

How To Tell If Your Wine Is Corked



The other evening, my husband opened a bottle of red wine. He decanted it and then poured himself a glass. Then he promptly announced that he was going to pour it down the drain.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“This wine smells funny. It smells bad. Like rotten.”

So down it went. Glug. Glug. It was corked.

What is corked wine?

Well, let’s start with what it *isn’t*:

- It’s not the pieces of cork floating around your wine.
- It’s not a wine cork covered in little white crystals. These crystals (tartrate) are a natural by-product of some types of wine and are totally harmless, btw.
- You can’t tell if a wine is corked from smelling the cork itself.

Corked wine is wine that is tainted with a compound called TCA (a molecule known as 2,4,6-trichloroanisole). It’s formed when

natural fungi (which reside in cork) come in contact with certain compounds found in bleaches and other winery sanitation products. If a winery uses infected corks, the wine becomes tainted.

Winefolly.com says about 2-3% of wine has cork taint (that's about one bottle in every 2 cases) and that a typical wine enthusiast can expect to encounter about 100 bottles of corked wine in their lifetime. Yikes! I'm not a heavy wine drinker, but I've been lucky. I have been ordering wine for about 4 decades now, and it's only been a few times that I have sent one back in a restaurant or poured one down the drain at home.

If your first wine encounter is with a corked bottle, it can turn you off of wine forever. The good news is the chances of that happening are low. Below I'm going to tell you how to spot a corked wine, even if you are a wine "rookie." I actually find this stuff quite interesting and hope you find some benefit from it, too.

How do I know if my wine is corked?

Jeremy Allen, a top sommelier in Hollywood, give some pointers:

"Does it smell like a wet dog? Or does it smell like a wet forest? A wet sponge? Does it smell like rotten poop, or precious world's best poop? Does it smell like the *Village Voice* underneath that bus stop bench? Does it taste like a rusty old penny? Does it smell like a *CORK*? If it doesn't offend you, no problem, drink it up. But if you have to question it, go ahead and question it. If you think it's corked, it's usually corked. The more bottles you pop, the more likely it is that you're gonna get a bad one. By the way: If the cork breaks upon opening, or falls into the wine, it has no effect on whether or not the wine is "corked." A dry cork that crumbles could be a clue that an older wine may have been exposed to air, and may

possibly be less than prime, but that is a different matter.

“One reason “corked” is such a touchy area, is that people encounter things they don’t love in wines all the time, but have been intimidated into fearing that the flaws in a wine aren’t really flaws at all. And in delicate social situations, questioning a wine or sending it back could make you feel pushy, picky, or twerpy.

“Say, the boss ordered it, and appears to love it—would you speak up and question her WINE EXPERTISE? Tough situation. There is no secret hand signal to the server for “My boss is drinking bad wine and I can’t take it, but I don’t want to not drink it—fix this please.” There is a lot of pressure on choosing, tasting, and sharing wine. Maybe it’s business, maybe it’s meeting the parents, maybe it’s just impressing a date with your sense of adventure (natural wine instinct), or comfort (fruit-forward guzzle). You don’t yet know who’s paying the bill, or what Emily’s mom and dad drink, or whether they have a cellar stocked with Harlan Estate or a fridge full of Barefoot Bubbly. But if it’s you that ordered it, and you that’s paying for it, *PLEASE don’t hesitate to send it back*, or at least ask one of us service staff to confirm. You are paying to enjoy yourself, and we are paid to make that easy for you, no matter what.”

Is corked wine dangerous to your health?

Don’t worry, drinking corked wine is not harmful to your health. Unfortunately, it does ruin the experience...and some wines are very expensive. Most importantly, if you think a wine is corked, don’t try to suffer through and drink it. Drinking wine should be an enjoyable experience, so if it is not enjoyable, take a pass on that glass – corked or not.

TIP: *It’s harder to sniff out a corked red wine than a corked white wine.*

If you want to avoid the possibility of running into a corked wine, you can stick to wines with screw tops. If your wine bottle used a screw cap or synthetic cork to form the seal, it can't be corked. More and more fabulous wines are coming out with easy-to-open tops.

Corked wine is rare, but it happens. Now that you know about it, you'll be more aware if you happen to come across a corked bottle. Makes good cocktail party conversation, too. Or wine tasting conversation!

When in doubt, ask your wine sommelier for help. They're there to make sure you have a good experience. As I've gotten older, I'm much less intimidated by a sommelier. Now, I quite happily tell them what kind of wines I have come to like and I tell them the price range I want them to stick to. It's amazing how creative they can be. Sometimes they even suggest something that doesn't appear on their wine list, and I have been introduced to new wines this way. It expands my wine horizons.

Enjoy! May your next bottle of wine be the best bottle you've ever had!

Cheers,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Zola". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.