

FINE NEEDLE WORK

Just when you thought the world had more than enough wine gadgets, another one comes along. Felicity Carter speaks with Greg Lambrecht, inventor of the Coravin 1000, the nifty gadget that's taking the world of fine wine by storm.



The Coravin 1000, launched in July 2013.

What have oil wells and artificial hips got to do with making wine easier to use and enjoy? The answer lies in people with inventive minds focused on other industries who have quietly sought to revolutionise the way consumers interact with wine. We owe the ubiquitous Teflon-coated Screwpull corkscrew to a Texan called Herbert Allen, whose background lay in designing drills for the oil industry. A keen collector, Allen responded to a challenge from his wife in 1975 who was frustrated with the inefficiency of the family corkscrew. Nearly four decades later, Greg Lambrecht, an American inventor of medical equipment, has come up with a device that not only makes the Screwpull and every other corkscrew nearly redundant; it also solves the age-old problem of what to do when you want some wine, but don't feel like drinking a whole bottle.

Past systems of wine preservation have included rubber bungs that supposedly seal the bottle air-tight, but don't, to plain old refrigeration. The Coravin 1000, a handheld gadget that retails for \$299.00, tackles the problem from a completely different angle. Basically, the wine lover never opens the bottle at all.

Instead, a hollow needle is pushed through the cork. Argon, an inert gas, is pumped into

the bottle. The resulting air pressure forces wine back through the needle. After the required amount of wine has been released, the needle is drawn back through the cork. The argon left acts as a seal between the wine and any air, preserving the wine from oxidation. The cork then reseals itself.

The process can be repeated over and over, until the bottle is finally emptied. And, claims the inventor, every time the wine is extracted, it will be as fresh as the first time – even when years have passed between the first and last sip.

Medical technology

"I started in needles, which is important for the story," explains Lambrecht. A biomedical engineer, Lambrecht has developed artificial hips, knees, heart valves and cardiac catheters – and plenty of needles. "I developed a needle system for accessing the blood stream for people who have leukaemia or kidney failure." He became, he says modestly, "very good at needles".

Lambrecht comes from an engineering family. His grandfather, who had a strong influence on him during his southern California childhood, had designed weapons during World War II. "He came to me when I was 12

and said, 'you seem like a good kid. We've made enough weapons, but we'll never have enough medicine or power'."

The advice stuck with Lambrecht. Deciding to devote his life to nuclear energy, and he enrolled at MIT. After working in Japan, he realised that nuclear energy was so politically unpalatable, "it would not be possible in my lifetime, so I might as well give this medicine thing a try."

He began working with medical implants and devices from the age of 23 and today runs a spinal implant company. But alongside the inventing, he was also enjoying wine. When his wife became pregnant 13 years ago, she stopped sharing wine with him, and "I had all this wine and this bottle in my hand and I looked at it, and thought – there must be a way. But as soon as I pulled the cork, I'd exposed it to oxygen and it was deteriorating."

Lambrecht is nothing if not dedicated. For a full 13 years, he spent his spare time in his basement, perfecting the device that became the Coravin. "I experimented with different gases," he says. "I used argon, nitrogen, helium, mixtures..."

He also tried many different types of needles, testing different shapes, sizes and gauges. After that came experimentation with different types of wine. What if Pinot Noir, for example, was more subject to oxidation than other varieties? Could a single needle work for all different types of wines?

"I tried wines from all over the world, from vintages going back to 1961, to make sure my system didn't have an impact on a single wine that I wouldn't be aware of," he said. Lambrecht says he would buy a half case of wine at a time for his tests. First he would pierce one bottle. Then one month later, he'd open a control bottle and compare the wines. "My sons would scramble the bottles and I'd try to say if I could tell which one was which."

At six months he'd try again with another bottle. Then a year later he'd test again with a new control. After five years, he had six

bottles of wine being tested against once another. Soon he was making devices for his friends. "I started the company in 2011 and raised a small amount of money, and then in 2012 raised more money and hired a wonderful CEO, Nick Lazaris," says Lambrecht. "After the first six years of testing it at home with my wife and younger son, I brought it out to Masters of Wine, Master Sommeliers and winemakers," he continues. "I'd take their own wines and have them test it."

Soon, he had Robert Parker trying the system. Then the staff at Wine Spectator. Then Jancis Robinson, who wrote "I cannot fault Coravin technically and I can easily see its applications for restaurateurs who would like to offer particularly fine wines by the glass."

Eric Asimov, writing in the New York Times, discovered that the device was allowing at least one New York restaurant to offer rare wines by the glass. "Since mid-August, when he began using the Coravin at the NoMad, Mr Pastuszak has built a list that now includes about 30 wines that you might never expect to see sold by the glass," he wrote. "Want to try a 1996 Château-Grillet, a rare and unusual white wine from the northern Rhône made in minute quantities? A bottle will cost you \$525, but you could have a glass for a mere \$110." Asimov noted that while the price seems astronomical, what the customer gets is nearly a quarter of a bottle.

International sales

All the publicity has meant that the Coravin, which was only launched commercially in July, has had an unexpected response. Although Lambrecht's company decided to focus solely on the US market for the first year, to ensure that restaurants knew how to use it, they discovered that around 35% of people coming to the Coravin website were from Europe, China and Hong Kong. "The growth is about three times as fast as I thought. The overseas interest has really shocked me," says Lambrecht. "We realised the international interest was really strong, so we're working to bring it to Europe."

But isn't designing a wine gadget a bit trivial compared to nuclear energy and spinal implants? Lambrecht vigorously denies that.

"If you interact with something that people are passionate about, you can affect their lives," he says. "Wine is as big a passion as somebody's health. It's amazing how much people love and appreciate their wine."

He says that he also loves healthcare, because of the ability to impact people's lives and that he will never leave the medical field. "I still have my spinal implant company, which I love. I will make sure I have one consumer product and one medical product going for the rest of my life."

Lambrecht may make more than wine lovers and restaurateurs happy - his system must be music to the ears of cork producers. The Coravin doesn't work on screwcaps or synthetic corks. "I think of the cork as the best-tested preservation of all time," he says. "There is no sealing system that has been tested for 250 years with anything near the degree of the success of cork. The Coravin is leaving the cork in place to do its job."

At the price of super-premium wine today, any way to make a bottle last longer or go further seems set to do well. Unless, of course, there's a genius out there working on a way to make the bottle itself redundant. ■

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