

WINES&VINES

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Tips on Starting to Use Screwcaps

It is possible for the small winery in the East to experiment with screwcaps and begin production on a small scale at a reasonable price. To get started, the winery will need three things: a capping machine, bottles and screwcaps. Semi-automatic capping machines priced between \$5,000 and \$20,000 that can handle six or seven bottles a minute are best used for producing a single wine or for experimenting with screwcapping. Fully automatic capping machines starting at about \$31,000 are better suited for production because they can handle several thousand bottles an hour. The capping machine is the most costly item in screwcapping and it is important to compare different machines and their features before making a purchase.

There are many possibilities and options associated with bottles and their “finish,” the finish being the threaded pattern on the bottle. The standard screwcap for wine is a 30mm x 60 mm long flange roll-on pilfer-proof cap and the winery simply needs to get a bottle suitable for a long-skirted screwcap. While the shape of the bottle is immaterial, the finish has to be exactly 30 mm across and the length of the neck precisely 60 mm. There are other size caps that are not interchangeable and the bottle supplier and the winery need to be in agreement on the finish of the bottle. The configuration of the thread and the shape of the bottle will determine the mold. Most bottle suppliers have standard molds in stock such as the 750 mL Bordeaux, Burgundy and Hock style bottles. Because of the expense of new molds, start-up wineries will generally opt for standard molds.

There is no commonly accepted generic term for screwcap closures and they are given proprietary names by their manufacturers. A basic cap would be a single color non-decorated cap in one of five standard colors with a saranex liner. The key to caps is to put them on properly, and suppliers are usually willing to give advice. A pressure test should be conducted at regular intervals to ensure the integrity of the seal provided by the closure. Wineries should also take into account the levels of SO₂ and oxygen in the wine being screw-capped.

Wineries beginning to use screwcaps should get suppliers involved right from the start of the planning operation. Capping machines, bottles and caps are different products and may be handled by different suppliers, but it is essential that everyone involved know what everyone else is doing.