

Wine on the road

The advent of Stelvin seals and other quality screw cap closures has been of real benefit to the traveller who — like me — enjoys a glass or two in the hotel room, whether with a solitary meal or as an accompaniment to evening work, reading, watching television or maybe even entertaining a colleague.

Most business travellers have never been in the habit of carrying corkscrews and many of us who did so in the past have become a little wary since the security crackdown elevated corkscrews to the level of a dangerous weapon...which indeed they can be, with one featuring in a dramatic assault case not long back.

Actually, I gave away the habit when I left a prized corkscrew behind in a hotel room; they're easy to overlook when packing.

As I've discussed on these pages in the past, I was an early convert to screw caps, back when winemakers in the Clare Valley were experimenting with them on rieslings and building up a body of evidence on their attributes.

There have been a few downsides, of course. Some of the earlier screw closures were not technologically perfect and even now there can occasionally be disasters if there's a glitch in the bottling line - I was told of a situation where a batch of a prestigious white was packaged with the cap so minimally misaligned that no-one knew until buyers began complaining much later.

Interestingly, the specialist retailer that had sold most of the stock tracked down almost every buyer and replaced the wine with the support of the producer.

Even with a rare blooper like that and with a few years yet to go on assessing how effectively some red varieties develop long-term under screw cap, this closure is with us to stay and will undoubtedly become much more widespread.



This means you can now pop into a bottle shop and choose from a large selection — often several hundred, in even medium-sized stores — that you can take back to your room and open with a flourish. Forget the crap about the mystique of the cork; cork taint is so widespread that your chances of getting a less than optimum wine under cork are much higher than you might imagine.

Of course, many folk can't really tell the difference unless the tainting is extreme...and that includes plenty of self-styled "wine experts".

The other possibility is sparkling wine, with a cork that can easily be removed by hand.

Australia and New Zealand are particularly well endowed with quality sparklings at very reasonable cost.

I try to buy something from the area I'm visiting or at least a wine I can't get readily at home. That's if I'm drinking it myself; I'm keen to experiment, widening my horizons. For entertaining, I normally choose a more familiar wine.

I find that managers and staff in retail wine stores are usually interested if you mention you're a visitor, looking for

Many Australian and New Zealand wine brands are now packaged in screw cap bottles, such as the big-selling Montana Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc.

something a bit different. Impromptu tastings are sometimes organised and I've even had sample bottles "forced" (well, it didn't take much of an effort) on me.

It's all part of the colourful diversity of business travel!

And what about wine casks? Some are excellent, many are adequate, a lot are regrettably rubbish. If you're planning to offer a drink to someone else, it's probably best not to court possible criticism with a cask. But if it's just yourself, choose from the two-litre casks, especially within Australia.

On a recent business trip I bought an intriguing four-litre cask that was so keenly priced I should have heard the alarm bells ringing. It was terrible. The only person I offered it to went into the bathroom and flushed it down the toilet. I did likewise a day or so later, with only about a quarter of the cask consumed. Not a good buy.