrew into the bottle and either breaks the

cork or drills a hole through it. Should we offer the use of a Screwpull that we bring, which we have found to be more appropriate for the more fragile corks in aged wines? We have tried pointing out that the wine is older and almost always receive the assurance that they know just what to do. It is frustrating for us, and it seems embarrassing for them as well.

—Carol and David Melvin, Chester, N.J.

We thought it was just us! With older bottles, it really is better to use a two-prong corkscrew. When we take an older bottle to a restaurant—and we only do this at restaurants where we've dined before and know in advance that this is OK—we bring our own prong corkscrew because we know that those "waiter" corkscrews could cause problems. We offer to open the bottle ourselves and inevitably the waitstaff assures us that it's no problem and then we, too, watch in horror as the cork falls apart. We don't want to



hurt anyone's feelings or be rude or pushy—these are restaurants where we already know the people, after all—so we just suffer through it and, yes, the waitstaff is embarrassed. This is probably all more complicated than it seems—we can understand restaurants' reluctance to allow patrons to open their own bottles and there could even be legal issues in some places. So we're glad that you wrote because maybe restaurants will read this and figure out some way around the problem, perhaps simply by teaching the waitstaff how to use that prong opener.

After we sent the Melvins the response above, they wrote back: "You raise a separate issue. We cannot get the hang of the 'prong' or 'ah-so' (as we have heard it referred to for reasons we do not fathom). How do you use those correctly? We have only managed to shove the cork into the bottle."

First, supposedly this is called an "ah-so" because, once people get the hang of this opener, which grasps the cork from the sides, they say, "Ah, so this is how it works." We have no idea if that's true, but that's what our assistant, Melanie Grayce West, was taught at a for-credit wine course at Cornell University and an Ivy League explanation is good enough for us. Anyone who opens bottles of wine regularly, especially older bottles, should buy a prong corkscrew and learn how to use it. John, who opens the bottles in our house (because Dottie's wrists have been surgically repaired), is not mechanically adept and it took him some time to master this. The first few corks are bound to go into the bottle, so start practicing with simple, everyday wines. In time, it really does become easy to use and works much better on older corks than a corkscrew. One bit of advice we'd offer: Work the prongs very, very slowly and be patient.

Melanie Grayce West contributed to this column.