

Closure Trends for Sauvignon Blanc

Wine Business Monthly reveals results of Closure Survey specific to Sauvignon Blanc; winemakers discuss their choices

Stacy Briscoe

SINCE 2003 WINE BUSINESS MONTHLY has distributed its Closure Survey annually, measuring the constantly changing trend of closure choices for glass wine bottles. This year marks the first year the survey included questions targeted at specific varieties, which included Sauvignon Blanc.

The risk of using a screw cap, regardless of variety, will always be the potential for reduction when encased within a “perfect seal” as the natural oxygen transfer that takes place through a natural cork (or many of the modern alternative, “cork-like” closures) is non-existent. That being said, that slow micro-oxygenation process that allows a wine to age over time isn’t necessarily a requirement for the fresh fruit and herb-filled white wine most often intended to be enjoyed within the first year of bottling. In fact, many winemakers find that reductive quality actually enhances the aromatic compounds they strive for in their Sauvignon Blancs.

Therefore, when choosing a closure for Sauvignon Blanc, one also has to take into consideration the style, purpose and value as perceived by the potential customer.

Survey Results

Respondents chose natural cork as the most popular choice for Sauvignon Blanc: 39 percent of the total respondents who make a Sauvignon Blanc stated they chose a natural cork closure for their most popular Sauvignon Blanc SKU. This was followed closely by screw cap, with a 33 percent response rate. Only 10 percent answered that they utilize a technical cork (1+1, 2+2, Agglo, composite cork, etc.), and just 23 percent utilize a synthetic cork (100 percent plastic, extruded or molded). Fifty-four percent of total respondents indicated they do not produce a Sauvignon Blanc.

Breaking that down to wineries by size, the data from the survey show that small wineries, or those producing less than 50,000 cases annually, prefer a natural cork: 45 percent of the respondents in this category answered they use this closure type whereas only 15 percent of mid- to large-sized wineries, or those producing more than

50,000 cases annually, opt for natural cork. Conversely, the majority of larger wineries (53 percent of respondents) are currently utilizing a screw cap for their Sauvignon Blanc, whereas only 28 percent of small wineries indicated this closure type.

Mid- to Large-Sized Wineries

Grgich Hills Estate in Napa, Calif., produces 65,000 cases annually, 18 percent of which is Sauvignon Blanc. This includes two SKUs: Fumé Blanc, Napa Valley, 95 percent of the winery’s total Sauvignon Blanc production, retailing for \$31; and the Essence Sauvignon Blanc, “Milijenko’s Selection,” five percent of the winery’s total Sauvignon Blanc production, retailing for \$55. Grgich utilizes a natural cork for both SKUs.

“We use natural cork because we value natural farming and winemaking,” said **Nick Berube**, marketing and public relations manager at Grgich Hills Estate. “Natural cork is also the most widely accepted closure for luxury tier wines.”

Berube said that although the winery hasn’t conducted any formal surveys among its customers, he and the Grgich team find that natural cork closures are still the best way to market the winery and the wines as luxury tier. When asked if he would ever consider using a different closure, Berube said that alternatives, like **DIAM**, which still has “natural cork properties” and “largely prevent TCA,” have been considered in the past. “We recognize the positive attributes alternative closures bring to the market, however—we do not see ourselves using synthetic corks, glass closures or screw caps. Those don’t match our brand.”

In Woodinville, Wash., **Airfield Estates Winery** produces 60,000 cases annually, 5,000 of which is Sauvignon Blanc retailing for \$16.99 and bottled with



Grgich Hills chose natural cork for its Sauvignon Blanc to reinforce its position as a premium wine.

a screw cap closure. **Travis Maple**, the winemaker at Airfield, described the Sauvignon Blanc as a “New Zealand-style,” fermented and aged in stainless steel, emitting strong aromatics of citrus, lemongrass and wet stone.

“I chose to use screw caps on our Sauvignon Blanc mainly to keep the aromatics as fresh as possible and to keep our costs down,” Maple said, specifying the winery uses a **Stelvin** screw cap with **Saranex** liner, supplied by **BT-Watzke**.

Maple feels that screw caps tend to keep the aromatics of his Sauvignon Blanc fresher over time. However, his red wines are bottled using a technical cork. “Technical corks not only offer the peace of mind when it comes to contamination but also give me a great idea of how much oxygen intake the wines will have over the course of time,” Maple said. He also noted that technical corks assist in aging his red wines, where screw caps do not. Maple currently uses a variety of DIAM corks sourced from **G3 Enterprises**: the DIAM 10 cork for higher tier wines (those priced at \$50 and above) and the DIAM 5 cork for wines priced at \$35 or less.

Although he’s considered using screw caps in his red wine program—and does for those priced \$18 and below—Maple finds that consumers are still wary of purchasing higher tier wines when packaged with a screw cap. “Most think these closures are meant for inexpensive wines,” he said. “I believe the consumer still needs more education when it comes to screw caps so this type of packaging doesn’t get the ‘cheap’ label.”

However, when it comes to his Sauvignon Blanc, Maple finds no reason to switch closures. “Our (Sauvignon Blanc) program has been very successful and the screw cap packaging has delivered for this product for many years,” he said.

Following in popularity with the mid-to-large sized wineries is the technical cork. According to the survey, 20 percent of wineries in this category use technical corks for their most popular Sauvignon Blanc SKUs. **Llano Estacado Winery** in Lubbock, Texas, which produces 170,000 cases annually, about 1,000 of which are Sauvignon Blanc sold at \$10.99 per bottle, currently uses DIAM 5 technical corks.

Winemaker **Jason Centanni** said he chose to use the DIAM technical corks because they help maintain the reductive qualities the winemaking hopes to achieve, and because they mimic screw caps with a low oxygen transmission rate. Starting with the 2019 vintage, Centanni said he’ll switch to the DIAM 10 technical cork, which he believes will reduce oxygen transfer rates even further.

Centanni said he would actually like to switch to a screw cap with a Saranex liner for better protection against oxidation in the bottle. “We are absolutely considering, when upgrading our bottling line, to add in a roll on pilfer-proof (ROPP) closure option for several of our wines, including Sauvignon Blanc,” he said.

Small Wineries

In the small winery category, the story is quite similar, with those branding themselves as a luxury tier winery predominantly opting for natural cork closures for their Sauvignon Blanc.

Aridus Wine Company in Willcox, Ariz. produces 8,500 cases per year with about 750 cases of Sauvignon Blanc: one, a Sauvignon Blanc that retails for \$34; the other, a Fume Blanc that retails for \$40. “Because our Sauvignon Blanc and Fume Blanc are on the pricier end for this variety, we want to make sure the customer feels that the packaging is more luxe. For us that means natural cork,” said **Lisa Strid**, winemaker at Aridus. “I also don’t mind that it means less headspace in the bottle itself,” she added.

Conversely, Aridus’ Rosé, which retails for \$30, is the only variety produced by the winery that is packaged with a screw cap. “Again, this has to do with

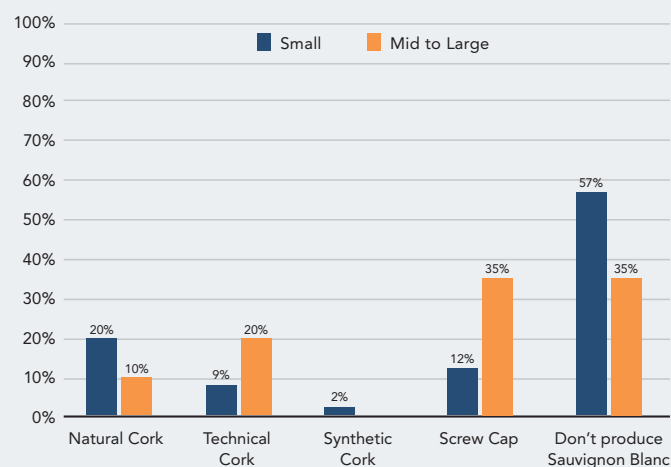
perception,” Strid said. “We want people to crack into and drink the Rosé within the year we release it, so we hope the screw cap nudges customers in that direction.”

When asked if she would ever opt for a different closure for her Sauvignon Blanc, Strid stated that while she’s always willing to entertain closure trials, it’s not high on her priority list at the moment.

Cynthia Cosco, owner and winemaker of **Passaggio Wines** in Sonoma, produces just 1,800 cases of wine annually, 100 of which are Sauvignon Blanc that retails for \$25. Cosco packages her Sauvignon Blanc with a screw cap—as she does for all her white wines and Rosés.

“The main reason is because they’re ‘drink now’ wines. There is no need to lay them down for any length of time,” Cosco said. Cosco describes her Sauvignon Blanc winemaking as minimal intervention, the resulting wines fruit-forward and friendly. The screw cap, for her, helps maintain the fresh, natural characteristics of the grape variety.

Which closure type do you use for your most popular Sauvignon Blanc SKU? (by winery size)



Source: 2019 WBM Closure Survey

In her red wine program, however, Cosco utilizes natural cork. Although she admits to seeing more red wines under screw cap, Cosco doesn’t feel that, in general, the wine-drinking public is “ready for that.”

Cosco said she hasn’t heard any of her consumers talk or ask about why her Sauvignon Blanc is under screw cap, but she finds her customers are happy both with her packaging and her product. “I think most consumers are used to seeing whites under screw caps,” she said.

Only 9 percent of small wineries use technical cork for their Sauvignon Blancs, according to the *WBM* survey. **Billsboro Winery** in Geneva, N.Y., which produces 4,000 cases of wine annually, 500 of which are Sauvignon Blanc retailing for \$18, packages its Sauvignon Blanc using a DIAM agglomerated cork.

Kim Aliperti, owner and vice president, said that the choice of cork isn’t really indicative of the wine’s style although she did describe the cool-climate Sauvignon Blancs of the Finger Lakes more like a Sancerre than a “New World” Sauvignon Blanc. Aliperti said that they use this same cork for all wines at Billsboro: “We had issues with real cork and switched over,” she said.

“I think there’s still a romance to real cork; but after a bad experience, we’re not willing to risk it. This seems to be a good option,” Aliperti added. She also said that the Billsboro winemaking team educates their hospitality staff to be able to talk to customers about the closure choice. “I think closures are less of

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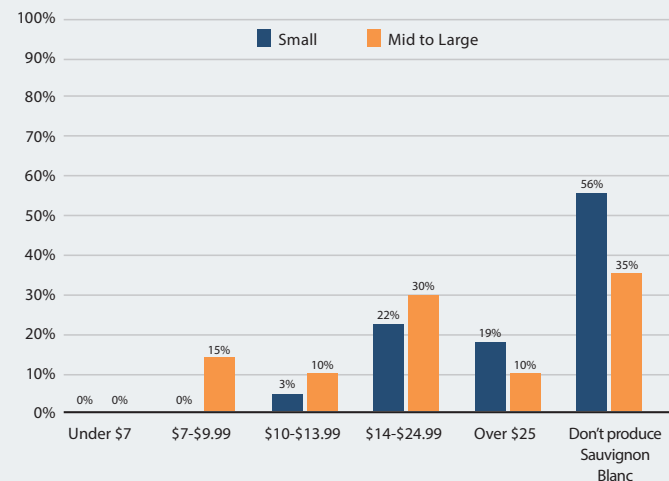
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Closure Trends for Sauvignon Blanc

What is the price point of your most popular Sauvignon Blanc SKU?
(by winery size)



a deal for customers in a tasting room setting where there is an educated staff around to discuss issues like this,” she said.

When asked if she’d ever consider changing her Sauvignon Blanc closure choice, Aliperti said that she doesn’t have plans to, but if she were, she would opt for screw cap—if they could upgrade their bottling system to accommodate that closure type. “Customers seem very open to that (closure) too,” she added.

Deciding Factors

Looking outside the lines of the raw data, it seems the number one factor when deciding the proper closure type for Sauvignon Blanc is consumer perception. Is the wine a “drink now” white wine or is it priced to sell as a luxury item?

Wine style almost plays a secondary role in closure choice. Those looking to maintain the fresher, fruitier style of Sauvignon Blanc tend toward screw caps or technical corks that have no, or very little, oxygen transfer, enhancing reductive qualities of the wine’s aromas and flavors. The deciding factor between the two closure choices often comes down to investment in the proper bottling line. Whether bottling takes place in house or through a mobile bottling service, switching to screw caps means a different piece of equipment. So, while a screw cap may better enhance the desired quality, the technical cork is a bit easier to accommodate logistically. [WBM](#)



Stacy Briscoe is the assistant editor of Wine Business Monthly. She has been writing about wine professionally since 2015, freelancing for multiple publications including The San Francisco Chronicle, Edible Communities and Napa Sonoma Magazine, among others. She also maintains her own website, [BriscoeBites.com](#), dedicated to wine reviews and tasting notes. Outside of wine writing, she also contributes as a freelance editor for the independent publisher She Writes Press. Stacy has a Bachelor of Arts degree in English-language literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz.