

A Toast to the Floor

By Dan Phillips

People often save wine corks. Why they do it is one of the mysteries of modern man. But there does seem to be a small voice inside everyone that whispers, “Don’t throw it away. It might be useful.” As pedestrian objects go, certainly the lowly wine cork holds one of the more honored spots.

Indeed, it has been interesting. I resolved to install a wine-cork floor. While it wouldn’t be the pricey, upper-end cork flooring that is touted in *Architectural Digest*, it could be the homespun “almost upper-end” floor, if I could figure out how to do it.

I am one of those mysterious people who save wine corks, but my passel of corks wasn’t nearly enough to accomplish an entire floor. So I put the word out. And people responded magnificently—from Huntsville and Conroe connoisseurs to Chicago sommeliers and Atlanta bistros. Sometimes it was one or two corks; other times it was a precious collection accumulated over time. Always, however, the proviso was attached that I lovingly care for them and use them in a significant fashion. Debra Fowler, whom I bumped into at the grocery store, was willing to save corks for me, but said, “You know, Gary uses them for fishing. I’ll have to negotiate with my husband.” The stories go on, but I had at least enough to get started.

Now, cork comes from the bark of an oak tree (*Quercus Suber*), which traditionally grows in the Western Mediterranean—Portugal being the largest supplier of quality cork. It is known as a “cork oak.” After ten years of growth, the bark is simply peeled off the tree and processed, and then the tree is left to work on more wine corks for another ten years. In fact, if you look at a wine cork, you can see the growth rings of the tree. This information comes from an interesting website: www.corksupplyusa.com, and after checking with Huntsville’s own vintners, Sue and Oscar Gutierrez, who own the Santa Maria Vineyard on Highway 30, I learned even more. Understandably, each winemaker wants to print its own nifty design on the cork—which is what makes them so fascinating to begin with (Gary, it seems kind of a shame to waste those designs on fish, who probably don’t appreciate them).

Often enough, the upper-end vintners print the date of the wine harvest on the cork. I have some corks from ’93, ’82, even one from ’78. And then I have champagne corks—a slightly different shape than your garden-variety wine cork. Well, with different lengths, shapes and sizes, the possibility of design presents itself—always a good sign.

I set to work. Do they go on end, or on their sides? Should I cut them in half and double my stash? How do I affix them to the floor? Should I grout between them for easy cleaning of the floor? And, since cork is resilient, will it crack the grout? As anxieties go, wine-cork-floor stress competes with the best. But determination routes you through

the darkest of forests, and if the project were going to fail, I would do it publicly and supremely.

I finally decided to go with laying the corks on their little sides, with the nifty printing evident—especially the dates when available. It would yield a lumpy floor, but lumpy floors are not entirely without precedent. The bonus is that it would be resilient—easy on the feet and the spine, great insulation, and most certainly sustainable. An extra bonus would be that the floor could serve as fodder for credential waving: “Yeah, here’s where we celebrated our anniversary, a marvelous 1969 Trocknen Auslese. And here’s Super Bowl XXXV, a subtle Chateauneuf-Du-Pape, vintage 1993. We had that with pork rinds.” Yet a further bragging point is that it would be an imported Mediterranean oak floor.

There are not many inexpensive glues that stick to cork. I use the pre-mixed ceramic tile adhesive over a sub-floor that it will stick to—concrete or plywood, but not vinyl or tile. The more porous the substrate is, the better the adhesion. Each wine cork—interesting side up—is squished into the adhesive. At this point I fire a small trim nail into the cork (if it is a wooden floor), which disappears, since cork is an open-celled wood. As I fire the nail into the cork, I also press the cork into adjacent corks that have already been installed so that each cork is trapped. The floor is then allowed to dry. At this point I squeeze a small bead of Yellow Woodworker’s Glue (aliphatic resin) down each trough, and let it dry. This helps glue all the corks together. Then I grout over the top with a tile grout (directions are on the label), being careful to sponge off where a person can read the lettering. After the grout dries, I wash it with a dilute solution of muriatic acid, which takes any residual haze off of the corks, without damaging the corks. Then a coat of polyurethane. Now, credential waving is in order. But my method is only one of quite likely many. A bit of experimentation and a learning curve would always be appropriate. Contact me for advice.

Accumulating enough is lots of fun, and also gets everyone involved. You simply put the word out, and the corks will start arriving. I’ve had little ladies arrive with three corks: “I brought you some corks!”

“Oh, thank you so much!” I raise my arms as I rave.

And yet others bring me an entire five-gallon bucket of corks. “Here,” they whisper, “don’t tell anyone where you got these.”

Point out that if people don’t particularly drink wine themselves, but would nevertheless like to contribute to the floor, they can bring you an entire bottle of wine. Of course, you must guarantee that the cork will arrive on the floor and that the contents will be appropriately dispatched. In fact, point out that a Red Bordeaux, Chateau Petrus, vintage 1953, would be nice, noting that you already have the pork rinds.

