

# WHERE THE OLD CORKS GO

BOUGHT UP BY DEALERS, CLEANED,  
AND SOLD AGAIN.

THE TRADE MEANS A PRETTY PENNY  
FOR HELPERS IN RESTAURANTS AND  
OTHER PLACES OF REFRESHMENT.

"What becomes of all the old corks?" asked a stout man the other day as he leaned idly against the bar of a down-town restaurant and lazily sucked a mint julep through two long golden straws.

"Oh, that's our pie," replied the dapper bartender. "We collect them until we get several pailfuls and then we sell them."

"How much do you get for them?" was the next question.

"Well, that depends on the corks," said the bartender, folding his arms and leaning back against the glistening sideboard. "The champagne cork is the most sought, because it is a large cork and is forced out by the gas of the wine. In this way it is not torn or broken by the corkscrew, and is readily made over into a smaller cork, or may be used, when cleaned, for other champagne. We get as high as 60 cents a pail for champagne corks. Other corks, such as are used for liquors and still wines, are not so readily sold, because they are small and many of them are torn in pulling them out. We put all these together and add to them the corks from ginger ale, soda water, sarsaparilla and other bottles containing effervescing liquids. For these promiscuous corks we get 35 or 40 cents a pail. The old corks accumulate very fast and we get as many as twenty pailfuls some weeks. We call the proceeds from the sales cork money, and we always bet it on the horse races, and in the end always lose it. I don't know but what it would be better if we were to give the corks to the people who come for them than to give the proceeds of the sales to the bookmakers."

And with this sage observation the barkeeper went over and looked at the tape of the sporting ticker to see who had won the last race.

"Lost again!" he exclaimed. "I guess we won't give away any old corks this week."

"What sort of people buy these old corks and what do they do with them?" asked the stout man as he drained the last drop of his julep.

"Well, they are a pretty poor lot, usually boys, old men, or women. They come around here with a bag and carry away the corks on their backs. When they get them home they clean them and cut the bad ones down to smaller sizes. The process of cleaning is usually that of boiling or steaming. This cleans the cork and swells it out to its best proportions. When the cork is cleaned it can be cut to any size that may be demanded by the trade of the cleaner. When the second-hand corks are ready for market the people who have made them over go out and peddle them, although some of the cheap soda-water and sarsaparilla bottlers will take all the corks in their line that they can get, and make a standing offer to that effect. The other corks are sold to liquor dealers, who want an assortment of sizes, and to the cheaper drug stores. From what I know of their sales I should say that the selling price obtained by these people is anywhere from 50 to 100 per cent. above the cost price to them of the old corks. This, however, represents not only the capital invested but the labor of collecting, cleaning, making over, and peddling the goods."

This conversation was overheard by a reporter for THE TIMES, and he at once undertook to make an examination on his own account as to the truth or falsity of the bartender's story. A tour of bar rooms and restaurants of the neighborhood revealed the fact that the corks were always collected and carefully kept until the "old corks" man should call. As the bartender had said, the champagne cork always held the post of honor and commanded the best price. In most of the bar rooms it was found that the old cork privilege was assumed as a perquisite by the bartenders. In the restaurants the scrubwoman was usually the gainer, although the smart waiters often took pains to pocket all the champagne corks. There was everywhere, in places of eating and drinking, a sharp lookout for corks and a deep interest as to what became of them. In some instances there was a keen rivalry between employes as to who should have the old cork privilege. In a very few cases the proprietor himself reserved the corks for his own gain, but in all these cases the employes consigned the corks to the sewer whenever they could do so without detection by their employer. It was alleged in some of the places of sale that old corks were ground up and used in the manufacture of linoleum, but this was denied by the linoleum dealers. The cork used in linoleum is the refuse left after stoppers have been cut from it.

In the very swell restaurants up town the employes denied that they dealt in old corks. They said that all the old corks, whether champagne or not, were thrown away in the room devoted to the cleaning of wine coolers. It was admitted, however, that the person who cleaned the coolers might do a thriving business in selling old corks. There was nothing in the regulations of the establishments to prevent such a thing.

Certain big champagne concerns have been known to allow to waiters in restaurants and to barkeepers 10 and 15 cents for every cork taken from a bottle of the wine made by the concern. This money was paid on the production of the corks and was given as an incentive to the waiters and barkeepers to sell that particular brand of wine in preference to other and possibly better brands. This expedient, however, is generally resorted to by the people endeavoring to introduce a new wine. The proprietors of long established and popular brands do not find it necessary to resort to such means of sale.

Champagne corks are also frequently used for mural decoration. Individuals in private life have been known to string their champagne corks and to festoon their smoking rooms with them. The walls and ceiling of the green room of a certain famous concert hall in this city are covered with champagne corks glued vertically to the plastering. Each of the corks is placed

as close as possible to the others and the effect is unique and suggestive if not beautiful.

One of the neatest and oddest uses to which a champagne cork has been put is its transformation into a pocket match safe. To do this the cork is carefully hollowed out from the top and lined with some metal, usually silver. A spring top of silver is fitted to it, and the safe is ready for use.

Incidentally, while inquiring as to the fate of old corks, the reporter for THE TIMES found that nearly all the new corks used in America are made from material grown in Spain, the best virgin cork being imported from Cadiz and Seville. The large American manufacturers of corks and bungs say that the Spanish supply of cork is so great that there is no probability of its failure within the next half century at least. The experiment of growing cork has been made in the United States, notably in Virginia, but the cork thus produced is said to be so hard that it is valueless for ordinary corkage, and can be used only for ornamentation. It is urged by cork manufacturers that the growing of cork in the United States can never become a profitable industry, not only on account of the quality of the cork produced but also because it requires at least eight years for a cork tree to develop sufficiently for its bark to be of value.